

Jan. 28. 2024 --The Confession of St Peter (Annual Meeting)

The Rev. Barbara Ballenger

Who do we say that we are?

We are celebrating so many things today – Come 4th Sunday, our Parish Annual Meeting and the Confession of St. Peter (transferred). Transferred means we moved it from its usual day on Jan 18 to today, our Annual Meeting day, because St. Peter is our Patron. Our Annual Meeting will also serve as our parish patronal feast day.

The picture on the cover of the leaflet is by my friend Ned McConaughy who attends St Martin-in-the-Fields and is the partner of Meredith Flaherty. It depicts a more watery scene from Peter's life, but I think it serves well given the leaps of faith that St Peter, both the apostle and the faith community, tend to make. Feel free to color it in while I preach.

Our Scriptures today come from a translation of the Bible called "The Message" translated by Poet and Scripture Scholar Eugene Peterson. He uses delightful current language for his translations. I like how Peterson translates Jesus' reply when Peter says that Jesus is the messiah.

Jesus came back, "God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn't get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I'm going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.

On our Annual Meeting Sunday the rector's sermon serves as the year in review. I guess that's so anyone who doesn't stay for the meeting afterwards, gets a taste of what's in store. That question "Who do you say that I am?" is a good one to use to reflect on the past year. Or to say it another way: Who do we say that we are, through our actions as church? How did we build on that rock named Peter this year?

One way that we said who we are is with the banners we put on our building. You might think that's a small thing, but apparently people passing by our church read the signs that we put there. And folks have come inside to find out more because of them. Especially the rainbow banner that says "All are Welcome." I've talked to many people who read that banner and decided to see if it's true. If I identify as LGBTQIA+ am I welcome? If I'm a person of color, am I welcome? If I haven't been to church in a while, or ever, am I welcome?

The banners, and signs, and a well-run trivia night get people in the door. But there are other forces at play that make people want to stay. Just about this time last year, our community members gathered in several sessions called Charting our Course to see how God had gifted us and what we were supposed to do about it. We named three big charisms – which is a fancy word for gifts that God has given us for the benefit of others, not ourselves. One of those was welcome. The other two were caring connection and inviting worship. Those are all sort of connected when you think about it. They are big part of how we live out who we say we are, and who we say that Jesus is.

One sign is that we are welcoming new people every month. Some have been around long enough to run for vestry and head up committees. That means that God is sending us the gifts to build on that Rock that is St Peter's, to spread the Gospel. That's exciting. At Come 4th Sundays last year we welcomed 23 people – adults and kids. Not only that, but we're welcoming Elizabeth Nettleton today with our special litany at the end of the service.

Another place where those charisms made an appearance was in the soft space we installed last year. That's the rug up here where families of preschoolers can get a good look at what is going on, and play with soft toys while they are at it, cause that's how little kids learn and feel safe. Sometimes it feels like we need a bigger rug, which is a good sign. But I see lots of sharing and attention and snuggling up here. It's the soft part of the rock on which we're built. That's inviting worship.

Parishioner Mary Rivera, who exhorts us to give toothpaste and make hats, and cut scarves and buy gifts for those who need them, invited us to go door to door to meet our neighbors and invite them to Easter service and Community Rally Day this year. She helped us to take to the streets and meet the neighbors. We invited our partners to share in the event, and we told folks who we say we are. That's welcome.

After rattling around here for nearly a year as your rector, I was finally formally installed in a celebration of new ministry by the bishop in November. So now I won't come loose. What a liturgy we had – you brought me gifts to help me do my job as your servant and shepherd and priest. And you brought yourselves on a Saturday morning. More of those charisms at play.

We have weathered COVID pretty well, though it's not over yet. That's why we still have masks at the entrances. We now have a pretty good practice for keeping one another safe. That's caring Connection.

We partied well – The Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper returned after a long COVID sleep, and it will be back next month, so sign up. Mike and Terita Reeve held an amazing Bluegrass Concert featuring their band. The Trivia Night returned thanks to the Voits. More welcome, more caring connection.

We threw a great retirement celebration for Frank and Ernest our old boilers, and we welcomed three new ones named Shadrach, Meshach and Abendigo – say that with me.... They are named after the three men that King Nebuchadnezzar put in the fiery furnace in the Book of Daniel. Look it up, it's a great story. They didn't burn because of their faith in God, and God joined them in the furnace just to confuse the king. Our new boilers do burn – in an earth-protecting efficient way that cares for God's creation. So win-win. If our welcome is warm, it's partly because of the buildings that we are taking care of. That's tucked into those gifts as well.

Meanwhile, we raised two thirds of the money to pay ourselves back for those improvements last year with our Warm Regards Campaign., and we'll close the gap in 2024. You can still make a time-limited ongoing donation as part of that if you haven't already.

We also said goodbye to dear friends who died this year, most recently Tony Zampirri, Fred Gordon, Art Lorentz Burnett, Rev Emily Richards – those are really fresh losses. We are using all the charisms we have to hold one another up, and keep the faith going.

Emily's funeral this past Thursday was so beautiful, I almost didn't think I was going to make it through. Many folks from St Peter's were there, especially our choir members, who sang in this incredible joint choir with St. Thomas, Whitemarsh. I've been thinking about Emily's larger than life life, and how much her 12 years at St Peter's shaped who people say we are at St Peter's and who we say Jesus is. And it occurred to me that while there is an undeniable Emily-sized hole in our world right now, she left an energy trail that is still at work, that's still reverberating – it's like we're doing this (wave back and forth) and atoms are still crashing together, things are still falling together and forming anew because of the energy of her life still at work in the world. And that is one way to think about resurrection and eternal life – not just that one's memories remain, but that the love that they set in motion continues to do its work, and that the source of that love remains with us, as near as God.

One of the places where that love continues to be at work is at St. Peter's. In the year ahead, as we grieve and as we heal, we will keep living into that love and out of that love. As our Gospel today said it upon St Peter, Jesus built-*"a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out."*

That's the key to the kingdom after all, the rock on which we stand.

Amen.