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February 7, 2016 at St. Stephen's, Lynn

Report of the Rector

Last Epiphany C: Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36

A few weeks ago I read an essay by the Rev. Rob Voyle suggesting that faith communities possess an “essential charism” or spiritual gift that defines them. Writing during the week following the Anglican Primates’ vote to exclude the Episcopal Church from committees of the Communion, he contended that the “essential charism” of the Anglican Communion since Queen Elizabeth I has been “common prayer.” Living through the costly religious orthodoxy of the reigns of her brother and sister, Elizabeth I insisted that the Church of England would no longer have oaths of conformity but would be known by our commitment to “common prayer”-- hence our Book of Common Prayer. Voyle wondered how the gathering of the Primates might have been different had the Bishops, instead of debating and legislating about conformity of doctrine and discipline, had shared the stories of their lives and ministries, and invited prayer.

In a subsequent article, Voyle suggested that each congregation has its own “essential charism.” Intrigued by his notion as I read and edited our Annual Report, I wondered what is our “essential charism?” What is the spiritual gift God has given St. Stephen’s that makes us who we distinctly are? As I read, thought, and prayed, the answer came to me quickly and clearly: HOSPITALITY.

We do all kinds of stuff—pages and pages of it are detailed in our stunning Annual Report; but hospitality is the heart of St. Stephen’s. Hospitality is expressed in all four of our mission goals:

- Being good stewards of our resources: physical, financial and human
- Deepening community connections
- Forming children, youth, and young adults, and
- Nurturing the congregation.

As our pledge campaign illustrated through weekly reflections and images, our building and our people are “vessels of God’s love and care.” This building welcomes people in through church doors, handicapped doors, Anderson Building doors, Blossom Street doors, kitchen doors, Pantry doors, basement doors, old doors, new doors; through an abundance of doors, we welcome people for Sunday and midweek worship, for KIC summer camp and after-school programs, for the food pantry and 12-step meetings, for ECCO trainings and community Actions, for choir practice and Bible Study, for knitting or sewing groups and tea & talk, for the fabulous Fair and Soul Celebration fund raisers, for youth groups and Young Adult dinners, for Vestry meetings and Beloved Community Team gatherings, for pastoral counseling and private prayer.

This building is essential to our hospitality. And, we have committed significant human and financial resources this year to upgrading systems including computers, locks, doors, and alarms; to repairing weather related damage to the roof, the floors in the sacristy and hall, our fences, and the parking lot; to cleaning up and clearing out spaces; and to continuing

work on chancel restoration. Our building is both a peerless historic and artistic monument, and a place of active ministry and formation offering hospitality to those who thirst in a barren land.

But the hospitality of St. Stephen's is not just the hospitality our buildings provide. Ours is also a hospitality of attitude. Each Sunday, when we gather for Holy Communion, the invitation is "This is the Lord's Table, and all are welcome here." Every day in the Office, Linda answers the phone and door welcoming people from every sort and condition of humanity. Successive generations of immigrants have populated our city and church. People from around the Anglican Communion have filled the pews of St. Stephen's giving us a rich diversity of races, languages, accents, cultures, and church backgrounds. The majority of the children attending KIC summer camp come from Spanish-speaking families, and we worship in both English and Kiswahili on Sunday mornings knowing the unity of the body of Christ into which God calls us.

This year, our mission goal of Hospitality to children, youth, and young adults brought significant new programs and people into our embrace. In the midst of February snowstorms, we launched KIC Music, an after-school expansion of our summer camp Kids in Community. We now have 20 students with us on Monday and Wednesday afternoons enjoying games, doing homework, and learning music theory and drumming. Both our Soul Celebration and the Fair were enhanced by special performances by the KIC Music drummers. In April, we opened our doors to gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and queer teens in Be You—a youth group for GLBTQ teens and their allies. Knowing the high suicide and homelessness rates of these teens, we wanted to provide a safe space for them. While it took time for them to trust that a church would welcome and not judge them, Tuesday afternoon Be You gatherings provide not only a circle of support but also a chance for teens to make a difference in the community. In June, hearing that the Lynn Public Schools had eliminated summer school for elementary-age children, Micheal Brown called me and asked, "What are we going to do?" For her, our hospitality was a given—we just needed to figure out exactly how we'd live into this moment of community need. For five weeks, Micheal, four college-age mentors, and a group of committed volunteers provided tutoring in literacy and math so that our youngest and most vulnerable students would not lose grade levels during the summer. And this September, we welcomed to our church and Church School community, six Gordon College students seeking an open and affirming Christian community in which to worship and serve. As one student expressed, "I knew I was in the right place when I saw the rainbow house outside and then heard a sermon on social justice."

Our mission goal of deepening community connection also led us into more significant hospitality this year. Last January, the day after Rev. Sarah's ordination as a priest, Esmeralda joined us as we welcomed our donkey-loving new Bishop Alan Gates to St. Stephen's. And in April, Episcopal Relief and Development representative Tinka Perry preached when Esmeralda returned to collect our Lenten Outreach Offerings. Rather than collecting the usual coins, she raised enough to fund a donkey and cart for a farming family in Ghana. Closer to home, our Food Pantry stepped up expanding our hospitality at our Pantry and in the neighborhood. Beyond food and Christmas gifts, our Pantry now

provides a reading corner and free books for children thanks to St. John's Beverly Farms member Jan Plourde and the faithfulness of Joanne Droppers and Helen Patmon. In addition, Sally Gosselin and Harry Jackson have worked with the Lynn Hunger Network to build capacity at our pantry and to support the monthly Saturday morning emergency pantry in response to the closing of the St. Mary's and Lynn City Mission pantries this summer.

In the story of the transfiguration that we heard this morning, Jesus, Peter, James, and John get away from the crowds and crush of the world; they go to a mountaintop so that they can be alone with each other and God; they go away to pray. In that sacred place, they see Jesus transfigured before them, and his clothes become dazzling white. On the mountaintop they glimpse God's glory; they hear God's voice claiming Jesus as his beloved. Perhaps it's not surprising that Peter hoped maybe they could stay; maybe he could construct three tents so that they could all abide in that holy place forever with God very near.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, St. Augustine of Hippo preached: "Peter sees God's glory radiating from Jesus, and as a man savoring the things of men says, "Lord, it is good for us to be here." He had been wearied with the multitude. He had now found the mountain's solitude; there he had Christ the Bread of the soul. What — should he depart once again to labor and suffering now that he had a holy love for God and a holy way of life? He wished well for himself. But Jesus says to him: "Come down, to labor on the earth; on the earth to serve, to be despised, and crucified on the earth."

In fact, Luke's Gospel could not be clearer about the real world challenges awaiting Jesus and the disciples. As soon as they come down, a great crowd and an epileptic boy thrown into convulsions, rolling on the ground and foaming at the mouth, meet them. Their vision of God's glory was not a gift in itself or some sacred talisman; it did not spare them sadness and struggle; rather, it prepared them to engage the world as it is and to seek to transform it. Their mountain top experience not only gave them a glimpse of glory but a reminder of how they were to live into God's grace and glory: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

**LISTEN TO AND FOR JESUS.** Here's the challenge for the people of St. Stephen's who often seem to be human do-ings rather than human be-ings. We understand our charism of hospitality and live into it magnificently. Yet, we often go the way of Martha feeling beset by responsibilities and tasks that need doing, and resentful that others aren't doing enough or that credit is going to the wrong people. We sometimes sit back and let others do the work feeling that we don't have anything of value to offer or we aren't really needed anyway. We don't always trust in the abundance of God to provide the time, space, resources, and people we need to do the work God would have us do; and upon occasion we ask new people to fill old wine skins, which may not work for them or make sense to them. We sometimes fear change as new people sit in our pews or come to our programs; and we worry that all the activity in our space will wear out the buildings and us. Often, we forget to be like Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus... listening to him.

Living into the charism of hospitality is not easy. Can we embrace elders seeking solace and sacred beauty as well as children and youth, who run about, make noise, create messes, and lack consistency? Can we hold together both those who think, "Criminals get what they deserve" and those who believe that people of color are disproportionately arrested and killed by police? Can we respond to the needs of those who want to worship in the historic tradition of the Episcopal Church and those who long for livelier liturgies? Can we continue to build God's beloved community "crossing lines of color, class, culture, and generation?"

The Apostle Paul reminds us: "Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart." My hope and prayer for us this year is that we will find new ways to listen to and for Jesus in worship, study and prayer, and in our relationships with one another and our community. Where and how is God calling each one of us individually and all of us together as the people of St. Stephen's to reflect God's glory?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu preached, "We are all agents of transfiguration," who are challenged by Christ "to transfigure our relationships, our communities, and our world, so that they become hospitable to joy, to justice, to freedom, and to peace."

Listening to Jesus, how might we become more "hospitable to joy, to justice, to freedom, and to peace?" Amen.