



The Dean's Address to the Annual Meeting January 29, 2023

Welcome! I am overjoyed to be together - maybe even a bit overwhelmed. After being the Dean and Rector for almost 2 and a half years, this is my first in-person Annual Meeting. Thank you COVID - ack! It is so good to be together, to be nourished with good food and even better company!

Once upon a time, there was a man who did such wonderful, incredible things a crowd followed him wherever he went. Sometimes his followers wondered who he was and if, perhaps, he was too good to be true. They would ask him hard questions to try and catch him, to test him. One day, someone asked, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The man answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." The crowd wondered, who is our neighbor?

What an interesting question: who is our neighbor? Superficially, our neighbors live in the houses nearest to us. Indeed, from this perspective, many of our neighbors are members of the Cathedral, children at ECEP, and, perhaps, the governor. Most recently, from this perspective, our neighbors include a family from Afghanistan. In many ways, "neighbor" does not reflect our relationship with them at all. We might call them lessors, as they rent Harrison house from the Cathedral. We might call them refugees, as they were brought over by the government at the end of the war in Afghanistan. We might call them friends or even family, as many of our members know them very well. The word neighbor does not capture the complexity of our relationship with the Nooristanis. As the Nooristanis seek a permanent home, stable work, and, one day, citizenship, I am grateful that we are their neighbors.

Who is my neighbor? Jesus responds with a story, commonly called the Good Samaritan. The story evokes a variety of images and questions.

Jesus begins with a generic person who is the victim of random violence. Then he wonders how some will respond to this victim, this person lying on the side of the road. The first two are religious authorities: a priest and a levite. And then there is the man, a Samaritan, who comes close, who offers his whole life to this stranger. Are they neighbors to one another? They are on the same road: is this their neighborhood? Who is the neighbor?

Don't worry, I have more questions.. Why do the priest and Levite pass by? Why is the Samaritan so generous? What would I do? These are general, personal questions.

What about community? The priest and Levite represent the Temple. The Samaritan represents a stranger. More than that, he is an enemy of the priests and Levites, assumed to undermine them. How does the activity in the story reflect life in a community?

These questions gave me permission to ask questions specific to our community. How are we neighbors to one another? What is our neighborhood? How do we respond to the needs of our community, no matter how we define community?

On any given Sunday, across three services, we gather as a community of about 200. Of course, there are members in our midst who attend multiple services a day like Herschel Cast and Linda Pneuman. Or our faithful choir who give hours of their week to the Cathedral. Here are faithful ministers of the Gospel leading the way with min-

istries of hospitality, music, and prayer. Their faithfulness reminds all of us that worship is the heart of our community; it is the work we do together. Yet, our regular attendance is only a glimpse of our whole community. On Christmas and Easter, we welcomed between 500 and 600 people. This year our virtual services garnered upwards of 10,000 viewers. Monday through Thursday we host the Daily office, virtually and in-person; and we are one of the few Cathedrals to offer weekly Evensong. This year we had 13 baptisms, 7 members were confirmed or re-affirmed their faith, and we gathered to mourn those who have died. In many ways, it has been a regular year.

Except, it hasn't: the community of the Cathedral, like every other faith community, continues to feel the impact of COVID. While we might want to forget the pandemic, and its endemic presence among us, we must acknowledge its impact. Our average Sunday attendance will continue to grow as we renew the habit and importance of regular Sunday worship. The seeds of this are seen in the increasing numbers of children in our midst. They will have faith because we are faithful. The hard news is that COVID has impacted our regular attendance; the good news is that we are returning.

As we return and renew who we are, what are we discovering? What has the last year shown us about what matters most to us?

We are a neighborhood who loves God. Take a look at the number of ministries who give themselves in service to God: Consider our altar guild, flower guild, and All Saints' guild; or our wedding guild, and flower deliverers, and the Daughters of the King. We come close to God and God comes close to us.

We are a neighborhood full of love. We love one another. We care for one another. We deliver flowers, communion, food, and cards. We visit each other. We gather to remember those who have died; we celebrate weddings and baptism and confirmations. And we have fun together: at Mardi Gras, at Bliss, for the Queen's Jubilee, and even at Annual Meetings. We love our neighbors. Monday through Friday we welcome children and their families onto our campus. And we care for them. We commit ourselves to our covenant with Bethel AME with a deep desire to know and love them. We invite people in: groups like Al-Anon, the Historical Society, and other musicians. We want to share our lives with one another and our neighbors.

To this end, we are a neighborhood who serves. We share meals at Stewpot, Dorcas House, St Francis House, Feed the Hungry, and Canvas. We gather coats, purses, shoes, and even undies that are given far and wide throughout Little Rock. We open our doors to those who need a place to meet, or play, or a hot shower. We are good stewards of our resources.

Consider our Vestry. This year we were led by the calm and peaceful presence of Melissa Whitfield, our Senior Warden. Her optimism and to always act in faith encourages and enriches our strong leadership. Mary Margaret Wippo, as our junior warden, managed to always deliver hard news with a smile. It is not a small thing to steward a property of our size and age. Susan Borné, as our member at large, always, always gave her discerning heart and mind to us, asking faithful questions and compelling us towards love. Grant Wallace, our Treasurer, brings more than financial competence to his ministry. He helps us see our financial life together as a manifestation of God's abundance. And Melonese Clarke, our clerk, does more than take good minutes. She invites us all to attend to the seriousness of our life together. Each of them reminds us that our life together matters; and they are a blessing to us! Every member of our Vestry is deeply engaged in ministry at the Cathedral. I am grateful for their love and care for our Cathedral.

Consider a few of our committees. The Matthew 25 is rooted in acts of service, leading us as we seek Christ in all persons and respect the dignity of every human being. The Legacy Society serves the Cathedral's future: ensuring ministry beyond this generation. The Endowment board faithfully stewards these legacy gifts. And, in the midst of a very stressful year, never lost sight of our abundant treasure. These are just three committees who serve this Cathedral and our community in meaningful ways.

These ministries and ministers, and many more, are the front porch sitters of our neighborhood. They keep us connected and engaged in our life together.

I am only just beginning to get to know our neighborhood. 2022 marks our first full year since 2020 inside the Cathedral, together. And I am finally beginning to meet more and more members of our community outside the walls of the Cathedral. Again and again, I find myself meeting people who are connected to us by a fine thread of relationship. There are many reasons why someone may remain at arms length from the Cathedral: the loss of the Cathedral school, their commitment to their own faith community, their concerns about organized religion. In this context, what matters most is that we lean into who we are and what matters most to us. We will never be who we once were; and, I am so grateful for the neighborhood we are right now. I am proud to be your neighbor and in our neighborhood.

Isn't it amazing, this is only the beginning: we've only just begun our life together. It is exciting to imagine what all lies ahead. Thanks to your faithful efforts and generous gifts, the Bliss fund has over 130 thousand dollars to share with our neighbors! Thanks to your faithful pledges we are ready to grow our programs, to take care of our property, and to take good care of each other! Thanks to the gift of your time and talent we are ready to make plans to resource and steward our mission and ministry!

With this gratitude in mind, let us remember the story of the good Samaritan. In many ways, this is a story that never ends. We might wonder what happens after the man is healed. We might wonder what happens to the Samaritan, the Levite, or the priest: are they changed in any way by their experience? And Jesus is curious, who is the neighbor: the one who showed mercy? Go, Jesus says, and do likewise. The story of the good Samaritan is our story.

Every act of mercy is a revelation of love: our love for God, God's love for us, our love for one another, even amongst enemies. How will it change and transform us?

I had the great privilege of taking a three hour retreat last week. I confess I resisted it: there's plenty of work to do. And I knew I needed to come close to God, to love God before anything else. As I sat in the quiet of retreat, I remembered who and whose I am, who and whose we are: we are the beloved creation of God, the manifestation of God's kin_dom is all around us. I was reminded that the wisdom that matters most is the mercy of God, the mercy of God will lead us.

I wonder how God's mercy will reveal itself to us this year. We have plenty of work to do. The Vestry is in the process of remodeling our committees and how we work together. We are developing an Operations Agreement with our Early Childhood Education program, including renewing parent and volunteer involvement. We will confront the necessary changes to make our Cathedral and Treadway Garden more accessible. We will elect a new Bishop; this time next year life in the Diocesan office will be different. We will begin to put in place the structure we need for a strategic plan. Someone once said something like: God's love meets us exactly where we are and is not content to leave us there. Indeed, God is here in this place, right now; and God is transforming our hearts with grace and mercy. Thanks be to God!

Thank You's

Please join me in giving thanks for our Vestry! As I said earlier, they are essential to our life and ministry together. This year we are very grateful for our outgoing members: Melissa Whitfield, Susan Borné, Harold Joyner, Susan Mehlburger, and George Moreledge. They, along with all our members of the Vestry, join a long tradition of faithful ministry at the Cathedral. I am grateful for everyone who has served on Vestry!

Please join me in thanking a few people who go unseen:

For Michael McNeeley and his hospitality ministry for the Cathedral and the Diocese

For our Vergers, including, Michael McNeeley, John Stanley, Otis Howe, and Grant Wallace

For Justin Craig and his service on the Bishop's search committee and the Cathedral's finance committee

For Beth Barnes and her leadership of the flower guild and our finance committee

For Linnie Lyle and her wedding ministry

For Coralie Maxwell and her leadership with the All Saints' guild

For all those I mentioned in my report: the Afghan Refugee sponsor Team, the Altar Guild, Flower Guild, Flower deliverers, The Daughters of the King, our Ushers, acolytes, readers, intercessors, LEMs, and the Tower Bells.

For our music ministry, the choir, handbells, and the Jubilee concert

For our Sunday school teachers

For our Pastoral Teams

For those who made Bliss, the Mardi Gras Party, the Advent event, and Trunk or Treat such core memories

For the work of Matthew 25, the Legacy society, our Endowment board, and Stewardship chairs

For the Insights committee and events

For those who lead and steward the Men's Breakfast

And for our staff: The Reverend Canon Dr. Lisa Corry, The Reverend Deb Cooper, The Reverend Susan Payne, Mary Hodges, Dr. Colin Macknight, Jack Dowling, Jeanie Toombs, Dawn Howe, Emma Mitchell, Christy Poindexter, our ECEP teachers, Reta Dean, Ricky Parks, Joe Harris

And for the ministry of our Bishop, The Right Reverend Larry Benfield

Glory to God whose power working in us can do more than we ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation. Amen.