



# Annual Meeting

This is our annual “state of the union” address and about all I can promise is that it won’t be as long or as ceremonial as President Trump’s whenever that happens. It is important, though, that we take time each year to consider the year past – what we have done well, what we might have done better- and then to lay out some hopes and dreams for the coming year. Please join us in Whitlock Hall following this service for food, fellowship and discussion about the year past and through our budget learn about where we see hopes and dreams for 2019. We need to celebrate all that we have been and done throughout 2018 because we did a lot as disciples of Jesus.

2018 was a good year. We baptized two infants. We said goodbye to six people. We celebrated one marriage at the Breakfast at the Shore. This is the nature of who we are as the gathered body of Christ. We are called to gather together each week and also at times of special life events. In fact, our Prayer Book is organized to reflect this. If you look at the Table of Contents you can trace major life events in the order they are experienced by us: Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Marriage, and Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child, Reconciliation, Ministration to the Sick and At the Time of Death and Burial. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses as we journey through the life that God has put before us.

St. John’s is a touchstone to many of us. It is the place where we come on Sundays to worship, the place where we come when we celebrate and where we mourn. It is, if you will, a container that holds us in the palm of God’s hands, safe and secure.

To keep St. John’s going and growing, we need to become even more like Christ. That’s easy you might think, especially if you are someone who comes most Sundays. I hear the Scripture read and preached. I enjoy fellowship with others. I offer my gifts and talents to help make sure we have a space that is welcoming and nurturing. So, *of course*, I am becoming more like Christ. But is that really true when we dig beneath the surface?

Carey Nieuwhof challenges us to think again about whether we really are becoming more Christ-like and as part of that reflection he encourages us to consider where we might be sounding more like the Pharisees than like Jesus. He offers these thoughts about the Pharisees.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://careynieuwhof.com/pharisee/> (January 14, 2019)

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31; Luke 4: 14-21

First, he reminds us that the Pharisees were very learned people. They read the Scriptures; they cared about whether people followed the Torah; they truly sought to follow God. But self-justification and self-importance got in their way. I wonder if ours gets in our way, at least from time-to-time. Good intentions. Good values for the most part.

Nieuwhof reminds us that Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea and Paul were each Pharisees. And each came to be follower of Jesus through encounters with Jesus. So we have a model for when we need to let go of some of our Pharisee-like behavior and comments. Self-awareness is key.

Here are some things we may say – or think- that we need to reconsider:

1. “IF HE KNEW THE BIBLE AS WELL AS I DID, HIS LIFE WOULD BE BETTER.”
2. “I FOLLOW THE RULES.”
3. “YOU SHOULDN’T HANG AROUND PEOPLE LIKE THAT.”
4. “GOD LISTENS TO MY PRAYERS.”
5. “SURE I HAVE A FEW ISSUES, BUT THAT’S BETWEEN ME AND GOD.”
6. “THEY JUST NEED TO WORK HARDER.”
7. “OF COURSE I’M A CHRISTIAN.”
8. “MORE PEOPLE NEED TO STAND UP FOR CHRISTIAN VALUES.”
9. “I’M SIMPLY MORE COMFORTABLE WITH PEOPLE FROM MY CHURCH THAN I AM WITH PEOPLE WHO DON’T GO TO CHURCH.”
10. “PEOPLE WHO DON’T GO TO CHURCH CAN COME IF THEY WANT TO.”

Did you hear yourself in any of these statements – or maybe not those exact words but the overarching thought behind the statement? I did. Self-righteousness. Self-justification. Putting a barrier between myself and others who aren’t like me. I’m comfortable here at St. John’s so others can be, too, if they will just give us a chance. Does what I say with my lips match what my actions are when push comes to shove?

Why the need to justify my actions or my statements? Perhaps partly through fear. Partly through not knowing the other as well as I should before I make judgments. Perhaps because I don’t have the energy to reach out beyond what I am already doing. There are lots of reasons why I fall short of the person God would have me be.

But my life’s journey has a ways to go yet. I and we have time to reconsider where we act like a Pharisee and where we can improve into being closer to Christ. If we truly believe in our Mission Statement, then we need to set aside behavior and attitudes that are more like the Pharisees and turn to behavior and attitudes that are more Christ-like.

One of the statements that really hit home for me was “More people need to stand up for Christian values.” On its surface, that sounds like a good thing. *Of course* I wish that more people had the same values that I do: love God and love neighbor. But how we live those values out can challenge our faith. We’re reminded of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Who is your neighbor? What action are you called to offer to your neighbor, even when he or she touches your last nerve? And why, in a country where a fundamental value enshrined in the First Amendment of no establishment of religion and the free exercise of religion do we think that everyone ought to have the same “Christian” values that we do?

“Christians should live out Christian values deeply and authentically. But why would we hold non-Christians to a standard they don’t believe in, anyway? Jesus and Paul never appeared to do this... not even once.”<sup>2</sup> That brought me up really short. Why would we hold non-Christians to a standard they don’t believe in in the first place?

Another comment that has crossed my mind when people ask for help is sometimes: “They just need to work harder.” Nieuwhof points out:

Jesus loved the poor and had compassion on broken people. Many Christians today don’t. (Self-righteousness rears its ugly head again.) Yes, I am very familiar with the passages in scripture that talk about hard work and prudence. I try to live by them. But when I allow my relative ‘success’ to serve as a basis to judge others... I miss mercy. Compassion should be a hallmark of Christians. The early church’s compassion in the first few centuries after Jesus’ resurrection was one of the key reasons the Christian faith spread so rapidly, even amidst extreme persecution.<sup>3</sup>

We aren’t and haven’t been persecuted in this country for our faith. That’s a good thing and I certainly hope we never will be. I wonder, though, if that’s part of why “the church”, meaning the Christian faith, might be irrelevant to more and more people. We haven’t been setting a good example too often. We’ve been too complacent. But we can change. We can consider where we might have Pharisee-like attitudes and behavior that actually push people away from following Christ. Where can we grow and learn?

For 2019, I pray that we will study and discern where our own actions and beliefs might need a little work to become more Christ-like. Where St. John’s might more fully grow into being a place that it known throughout the community as welcoming to all: Christians and non-Christians. A place where we follow Jesus into becoming the Beloved Community. Jesus offered himself to all but he never coerced. Jesus loved them even when they did not know what they were doing. Can we find a way to be true to our faith and do the same? Love God. Love neighbor. **Amen.**

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid