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Report of the Rector at St. Stephen's Lynn
February 9, 2014—Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Isa 40:21-31; Ps 147:1-12, 21c; 1 Cor 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

On first hearing, today's Gospel may seem pretty simple and straightforward. As is so often true of Mark, it reads rather like a series of headlines leaving us wanting to hear the full story... wanting to learn more about the relationships, interactions, and reactions. But, as I read it over and over again in preparation for today's Report of the Rector, I realized that it actually points to all that God wants and needs of us as individuals and as a church.

Jesus starts in the synagogue. Jesus and his disciples gather with other people of faith to pray, study, hear God's holy word, and make their offerings to God. From the synagogue, they go to Simon and Andrew's home—friends and family gathering. But when they get there they discover that Simon Peter's mother-in-law is sick. Jesus takes her by the hand, lifts her up, and heals her. Once healed, she begins to serve them—from sick bed to stove in minutes.

But Jesus doesn't heal just his family or friends, or just those approved by the synagogue. In fact, he seems quite indiscriminant in his healing. *"They brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons."* The evangelist reports *"the whole city gathered around the door."* Jesus cured the sick and cast out demons bringing healing and wholeness to all Capernaum.

In the morning, rather than either sleeping in or basking in his glory, Jesus goes to a deserted place to pray. His disciples don't get why he disappeared. They are excited. *"Everyone is searching for (you),"* they say. For them, Jesus finally has achieved a little buzz... but he doesn't seem to care. In fact, he turns from the people and praise of Capernaum saying, *"Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."*

So how is this "all that God wants and needs of us?"

The synagogue, or in our case the church, is central to equipping us to do God's work in the world. We need St. Stephen's to provide us with a sacred space in which to gather to pray, study, hear God's holy word, and make our offerings to God.

In addition, our faith, like that of the disciples, must be strengthened as we enjoy fellowship with other followers of Jesus. Whether we gather in the Graham Suite or dining room, at the Port Hole Pub, on Martha's Vineyard, at BCH Camp, or in each other's homes, our lives depend on our sharing meals, laughing together, supporting one another, and treasuring each other's stories. And, I have no doubt that some among us can, like Simon Peter's mother-in-law, remember a time when we got up out of a sick bed (or traveled through a snow storm) to show hospitality to a guest, a person in need, or a group at the church.

While worship, study, fellowship, and prayer are essential to our being church, they exist to nurture and form us for ministry. They prepare us to be God's people in the world. The work into which God invites us is to heal our city, to cast out the demons that limit the lives of our friends and neighbors, and to proclaim Christ's message of love, compassion and justice in Lynn and beyond. For us, this is an audacious goal-- just as it was for Jesus and his disciples. And so, as followers of Jesus, we seek transformation of ourselves and our community not for our own satisfaction but for God's glory.

Gathering, healing, praying, and proclaiming is all God wants and needs of us.

While the fifty-plus pages of words, photos and figures that make up our Annual Report attest to an extraordinary year of gathering, healing, praying, and proclaiming, they also point to areas of stress and struggle. As we strive to be good stewards of our physical, financial, and human resources, we face daunting challenges. The treasurer's office team led by Heather Collis Puro worked hard to create transparent systems for tracking income and expense streams in our increasingly complex budget. Strong fundraising and robust grant income brought 2014 to a close with a balanced budget, and the Vestry voted a balanced 2015 budget due to the \$30,000 Assessment Credit from the Diocese in gratitude for our hosting Diocesan Convention last November. Unfortunately, this one time assessment reduction does not solve our chronic operating income shortfall. The Vestry's challenge in 2015 is to develop a new and sustainable income stream.

On the building front, our apse wall restoration project successfully stopped most leaking over the chancel arch, but the cupola, which was not included in the initial scope of work, does still seem to leak during nor'easters. In 2014 we applied for and received \$100,000 from the Diocese of Massachusetts to address leaking in the roofing and exterior walls of the sacristy hallway. Although we did not receive the money in time to do the work before winter, we look forward to soliciting bids and getting to work this spring.

Bit by bit, we address the needs of our building but we will require a much more focused effort at identifying "Friends of St. Stephen's" and finding grants for preservation of historic properties if we hope to preserve our church. The synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus worshiped and taught with his disciples lies in ruins; 15 years ago with James Liberge, Leveille McClain, and other YLAers, I sat in the sun on its tumbled stones. We are the people entrusted with the care and restoration of our magnificent church—its extraordinary beauty, its historic windows, and its open doors. The future of St. Stephen's depends on us being good stewards of our resources.

Beyond the bricks and mortar, our Annual Report shows both challenges and glimpses of the kingdom as we nurture the congregation. Like most congregations in the Diocese, our Sunday attendance is down. The most important way to address this problem is for members to commit to regular church attendance. All too often, we let life get in the way of coming to church. On weeks when "everyone comes", our pews feel comfortable-- not lonely. And, if each of us brought a friend or neighbor to church, we would really start to feel some energy. In 2014, we greeted an increased number of visitors. While we are known across the Diocese for our hospitality as we hosted Bishop Walkabouts in March,

Confirmation in May, and Diocesan Convention in November, we have no formal system for welcoming or incorporating visitors who may be looking for a faith community.

Even as Sunday attendance was down, participation was up this year in adult formation programs and mid-week worship. A growing group gathers at noon on Thursdays to pray for healing; we offer prayers of thanksgiving and sorrow; we come to know and hold in prayers friends and family who are far off and near. Through our fellowship and prayer, we create a sacred space for us and for God. Thanks to the clergy and the Pastoral Care Team, visits with hospitalized and homebound members also increased significantly. Whether it's Josephine delivering flowers or Sally and Lucinda taking communion, our ministry of pastoral care weaves the St. Stephen's community together. For many, these visits truly are healing balm.

While we manifest God's love and care through prayer and presence, our new website, thoughtfully and faithfully maintained by Carolyn Hoy, extends our reach. It connects us with people looking for a faith community, folks who have questions, and friends who live at a distance. I received a note from a priest who trained here saying that he checks us out regularly on the website and wanted to thank us for all we do. For the virtual world, as well as for our own community, our Lenten God Blog deepened our relationships with God and each other as we shared the God Moments of our lives. Our daily reflections offered glimpses of God in times of struggle and sorrow, in places of extraordinary beauty, in experiences of miraculous grace, and in the ordinary moments of life.

Gathering, healing, praying, and proclaiming, we show Christ-like hospitality to children, youth, and young adults. As our usually strong high school youth program faltered, we invested in our fledgling Young Adult or YA Ministry, and launched a monthly Sunday evening Contemporary Worship service with music provided by Juliana Davis and her Berklee Band. The reflections offered invite seekers of all ages to engage the place where true faith meets real life. Even as we strengthened our ministry with those out of high school, we also created a Middle School Youth Group to build community among our pre-teens. An active cohort of 6th-8th graders who enjoy spending time together, want to engage community service projects, and eagerly ask questions about faith and life makes clear that youth ministry will rise again but we need to nurture the relationships and the faith of our young people now.

As the Rev. Sarah van Gulden joined us in July as our new Urban Assistant, she began the challenging work of rebuilding our Church School. Rev. Sarah blesses us with her extensive experience working with children and youth in schools and churches; and, perhaps more importantly, she blesses us with her passion for nurturing in young people a love of Jesus and the stories of our faith. While we still need to recruit more adults to teach and to inspire parents to bring their children to church regularly and on time for their classes, a solid program has begun to take root. Beyond Church School, we heard requests from children and parents for a Kids' Choir. Twice a month Juliana Davis rehearses our young singers and provides music education, and once a month they offer anthems at our 10:00 service. They became the darlings of the Diocese singing at Confirmation and Diocesan Convention.

We know that our young people face challenges as they seek to become the people God created them to be. Tragically, we buried one of our own this year welcoming hundreds of his classmates into our dining room on Good Friday and our church the first weekend in May as we gave thanks for his life and lamented the culture of gangs, drugs, and violence that entangles our youth. Our stunning staff team of Rev. Sarah, Youth Minister Jason Cruz, Diocesan Intern Dan Bell, Kids' Choir Director and Contemporary Worship leader Juliana Davis, and Kids in Community Coordinator Audrey Gutfreund offer more than a dozen points of entry for children, youth, and young adults as we "show Christ-like hospitality." To make a transformative difference in the lives of young people in our church and our community, we need more adults to give their time and talent to the work. We need parents, grandparents, aunts, and friends to commit to encouraging and facilitating the active participation of our young people. And we need our elected leaders investing in quality education, positive youth development, and job training and creation.

On the advocacy front, Raise Up Massachusetts increased the minimum wage to \$11 an hour and provided workers with earned sick time. Last Friday evening, the North Shore Labor Council presented ECCO and our allies with the Social Justice Award for 2014 for our work with Raise Up. In achieving these gains affecting millions of Massachusetts workers, we reminded ourselves and others of the power of committed people coming together for positive purpose.

In the final weeks of 2014, the failure to indict police who killed black men in Ferguson Missouri and Staten Island, New York focused national attention on issues of race and privilege, and the brokenness of our criminal justice system. As a national conversation emerged, St. Stephen's folks raised questions with Congressman Seth Moulton, identified race and privilege as the focus of our Leadership Development Initiative Team, and told our stories at ECCO's Time of Lament and Conversation. Our LDI Team and ECCO will draw us into deeper conversation and action in 2015 but we bravely planted seeds during the cold, dark days of December.

Undoubtedly, my words this morning, the pages of our Annual Report, and the stories told at our Annual Meeting, make clear that we are gathering, healing, praying, and proclaiming, as Christ would have us do. Yet, we know we face daunting challenges as God invites us to heal our city, to cast out the demons that limit the lives of our friends and neighbors, and to proclaim Christ's message of love, compassion and justice in Lynn and beyond. Sometimes our leaders feel weary. Often we worry that we will not be enough and that we will not have the resources we require to engage our holy calling. Regularly we wonder why God is not bringing the increase we need as we do the work God has given us to do. But here we stand in the company of the psalmists and the prophets asking "*how long O Lord, how long?*" God's answer comes to us in scripture this week and any time we open the Bible-- Jesus "*went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.*" To be the people God wants and needs us to be, we must ground ourselves in God through prayer so that our worship, study, fellowship, and action reflect God's glory. And we must trust, as the prophet Isaiah promises, "*those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*" Amen.