

**Last Epiphany
February 14, 2021
Annual Congregational Meeting**

**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.**

In my 45 plus years of ordained ministry I have never prayed so hard and so long as I have in the past eleven months. Almost every morning Caren and I walk from our home to the church to open it for prayer and meditation. It seems as if every step is a prayer. We light three votive candles: one for the people who have died of COVID-19 ... now almost 500,000 in this country alone. Another candle for the people around the world who are ill and suffering from COVID-19 ... including those who may be physically healthy but are suffering from the economic effects of the lockdown. And, we light a third candle for the people of St. Cyprian's ... for your physical health, for your emotional sanity, for your faithfulness in your soul during an extremely trying time.

There are other prayers at other times ... creating the bulletin every week, reading your emails, seeing you as you drop off food for Dining With Dignity, or the Ecumenical Food Pantry; or sometimes when I lie wake at three o'clock in the morning.

Today is the Last Sunday of our Epiphany season. We begin Lent on Wednesday with an adapted, virtual Ash Wednesday service. Today is also the occasion for St. Cyprian's Annual Congregational meeting. It is a time to look back at the ministry of this congregation in 2020, and look forward to 2021 and beyond.

A year ago at this time I was recovering from knee replacement surgery. Pastor Deena had led our worship for a month while I was out of commission, and the church was full every Sunday ... I mean really full. There were reports in the news about a flu-like virus in China, but little was known about it. And, in mid-February last year, Mary Beth Martin came to me with a simple request ... could she video record my sermons on her iPhone to post on our web site?

In the next few weeks the news of this new virus, COVID-19, became more frightening, and we responded with changes in our worship. Hand sanitizer became ubiquitous, and we offered options regarding drinking from a common cup. Finally, in mid-March we shut down our in-person worship with hopes that it would only be for a couple of weeks ... surely we would be open again by Easter.

In a quickly evolving situation, I called Mary Beth ... could we record an abbreviated service on Saturday afternoon and post it to YouTube for Sunday morning? It was a steep learning curve, but Mary Beth made it happen. Each week, as new information about COVID-19 became available, we adapted ... and we learned. It was a beginning, but we were all feeling anxious

and alone in the separation from our beloved community. So, for Easter, we put you back in the pews ... at least your pictures were back in the pews. And we brought in Mama Blue to sing ... something joyous and familiar in the midst of the turmoil around us.

The technology employed to broadcast our worship service was simplistic ... and limiting. Mary Beth's iPhone was mounted on a tripod in the middle of the choir area. The Lector reading the lessons and prayers, Pastor Deena reading the Gospel, and me preaching and celebrating the Holy Eucharist, would take turns in front of the camera ... and we had to speak loud enough to be picked up by the mic in the iPhone. Then, Mary Beth would upload the recording to YouTube ... a process that sometimes took hours ... and then send the link to Missy Colee who would post it on the web site, and to Katie Cash who would post the link on Facebook. Mary Beth would also send out a special edition of the Voice with the link to the recorded service.

I realize that this explanation is a bit technical, but I wanted to point out how we ... the people of St. Cyprian's ... creatively adapted to the challenges we faced, and I wanted to note the commitment of those persons with a particular passion and talent to make things work for the entire community. During this difficult year that has happened ... over and over again ... on multiple fronts.

Here are some examples:

- Within weeks of the start of our virtual worship services Kathy Vande Berg offered to add a small "choir" so we could have music with our worship.
- We began having a virtual Coffee Hour on Zoom,
- then the Centering Prayer group started meeting every week via computer screens transforming them into vessels of sacred prayer.
- In one of our Coffee Hour conversation someone suggested doing a book study ... "Fr. Ted, didn't you and Caren write a book together? Why don't we use that?"
- Following the George Floyd killing in Minneapolis and the Black Lives Matter marches around the country an increased interest in St. Augustine's Civil Rights era history led to another book study ... *If it Takes All Summer*, by Dan Warren. Led by Melinda Lang Hilsenbeck and Mary Beth Martin, That group has morphed in to the Racial Justice Discussion group and is meeting by Zoom on Mondays discussing Isabelle Wilkerson's book *Caste*.

Although lockdown rules would not allow us to continue our familiar way of sharing a meal with our homeless sister and brothers at Dining With Dignity, Tommy and Katie Cash adapted with Subway sandwiches, drinks and other snacks in take-home bags ... and the congregation generously responded to the extra needs.

The same was true with St. Cyprian's shared ministry with the Ecumenical Food Pantry ... an adaptation to the lockdown, and an outpouring of support by the people of St. Cyprian's.

You have heard me quote the Episcopal Church's Catechism before: "Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deed, with and without words." In my 45 plus years of ordained ministry I have never prayed so hard and so long as I have in the past eleven month ... it seems

that that is true for you as well. Your prayers for each other, this faith community, for the world around us, and for yourselves is amazingly apparent in all that this community is in the midst of this horrible pandemic.

This is the occasion of St. Cyprian's Annual Congregational Meeting. St. Cyprian's is in amazing shape ... in spite of this pandemic.

Here are just a few indicators of our health as a church:

- We are growing in membership in spite of not being able to worship in person.
- We completed 2020 with a \$16,000 plus surplus, partly because you contributed more than was expected.
- For 2021 we have 11 new pledging units ... 11 new pledging units!
- Later, at our meeting, John Wooldridge will present the 2021 Operating Budget. Last year parishioners pledged \$128,000 ... for 2021 you have pledged over \$157,000!
- In addition ... in 2020 ... parishioners donated over \$25,000 to ministries we support ... Dining With Dignity, the Ecumenical Food Panty, Episcopal Relief and Development, Wildflower Healthcare, and Operation New Hope. That is \$25,000 in addition to the generous support of our operating budget, and it does not include the donations made direct to those organizations.
- We have people viewing our worship in at least 8 states and 3 foreign countries. The statistics that the Communication Team have provided indicate that more people are watching us on Sunday morning than could fit in St. Cyprian's if we were worshipping in person.

In the midst of this pandemic we have also been attempting to complete a number of the projects included in the Beyond The Commons campaign. Our Senior Warden, Joe Finnegan will have more to say about this later,

- but we now have a new metal roof on the Mission House,
- and although it doesn't get much use because of the lockdown, we have an additional restroom in the Mission House.
- The Sanctuary has new carpet
- and the new worship seating is in place.
- We still have to complete work on the Mission House and some other projects that have been delayed, but we are moving forward.

In addition to all the news of growth and adapting ministries, we just learned this week that one of our own will be leaving us, at least temporarily. Clerene Romeo-Jackson is in the process in the Diocese of Florida to become ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church. This is ... and has been ... a long process for Clerene ... and for us. Several years ago Clerene and I met with Bishop Howard, and she has completed a discernment process with a committee here at St. Cyprian's, and also with the Commission on Ministry in the Diocese. And, on Ash Wednesday Clerene will begin the next phase of her process ... she has been assigned a six-month internship at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Palm Coast.

Interestingly, St. Thomas in Palm Coast is holding in-person worship. The size of the congregation for Sunday worship is limited, and people are required to make reservations, wear masks, and be socially distant. This is true of a number of Episcopal congregations in our area, including Trinity Parish downtown. So the question is ... and I hear it often ... when will St. Cyprian's move back to in-person worship, and under what conditions?

The Mission Board and I have struggled with this issue for a while, and have taken the stance of erring on the side of caution. However, with vaccines now available, and the infection rates decreasing, I think it would be safe to think that some time in March we might, once again, have in-person worship ... certainly by Palm Sunday.

- Of course, there will be certain restrictions.
- Only those who have completed their vaccination regimen, or have antibodies from exposure to COVID-19 should attend.
- We will have social distancing in the church.
- Therefore, will only be able to admit a limited number of people, and so reservations will be necessary.
- And, of course, masks will still be required.
- However, we are close to being able to worship together again.

That being said, we will also continue to live-stream our worship services on Sunday mornings for those who cannot be with us for whatever reason. What began as a desperate plan to provide at least some degree of normal worship in extraordinary times, has turned out to be an expansion of our ministry we had not planned for, and has become an unforeseen asset. This is but one of the many blessings we have known from God's Spirit during this extraordinary time.

So, what does the future hold for St. Cyprian's? We continue to be surprised by the power of God's Spirit in our midst ... especially during this pandemic. As we all know, the "new" normal is not going to look like what we were used to. Yet, the possibilities continue to be present, and we are actively making plans to meet them.

Specifically, St. Cyprian's is a Mission congregation in the Diocese of Florida. I have already met with Bishop Howard about the possibility of St. Cyprian's transitioning to self-sufficient Parish status which would give us greater autonomy. Bishop Howard was clear about the requirement as outlined in the Diocesan Canons, one of which is to be able to financially support a clergy person as Rector of the parish. This would require an annual operating budget of at least \$250,000.

The people of St. Cyprian's are very generous ... but \$250,000 a year is a stretch, unless we grow. To grow we need additional space ... maybe not a greater footprint of land, rather expanded facilities on our campus to support additional programs, especially for children and youth. This was taken into consideration as the Mission Board considered options for the

renovations of the Mission House. As we deliberated an enticingly sexy option of opening the ceiling in the Mission House the costs of that kind of renovation became greater and greater. The Mission Board chose a more pragmatic renovation at a lower cost, with the possibility that the money we did not spend on the Mission House might be used for future expansion of the office with new classroom space.

No firm decisions have been made about our long-term future, but we are keeping the options open, and will rely on God's Spirit to continue to direct us.

Finally, a personal note ... and I begin this by saying, no, I am not retiring anytime soon, although I think we all know that is on the horizon. However, after 13 years as your Vicar I am going to take a sabbatical beginning in August.

Sixty years ago my grandmother ... my father's mother ... was elderly and ill. She lived in San Diego, California and my family lived on Long Island, New York. I am the oldest of six living siblings and was the only one who had ever met my grandmother. So, my parents decided to take all of us to see her before it was too late, but then were faced with the problem of how to transport, shelter, and feed eight of us for the trip. The family's new Pontiac station wagon stuffed with eight people and all our luggage would be too cramped. Flying was too expensive. So how were my parents going to make this happen?

Inspired by an article my mother read, my father bought a six year-old school bus and converted it into a primitive camper ... beds for all eight of us, some hanging from the ceiling like in a submarine ... a Coleman stove using unleaded gas to cook on ... an ice box my father found on the Bowery in New York City ... an ice box that used block of ice to keep things cool ... and I won't bother you with a description of our toilet.

We drove across country staying in state and national parks. We visited my grandmother ... and also the home where my father was raised. Then, as we were driving up to see the giant trees in the Sequoias National Park, the bus's engine blew up. By the time the repairs were completed my father's vacation allotment had run out, and he flew back to New York leaving my mother to drive us all back home ... with my help. I had just turned 16 and in New York State I was of legal age to drive and had a learner's permit. It made for an interesting way to get in my practice hours.

It was an adventure that changed my family. Although school bus conversions became ubiquitous as homes for hippies, in 1960 we did not see another conversion like ours on the whole trip. Since then, recreational vehicles ... RVs ... have come a long way. Last week Caren and I purchased a small RV and plan to follow in my family's tire tracks ... at least for some of the trip ... as we head across country late this summer. The Mission Board, Pastor Deena, and I are making plans for my absence ... you will be in good hands.

As I began this report I said that in my ministry I have never prayed as long and as hard as I have this past year. I believe that is true for many of you as well, and I appreciate all your prayers for

each other, for St. Cyprian's, and especially your prayers for me. This is our ministry together ... I do not do it alone ... nor could I. My deep appreciation and gratitude for sharing this ministry with Pastor Deena, our Mission Board, and all of you. And there is a special place for my thankfulness for the physical, emotional and spiritual support that my beloved Caren gives me every day.

St. Cyprian's is a special place ... you are a special people ... and in spite of a pandemic, by the grace and love of God ... and the power of God's Spirit ... we are in great shape to continue our ministry to the world around us.

Amen.