

INTRODUCTION

If you are visiting us this morning, you've come on a good Sunday. I hope that the sermon today will not only tell you a lot about our community of faith here at St. John's, but also that you will find yourself inspired to come again and to grow with us in our ongoing commitment to building community at the crossroads of faith and life.

I want to say thank you also to those of you who made an extra effort to be here today in response to my appeal. Today is pivotal in the life of our community. As your Rector, I will be sharing with you some important things that you need to know about St. John's. Information that will stretch us and force us to ask some crucial questions related to our own lives as well as to the future of this congregation so that we can continue to thrive -personally and in community- and to continue to do the work God has called us to do with integrity.

STORY

I finally got around to building a partial privacy fence in our backyard earlier this summer - right on the edge of our patio - to create a little seclusion from our otherwise very open space that we share with our neighbors. So where do you start building an eight-foot wooden fence? With the foundation. The starting point was to dig holes for the 4X4 posts that were to go into the ground and ultimately hold up the entire structure.

Now, just to give you an appreciation for how much of an experienced builder I am, when it came to figuring out how deep the postholes should be, I used a very thoughtful method of measuring the above-ground height to below-ground depth ratio: my guiding principal was essentially this (it's very scientific): "How deep do I feel like digging?" And apparently the answer to that question was, "not very deep!"

Because the fence came up, and it looked great, but the problem was that the more planks I affixed to it, the heavier it got, and the heavier the fence got, the more unstable it felt. So, finally, I went online to figure out what I did wrong, and I came across a You-Tube video called, "how deep should your postholes be?" and as I clicked to watch it, a voice inside my head was saying "Do you really want to know?" because I knew that once I knew, I would have to do something about it.

Here's what I discovered: my postholes were only about 1 foot deep (which seemed reasonable to me at the time), but, according to my ill-timed research, they needed to be closer to 3 feet deep. That was hard news to stomach. Especially after all the time and energy I had already invested in this thing. And at one point, as I stood there with my wife staring at the fence and wondering what to do next, she said to me, "Well, there's at least one thing we know for sure: We can't add anything else to that fence until we give it a deeper foundation."

GROWTH SPURT

I've been building with you for five years now, and we've been building something really good together: our church family has been growing, people's lives are changing, we're moving toward making a greater impact in the community beyond these walls, and you've got the healthiest church leadership (if you want to see them in action, come and sit in on a vestry meeting - third Tuesday of

every month from 8-9:30pm). We've been building something really good together. And now, we are on the cusp of a major growth spurt for at least 2 reasons:

1. The vision process: as you know, we are in the third year of a very purposeful and thoughtful discernment process regarding how our church will make a difference in our local community. In addition to our existing outreach efforts to bring relief to the poor, the homeless, and the marginalized, this vision process will result in a major St. John's difference-making effort in the lives of many people in the name of a loving God. To go from being primarily focused inward to having a major endeavor outward is God-inspired growth. The mission of The Church is to spread the good news of God's love; and friends, we are growing into our calling.
2. The development of the adjacent property: Unlike the vision process which was birthed from within, the development of the adjacent property is an external opportunity for growth that is being thrust upon us. Five years from now we're not even going to look the same. The parking lot next to us (which we don't own) is going to be developed into a high-rise building, and we have a one-time opportunity right now to influence the direction of that development. And if we do it right, we could turn a potentially negative situation for our church into a very positive one that could endow and establish this church for years to come.

So the exciting news is that we are growing, because healthy organisms grow. And we are on the cusp of a growth spurt as a church. You remember what a growth spurt feels like right?

When I was growing up I would pray every night that I would be tall enough to dunk the basketball. And I think God heard my prayers, because everyone else in my immediate family is under 5'7", and I'm 6'1". But I remember waking up in the morning as a teenager with pain in my joints... and it was uncomfortable, but I knew that the pain had a purpose. And I was excited to grow.

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OUR FOUNDATION

Over the course of the last several years it has become progressively evident to me and to the leadership of this church that even though we're growing, our foundation is simply not deep enough to sustain this growth.

What do I mean by that?

The word 'church' is a translation of the word 'ekklesia' in Greek which literally means "the called-out ones." Called out by God to be an alternative (and radical) type of community. So the church is the people. In other words, we don't do church, we are the church. We don't pay people to do church for us, we are the church. You hired me to lead you. You pay the staff to support you. But this is you. You are the church.

Everything we do as a church - all the services, activities and programs - is directly supported by, and built upon the participation of - the church community. You. The church can only grow as high as its members go deep. Without church members volunteering their time and their talent, there is no one to implement the breadth of the church's ministry. Without members pledging their financial support, there is no money to accomplish the good work that the church is called to do. Our church can only grow as high as we, its members, go deep.

And I can tell you this with certainty: St. John's church is called to great things. But we can only grow as high as we go deep. Friends, God is calling us to great things, but currently our foundation is not deep enough to sustain the momentum of our growth.

And to borrow the words of my wise spouse, "we can't add anything else to what we're doing here until we give our church a deeper foundation."

THE SPECIFICS

Let me get very specific for a moment. Every year this time, St. Johns' vestry and finance committee sit down to consider the budget for the following year. Obviously, as a church, the starting point for our budget considerations is "what do we believe God is calling us to accomplish this coming year." "What opportunities is God presenting us that we need to be paying attention to? And what is the most faithful way to respond?"

But as always, these first and primary questions are made sober by the question, "how much income - as a church - do we have to work with?"

St. John's has 2 primary sources of income that together make up a budget of just over a million dollars:

- The first, (and main source of income) is pledge income. This is the money that we, as members of this church, promise (in advance) that we will contribute in the coming year, and that is roughly \$800,000/year.
- The second source of income comes from the oneness family school that rents space from us, and that is roughly \$220,000/year (about a fifth of our budget).

So, the responsibility of the vestry is to be as faithful as we can in allocating these resources. And usually what happens is that we take the vision

(i.e. This is what we believe God is calling us to do this year: here's how we want to impact more lives, here's how we want to make a greater difference, here's how we want to reach out even further with the love of Christ), and we begin to cut back from this vision to accommodate the level of income we can expect to raise. And friends, let me just say: for an endeavor as big as this with over a thousand members, a budget of a million dollars is just enough to accomplish the bare minimum. But I'm here because I believe that God is calling St. John's to so much more than the bare minimum. And I'm convinced that you're here because you also believe that this church has something really special going on.

Healthy organisms grow. We are a healthy church, and we're growing. The growth spurt I mentioned earlier has begun to impact our operating budget. And you need to know this: as we look at the year 2016, we're looking at an increase of \$240,000 in operating expenses. And again, this is just trying to keep up with the growth. And here is where the discomfort lies (and this is where the vestry is struggling): we have no fat to cut.

THE POINT

But here's the thing (believe it or not I'm just now getting to the main point of my sermon) - and this is why I am using the sermon to talk about this: This is not about asking you to give more. This is not a fundraising campaign. This is more important.

If I was only standing up here today to ask you to give more now because we have a financial need related to our health and growth as a church, then I would have to do the same thing next year, and the year after that, and the year after that, because this church is thriving and we are growing, and money is always going to be a part of the equation in terms of answering the Call. And I don't want to have to do that, because then it feels like yet another campaign to get your money. And what you're going to do is the same thing that we all do when we turn on NPR radio (for example) hoping to listen to some good programming and instead we realize that we've tuned into their pledge drive. What do we do? We change the Chanel.

The church is different than NPR (as wonderful as NPR is). When we give, we're not just supporting a service that we are receiving. The church is different than our alma mater, or our kid's school, or any other institution that we care about dearly and support.

The church is the Body of Christ.

It is God's hands and feet to the world.

This is where we meet God together.

This is where our children explore and learn and talk about things that matter.

The church is where we come closest to touching the mystery.

It's where we are nourished and find our center in the midst of life.

It's here that we are baptized. It's here that we're buried.

The Church is the Body of Christ. Our financial offerings that we bring here represent our gifts of Thanksgiving to the God whom we love and serve. It's not a donation. It is an act of worship.

And Scripture has a lot to say about this act of worship, including guidelines on how much we should be aiming to give. My job is to help us see what scripture teaches on this subject - and that's what we're going to explore together next week. The question I want to ask you to begin thinking about is this: "What is your process (your benchmark, your guiding principal) - how do you decide how much you give to the church (and to God) as your act of thanksgiving and worship? How do you arrive at that number?"

And as you're thinking about that, I want you to think about this: There are 87 churches in the Episcopal Diocese of Washington (which includes churches in areas that are drastically less wealthy than this area). In terms of our size as a congregation we are the 7th largest. In terms of our financial giving, however, (i.e. what the average pledge is) we are 53rd. What this means is that we are building on a foundation that is not deep enough to support our growth. It also tells me that this is an area that God wants us to grow in.

That why you need to be here next week.

CONCLUSION

Let's go deeper together.

Let's grow together.

Don't change the channel.

This is what a growth spurt feels like.

I promise that if you hang with this conversation (and you come next week), you will be blessed.