

Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
Annual Meeting Sunday
January 27, 2019
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

I don't do very well with forced fun. I don't like mixers or ice breakers, and I'm not keen on being divided into small groups of people I don't know well to do some deep sharing. So you can imagine how much I look forward to the annual three-day, mandatory, clergy retreat for the diocese each year, which I just returned from this past week. I know that the experience is supposed to build community among priests and deacons in the diocese, but I will admit to a certain lack of enthusiasm when it rolls around each year.

I made my way down to a retreat center in Racine; checked into my room and went in search of the tea kettle. I caught up with a few friends, heard about some great ministries going on in the diocese—particularly in some of our rural parishes—, and I ate Wisconsin-sized portions of carbs while the snows fell. After three days of eating, talking, and praying, I was prepared to log another clergy retreat in the books, when something wonderful and even a bit magical happened.

The last event of the retreat is Eucharist with Bishop Miller. It's strange to be in a room full of priests sharing a simple Eucharist together. Each of the people in the room is much more accustomed to hosting the meal at the altar rather than being fed by it. They all knew the words and the prayers by heart, and there was much bowing and kneeling as the bishop lead us through the Mass. I'll admit my mind was wandering to whether we should cancel choir due to the snow and if my car was going to be alright on the roads. And I was kind of writing the annual report remarks in my head while the Epistle was being read, which I'm sure none of you ever do.

After the deacon said, "Go in Peace to Love and Serve the Lord," I hopped up, grabbed my duffle bag, and started walking to my car. And I noticed, of course, that all the cars of all the priests were covered in about five inches of snow. I went and got my sad little scraper and starting doing the necessary snow removal when one of my brother priests came over to my car with a broom and started helping. I was so delighted for the help. Then, I'll admit, it seemed rude to just leave, so the two of us started going from car to car, scraping windows and mirrors and unburdening them of their snowy blankets. Before you know it, we were joined by several of the other priests and deacons of the diocese, and we found ourselves laughing and telling stories of other snowfalls—wishing each other safe drives as the cars emerged from the snow and started warming up. One by one, we brushed off all the cars and sent them off into the afternoon safely clear of snow. Unlike the games we had played earlier in the retreat, this act of snowy service felt authentic, joyful, and even holy.

It turns out my favorite part of the entire retreat was the last thirty minutes—joyfully clearing snow with friendly company. At every Eucharist we ever attend, Christians are entreated to get out into the world strengthened by the shared meal to serve one another and our neighbors—to

attempt to live in this world as if the reign of God had already fully arrived. Jesus quotes one famous articulation of this vision from the prophet Isaiah:

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

And the prophet Nehemiah paints his own picture of how world ought to look under the reign of God:

Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

Over and over, the scriptural narrative entreats the people of God to respond to the goodness of God with feasting, with acts of service and worship, and with special attention to the poor and those sidelined by the powers of the world.

I know it can be hard to live a life of joyful service when the weight of the problems of the world fall on your shoulders. I know it's hard to keep despair at bay when it seems like our society is fractured, greedy, and heartless.

But despair is simply not the whole truth of this world. There are people who, every day, take with message of the prophets into their hearts and joyfully serve the needs of others. These people aren't super heroes in some other more important place. These people are just like you—enriched by the scriptures and fed by the Eucharist—going out into the world to live as if the prophets' vision were already here. It's a bunch of priests at a mandatory retreat, saying their prayers, and then forming a sacred community of service and joy in a snowy parking lot. Simple, joyful service provides our Christian antidote to a world that sometimes loses its mind.

So, if the prophets paint a picture of a joyful world filled with God's people feasting and serving one another, why do we have annual meetings? Why do we have budgets and officers and bylaws? I promise you that when Nehemiah lead the people back to reestablish Jerusalem after a long captivity in Babylon, he had a spreadsheet—or whatever clay tablet passed for a spreadsheet back in the day. Feasting and joyful service is Mary; annual meetings are Martha. Feasting and joyful service are the poetry. The annual meeting is the prose. We need them both to be able to thrive as a community. It's very hard to share the Eucharist if someone forgot to order the bread.

So, remember those priests in the snow, answering God's call to love and serve the Lord. After we share the Eucharist this morning, we will be just like them—going into the snowy world where we will serve our neighbors joyfully...with a brief stop at our annual meeting where we will figure out the HOW of making that all happen. Amen.