

**5 Epiphany  
Annual Congregational Meeting  
February 9, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

I want to begin this morning with expressing my sincere thanks for all the thoughts and prayers, cards and emails, rides to doctor appointments and physical therapy ... and all the other ways that you have communicated your concerns for me ... and Caren ... following my knee replacement surgery in early January.

My knee is recovering well. However, the surgery itself set off a reaction involving my auto-immune issues of lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. This set me back a little, but I am beyond it now, and feeling stronger every day. And ... to put things in perspective ... it is not like I am the only person to have joint replacement surgery in this congregation. But, more about that later.

Today is the occasion of St. Cyprian's Annual Congregational Meeting. Assuming that this congregation held an annual meeting since its inception, this is the 127<sup>th</sup> Annual Congregational Meeting of this church. Following this service of Holy Eucharist, we will gather in the Mission House to elect new members to our Mission Board, and Delegates to the Annual convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Florida. We will hear reports from our Wardens and Treasurer, and the coordinators of many of the ministries we have at St. Cyprian's. But, simple put, St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church is thriving.

Some of the highlights of the past year include:

- Being named St. Augustine's "Best Church" by Folio Weekly
- Having Bishop Howard recognize St. Cyprian's as the fastest growing congregation in the Diocese of Florida
- Presenting 13 folks to Bishop Dorsey Henderson for Confirmation in July
- And exceeding our \$100,000 goal by raising over \$185,000 in pledges and gifts for our Beyond the Commons Campaign

Much, much more happened in 2019, which we will hear about when we meet in the Mission House. However, I would like to say something about this "Best Church" award that we received from Folio Weekly. We received the award in 2019, and then we just received it again in 2020. However, being a church is not a competitive sport, so winning first place just doesn't really say much about who we are, or what we do, or why anyone might feel that St. Cyprian's is the "best." I think it is fun that so many of you were willing to play along and send your votes for St. Cyprian's to the Folio Weekly web site. But, the real question is, why is St. Cyprian's "Best" in your mind?

For me, this isn't about being "best" in the sense that we are better than other churches. It is about being "best" because we are striving to be the best version of St. Cyprian's that we ... all of us ... can be. We are the best version of St. Cyprian's when each of us is also striving to be the best version of our individual selves in this community ... and that is happening every day. We are not perfect, and we are not "better than" ... we are all just trying ... striving ... to be the best version of ourselves ... blessed children of God made in God's image.

As I mentioned earlier, I am very aware that I am not the only one in this congregation to have a joint replacement ... another one of our parishioners just had a knee replaced this week. I can look out on you in the pews and count the knees, hips, backs, and shoulders that have gone through significant surgery. And, I am not alone in living with a chronic disorder. Some of you have similar diseases that infringe upon your life. Then there are those who are facing far more serious illnesses ... cancer, heart problems, organ failures, and neurological disorders. Just yesterday I spoke with a woman who made the decision to take her twin brother off of life support. Her twin brother. She said it was the most difficult decision she had ever made. I can only imagine.

There are others in our community of faith who have lost loved ones ... parents, siblings, children ... to tragic accidents. And there are those living with troubled relationships, mental illness, difficult employment situations, and life-long recovery from addictions. Look around you ... there is not one pew without someone living with some kind of brokenness ... either presently or in the past. Most of us don't wear our brokenness on our sleeves. But it does give us a sensitivity to others who are also living with These challenges in our lives.

When some people are challenged in life they will become bitter, self-absorbed, callous, and even hateful. However, the people in a faith community like St. Cyprian's ... and we are not alone ... look at that brokenness and see it as a shared burden. I know the pain that you are going through because I have been there myself. In this faith community we share with each other the tools needed to face these challenges of life ... openness, courage, and generosity. We invite people into our midst ... regardless of whatever labels the world has placed on them ... and we help them become the most loving version of themselves possible ... living fully into the image of God in which they were made regardless of the challenges they may be facing.

In a broken world, political figures, military leaders, corporation invested in greed, and rising demagogues consistently consolidate power by scapegoating and dehumanizing the outsider, the stranger, the marginalized, the outcast, or an enemy. However, when we take seriously what Jesus took serious we resist their agenda by humanizing "the other" ... we see all people as brothers and sisters, neighbors ... loving them as ourselves ... standing with them in solidarity. Giving them the strength and support they need in their brokenness. That is what St. Cyprian's is striving to be ... to be the most loving and faithful community ... that is the best version of itself ... in all aspects of our life.

In our Gospel reading this morning ... a continuation of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount ... Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth." In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we often take salt for granted ...

it is in our cupboards and on our tables. Yet, in the time of Jesus that was not the case. Until about one hundred years ago, salt was one of the most sought after commodities in human history. Salt was not only used as an enhancement for flavor, it was also used for medicinal purposes ... to disinfect wounds, check bleeding, stimulate thirst, and treat skin diseases. And, of course, in all the centuries before refrigeration, salt was essential for food preservation.

However, there are several things to take particular notice of in this reading. First, Jesus is not saying we are “supposed to be” salt, or we are “encouraged to become” salt, or promised that “if we become” salt, God will love us more. Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth.” Jesus is telling us who we are. We are salt. The language Jesus uses is 100% descriptive ... it is a statement of our identity. We are the salt of the earth. We are that which will enhance or embitter, soothe or irritate, melt or sting, preserve or ruin. For better or for worse, we are the salt of the earth, and what we do with our saltiness matters. It matters a lot. Whether we want to or not, whether we notice or not, whether we’re intentional about it or not, we spiritually impact the world we live in.

Secondly, by saying that we are the “salt of the earth,” Jesus is saying that we are precious. Again, it’s easy to miss the value of this in our modern world where salt is cheap and plentiful, but imagine what Jesus’s first followers would have heard when he called them salt. Remember what sorts of people Jesus addressed in his famous Sermon on the Mount. The poor, the mournful, the meek, the persecuted, the hungry, the sick, the crippled, the frightened, the outcast, the misfit, the disreputable, the demon-possessed ... he was addressing those who were broken in one way or another. “You,” he told them all. “You are the salt of the earth.” You who are not cleaned up and shiny and well-fed and fashionable, you who’ve been rejected, wounded, unloved, and forgotten ... you are essential. Jesus knowingly named a commodity that was priceless in his time and place. He conferred great value on those who did not consider themselves valuable. He is still doing this. For us. Today. Now.

Thirdly, salt does its best work when it’s poured out ... when it’s scattered ... when it dissolves into what is around it. It is meant to give of itself. It is meant to share its unique flavor in order to bring out the best in all that surrounds it. Which means that if we want to enliven, enhance, deepen, and preserve the world we live in, we cannot just hide within the walls of this church. We must not cluster and congregate simply for our own comfort. Remember ... we are salt. It’s not a question of striving to become what we are not. It’s a question of living into the precious fullness of what we already are.

That is the point I want to make on this occasion of St. Cyprian’s Annual Congregational Meeting. In just a little while we will hear all the many things that we do as faithful members of this church. Yet, behind all those markers is something much more powerful and significant ... it is the faith that the people of this congregation live into every day. Sometimes we are confused, sometimes we hurt, sometimes we are unsure. Yet, we gather here week by week to sit next to people just as confused, just as hurt, and just as unsure. It isn’t “us and them” ... it isn’t we have all the right answers to give to those who “others” who obviously have the “wrong” answers. We come here knowing that we are all in this together. All of us. We are all

beloved children of God ... made in the image of the divine ... so even in our brokenness we affirm each of us ... and this community of faith.

One last thing ... I have the honor and privilege of standing up here and leading you in our worship Sunday after Sunday. Yet, that is just one of the many roles that is required in a community like this. This past month has shown me ... and I hope it has shown you ... just how valuable each of you are in our life together. You are the church. You are the salt of the earth. You are St. Cyprian's. We are just trying to be the best version of what that can be.

Amen.