

Abiding in Love: The Joy of Community

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy might be complete. *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* No greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15: 1-13)

This week a few things converge in the life of our faith community. Much like any other week in fact. One is our continued journey through John’s farewell discourse to his followers. We continue to learn how Jesus hopes we will be in the world as those who want to follow him and the second is our regular Vestry meeting.

It can be challenging for us to connect the dots with how the Holy Scripture we hear Sunday by Sunday intersects with the daily life and work of our parish. So it occurs to me this is a great opportunity to connect a few of those dots!

At our Vestry Retreat this year I invited your Vestry members to see our little parish and the work we do as leaders as being and creating a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven. What can we do week by week, meeting by meeting to help the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Vestry service often suffers under the myth is that it is about arguments, turf wars and that vestry members “have a target on their back.” However, when we understand Vestry as a singular, important ministry of leadership all of that changes (and while the unfortunate behavior can and does happen on vestries, it is not the norm—so the myths need to go away!).

And many think of Vestry service as a non-profit board like any other through which a parish’s financial life is managed and that it is a place for hardnosed decisions with no touchy—feely, spiritual, churchy talk!

But vestry service is unlike any other board. The Vestry Resource Guide from the Episcopal Church Foundation describes it this way:

“Because vestry meetings usually take place in the church and are dedicated to the service of the Church, most open and close with a prayer, often delivered by the clergy or an appointed vestry member. But the spiritual life of the vestry is not just about prayer at the beginning and end of meetings. It is also about how the vestry approaches the agenda items in between.”

And it goes on to say:

“A helpful corrective is to remember that the church is first and foremost the Body of Christ, and our basic task is to tend that body. The church was established as a way for spiritually hungry people to find a home, to draw from the living waters of a life with Christ, to engage over and over in both worship and ministry to each other as well as to those who are hungry, tired, in prison, and rejected. The Church is meant to be spiritual food for spiritual people. The Church is meant to prepare its members to act with the mind of Christ out in their everyday world.”

In other words, the Church is different from all other organizations in that it's work is given to us by God in order that we might better learn to love God and love our neighbor. As the Vestry Resource guide cautions, it sounds easy enough, but many vestries become hopelessly lost. The Vestry, made up of those who have answered the call to the ministry of leadership, is meant to tend to God's business! And God's business most definitely includes sound use of our financial resources, and stewardship through the maintenance of our buildings, and developing a vision for the future, and staffing our mission and ministry properly---always needing to hold the future lightly trusting that God is out ahead of us and may call us to new directions.

Most importantly, all of this is lovingly done in the service of spiritual growth, loving community, beautiful worship, and equipping the saints for ministry.

The passage from John quoted above, gives us our "job description." This is not only a loving guide for the vestry, but a call to all of us who gather at Christ Church week after week to touch God's joy and make it complete not only in ourselves, but for all of those who are yet hungering for it as well.

All that we do, every decision we make is meant to flow from this source. And it all starts with community. With learning to truly abide in God and in turn with another in a meaningful way.

You may not know it, so I want to tell you: You are an amazing and delightful community of faith. I rejoice that I gave an emphatic "Yes!" when Joe Ritchie called me on May 18, 2016 to invite me to be the next Rector of Christ Church, Sparta.

I have fallen madly and deeply for this parish and I am thankful everyday I listened to my heart and came to join my life's ministry with yours.

I rejoice that the Holy Spirit has brought us together in this place and in this time. And all of this in just another ordinary week filled with God's extraordinary grace and love.

In Gratitude, Stephanie+