

**Sermon, 27 January 2008—Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Annual Meeting**

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27; First Corinthians 1:10-8; Matthew 4:12-23

I recently saw a sweatshirt that said “Slap me if I’m about to volunteer again”—and I immediately thought of St. John’s. Today is the day of our Annual Meeting. Some of you may ease your way into the parish hall with that sweatshirt slogan foremost on your mind—backs to the wall, careful not to sign anything. Let me reassure you: volunteering is not what we do here. Be at peace: the Church is not a volunteer organization.

From the outside, perhaps even on our calendars, it looks like we are a volunteer organization: we schedule our time, we sit on committees, we take on projects, we produce work that produces results, then we get into our cars and drive to our next commitments. But we are more than this. We are the Body of Christ. We claim not only to belong to God, but because we belong to God, we claim to belong to each other; and because we belong to each other, we claim to be identified with each other. We are one Body, and a living body, and a source of life, and therefore a source of spiritual power. This is not simply an image; it is a spiritual reality.

Being a member of a body is far different from volunteering. This is about having a life that is fully invested in and dependent on each other, by which we have meaning and strength and hope. This is about knowing that we cannot do without what we find when we come together. This is about seeing each other, not individually, but corporately, not one by one as friends with like minds, but all together as an organism with a single heart. Once we see the pearl of great price in what we are together, we understand why we would sell what we have for this—we don’t do that as volunteers.

Now, we are not the first people to realize that these claims are nonsense and to resist them. Our dear older brother Paul was emphatic that what the Church claims is foolishness in the world's eyes—and most of us still have the world's eyes. We find it hard to resist what our culture imposes on us. In fact, we don't want to resist it: it takes too much effort and creates problems in our daily life. So we willingly walk around with the blinders advertising and entertainment set on us. This default program of prejudices and presuppositions starts to run in our mind as soon as we wake up in the morning. You don't have to turn on NPR to be in the world.

It takes effort to see how our culture constructs us as individuals, makes us what we are, and even predetermines our reactions. Our desires have been commercialized. Our activity has been reduced to various forms of consumerism. We take for granted what we've been stimulated to believe: that self-satisfaction is our primary goal. How can we be surprised that we move through life resentful? We take for granted what we've been taught: that we are independent selves. How can we be surprised that we move through life lonely?

We ought to struggle with everything we have not to let mainstream culture determine what we believe the church to be: a project center for social relief, a club for private consolations. These are pale cartoons of the ministry of Jesus and of the work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Church could not begin to offer encouragement and action and belonging unless it is empowered by more than the goodwill of its off-and-on members. Only if the church is the vehicle charged by the Holy Spirit, the ongoing incarnation of Christ, the garden and bejeweled city of our Eternal Source and Goal, can the Church promise and provide what we hope for from the deepest core of our being. This communion is what we are made for by God.

I repeat: it takes constant effort on our part to resist sliding back into what the world would prefer the church to be: a feeble impotent optional organization. But if you think you are here to get fueled up to go back to work, or to be consoled for your resentments and frustrations, or to find something useful to do, or even to hear something interesting or stimulating, you are agreeing with the world that this place is for those who can't keep up, who lack something, who need a little occasional delusional boost, who need a little help in making their life easier, pleasanter, smoother. We have not learned how to proclaim that the Church is more than one way to feel good—perhaps because we don't know how to say credibly that it is. We have not learned how to witness to the fact that the Church is about new life—perhaps because we haven't found it to be so.

The Church is a much greater mystery than any human organization, because it is the gathering of those who are not alike—or rather, of those who are only alike in what they realize they are not in themselves: we are alike in being the presence of Christ to each other and to the world. The great failures of the church have come in its determination to make all its members alike on human terms. Remember centuries of inquisitions and excommunications and schism and the endless tantrums of Protestants prone to faction and fraction—even Paul's lament that the Church of Corinth has degenerated into cliques. The Christians in Corinth found it easier to rally around the evangelist that converted them, and the more prestigious the person who converted you, then the more admirable you considered yourself: “not even Apollos; it took *Paul* to convert me!” Some of those Corinthian Christians even tried to trump everyone else by claiming that they followed no human being, but Christ, the real leader of the pack. “Has Christ been divided?” Paul asks in despair.

The great catholic unifying vision of the Church, which Episcopalians adhere to, is that the Church is the place where I come to recognize as brother and sister those that I never expected to be like me. The Church is the place where I come to trust the one I consider inexperienced and unformed. The Church is the place where I find I learn from those I thought ignorant, and am fed by those I thought poor, and am guided by those I thought helpless, where I find myself always standing next to those that, in the world, I would not think to associate with.

This humiliating lesson that we belong to each other and that God has called us together to incorporate us into each other is not without real cost. The Cross is foolishness to the world. What we see in the Cross is the death of our preferential Messiah, the one we expected would solve our problems. But I say to you, with Paul, that the Cross is necessary—wisdom beyond the world’s wisdom and power beyond the world’s power—because what the Cross means is that our problem cannot be solved on our terms. The true problem of our dissatisfaction and restlessness and lust for control and fear can only be solved by leaving our own terms behind, the terms by which we prefer to define the problem. Our problem is solved, though, when the default terms, which we have accepted in order to navigate our world, stop determining and controlling us. Abundant life costs us our death.

Do we have time to volunteer in this organization? That is a deadly question and a question we must put to death. You see, we always have time for what is life-giving. The question is this: is what we spend our time on life-giving?

Do we have enough cash to contribute to this enterprise? That is a deadly question and a question we must put to death. You see, if we support each other in more than words, but in deeds, then we no longer need to

purchase services. The question is this: is what we offer each other life-sustaining?

Do we find a way to express our gifts and talents, to be our full and authentic self? That is a deadly question and a question we must put to death. You see, when we discern what God is doing and participate in it, our gifts are called out, and we find joy and satisfaction in being spent. The question is this: is what calls out our gifts the work of the living God?

All this is weakness and foolishness to the world; it requires risks and faith that seem ill-founded to those of us already battle-scarred. Every one of these faith steps can be sabotaged when our worldly self-centered fears determine our response. But to those “being saved”—those not yet saved, but on the journey of becoming a new creation, not perpetuating business as usual, but moving into the darkness of God—this willingness to stretch beyond our customary comfort zone, to risk being uncertain and feeling foolish, to undergo being weak, is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

So our dear older brother Paul wanted the Christians in Corinth to see that what they have is one ministry, not a set of competing options, because in Christ they are one and it is Christ’s ministry that they are living out. We also can look at each other and find ways to make room for each other in ministry, to claim shared ownership for our ministries, to welcome unexpected newcomers into our ministries, and to deepen our service to each other and to our surrounding community as we reach out in ministry. All of this will be sustained and will flourish if we do it in the Name of the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the life-giving Spirit, who has called us to new life and made us one Body, and whom we praise today.