

Epiphany 3 January 22, 2023 “Annual Parish Meeting”

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, today in your word we hear the story of those you invite to follow on your Way. May we too hear this invitation and joyfully follow in the light of your Love. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

Today, in a little as we gather following our worship, we will hold the “Annual Parish Meeting.” I must say, I do appreciate this tradition. First, it is similar to our “Town Meeting Day,” a time to look at where we have been as a community and to give some serious thought and discussion to where we are going. In the Church, of course, we have our Scriptures and our traditions to guide us in these deliberations, so we are not flying blindly into the future, but building on a solid foundation, built up over the years by past generations and our own undertakings in mission. Also, like “Town Meeting Day,” we will elect representatives, Vestry members and convention delegates to oversee the work that we will carry on through out the year. This is our direct democracy in action, and **no**, contrary to the claims of some people whom I will not mention, these elections are not rigged!

But at a deeper level, there is something very special, unique, about our Parish Meeting: as I mentioned, in the Church we are guided by Scriptures, our traditions and our rational minds as we ponder and discern our path for mission. This is all based on our faith, on the call given to us so graciously by God, a call to follow Jesus on his Way of Love. This Parish Meeting is part of our response in faith, how we organize together for God’s mission, how we decide it will be best for us here in Barre to live in the light of Christ’s example, how we can be open to the power of God’s Holy Spirit of Love and share in that love, one with another, both within our fellowship and in the wider community. But I want to remind you as I have before, of the wise words of the Honorable Byron Rushing, a member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives and a past President of the Union of Black Episcopalians; Mr. Rushing once said in a sermon, “The Church doesn’t have a mission. God’s mission has a Church!” So our task today is to decide how to be the church in Barre to carry out God’s mission.

Over the past year, it feels like we are coming out of the pandemic time in a good way to serve our community. We have been able to get back to regular worship here in the sanctuary, staying on

Zoom if wanted or needed, and perhaps most important to many, we even have Coffee Hour, starting in the Garden, which is delightful, and now indoors for the winter. We have been able to hold an inaugural organ concert to celebrate our new organ, we have resumed our in person breakfast as well. All the while, we are also carrying on with some of our new activities like Saturday Yoga with Terry Crowther, Wednesday Bible Study and Evening Prayer, our take away meals on Mondays and Thursdays, and meals for the Good Samaritan Haven. Lots of great activity going on, which I think is really good. But I think was one of the best things we did this past year was the worship services and meals at the Hilltop Motel. We began on Easter, and had a great celebration, and working with other congregations here in Barre and Montpelier, once a month we did a service and took meals to the Hilltop. But a few months after that Easter high, the attendance dwindled, and finally in October and November no one came. So we stopped. It was that easy: there was a need, we met the need and when there was no longer a need, we did not feel that we had to hold on to it; we could just move on. I really think that is a good model for us, and I suspect that in these post pandemic times, this might become more and more normal for Church life. We shall see where and how the Spirit leads us!

I believe we are in a good position as a congregation to follow where the Spirit will lead us. During this past year our wonderful Garden Committee, Nancy Hanson, Cindy Willis, Linda Webster (and her sister Carol) and Joy Lee Packert have reclaimed a neglected space and tuned it into one of the most beautiful spots in Barre. Our indefatigable Junior Warden, Leo Martineau, has work tirelessly to upgrade our electrical system, upgrade the listing, login over every square inch of this building to get things in better shape. Marjorie Strong has mastered our new organ and brought out the musical talents of Beth Hilgartner, Amy Eschelbach and many others to grace our worship. We have also had the great assistance of the Rev. Linda Moore, first as a deacon and now as a priest as she settles into her vocation. Linda Wentworth and Melissa Battah have worked with Vermont Interfaith Action so that Good Shepherd can join with other congregations throughout the state to work for Corrections reform, for housing for all and toward racial healing and justice, and we did win a great victory this year by getting the issue of slavery out of the

Vermont Constitution once and for all! Also, with Ron Hirsch's help, we have the most successful Stewardship campaign in the history of the parish, adding seven new pledges and topping \$50,000 in pledges, about a 15% increase. Even though we face difficult economic times, your support of Good Shepherd is putting us in a good place to face the future. Tess Taylor, as our Treasurer, is great at keeping a sharp eye on our finances and making sure everything with our funds is kept properly. And last, and I think most importantly, during 2022 we engaged in a Discernment process for Good Shepherd, and with prayer, hard work and great imagination our Discernment Team has come up with an incredibly thoughtful plan for us to put into action. Under the wise leadership of Philip Moros, soon to become our Senior Warden emeritus!, and joined by Cindy Cobb, Amy Eschelbach, Felicia Martineau, Marjorie Strong and Linda Webster, and with the remarkably dedicated efforts of Cindy Willis, outgoing Clerk of the Vestry, to keep all the notes, this team has accomplished brilliant work to chart our course for mission in the coming years. Thanks so much to all of you, for your prayers, dedication, spirit and good humor to bring us to this place where Good Shepherd can thrive as we follow the light of Christ for God's mission in Barre. Thank you!

In Matthew's Gospel today, we hear Jesus proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." In our weekly Bible study during Epiphany, we have been looking at the theme of "Beloved Community," a phrase first used by Rev. Martin King in a sermon in 1956, and used throughout his life as a way to understand Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of heaven. His life was cut too short by the assassin's bullet in Memphis in 1968, but his wife, Coretta Scott King continued in his stead to promote the cause of Civil Rights. She also spoke of "Beloved Community," perhaps even more insightfully than her husband, and she wrote in her posthumously published memoir, *My Life, My Love, My Legacy*:

[T]he Beloved Community is a realistic vision of an achievable society, one in which problems and conflict exist, but are resolved peacefully and without bitterness. In the Beloved Community, caring and compassion drive political policies that support the worldwide elimination of poverty and hunger and all forms of bigotry and violence. The Beloved Community is a

state of heart and mind, a spirit of hope and goodwill that transcends all boundaries and barriers and embraces all creation. At its core, the Beloved Community is an engine of reconciliation. This way of living seems a long way from the kind of world that we have now, but I do believe it is a goal that can be accomplished through courage and determination, and through education and training, if enough people are willing to make the necessary commitment. (pp. 186–187)

(Now Martin King famously said, “I want to be a drum major for justice.” I think Coretta Scott King is too often overlooked (like many women are, I’m sorry to say), overshadowed by her husband’s legacy, but to me, Coretta Scott King is the epitome for the 20th century of “The drum majorette for justice.”) Mrs. King’s vision of “Beloved Community,” is that sacred vision of Jesus for the kingdom of heaven that has come near: it is for us, you and I, to make that commitment in faith that together as the people of Good Shepherd in Barre, we seek to make the light of the Lord shine ever brighter in our lives and for our community, becoming the “Beloved Community” of those who like Peter and Andrew, hear the call to follow Jesus, and like James and John, we go out to fish for people, bringing to them the Good News of the light of Christ, bringing to them the vision that “Beloved Community” has come near. In a few minutes, we will renew our Baptismal faith as we are doing every Sunday during Epiphany, renewing our response to Jesus’ call to us as followers. Today we will affirm that we will, “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ,” as we seek to follow more closely in Jesus’ Way of Love. (And as a quick aside, though I’m a preacher and have a lot of words, maybe too many! I’m so glad that this affirmation also includes “example” because that is probably more important!)

My sisters and brothers, as we gather in prayer and in fellowship around this Altar I the presence of Christ Jesus, may God bless us as a congregation as we undertake the tasks for carrying out God’s mission in the coming year, granting us strength, insight, courage and compassion, and above all, inspiring us by the power of the divine Spirit of Love. Thanks be to God and thanks be to Christ this day and in the days to come. Amen.