

“Something that cannot be touched”

- Time passes rather quickly, doesn't it?
 - There was a Star Trek about that once.... nah, I'm just kidding
 - [Have you seen the parish hall yet? !!]
 - It does not seem possible that five Sundays can pass as quickly as these have
 - And I find myself standing up here for the last time once again trying to articulate anything that still needs to be said
 - To say a good goodbye, whatever that means- they don't teach you that in seminary
 - But I think we have done rather well
 - So I would like to leave you with a sermon reflecting a bit on our time together
 - Passing along some things I shared with the vestry on Monday
 - And then saying one more time how proud I am- proud in the most holy sense- of the ministry we have done together
 - I am truly leaving one great parish- love very much, even as I believe that I am called to now lead another one.
- On Monday evening, we had our regular vestry meeting, and one of the things they asked me was to reflect on the church from my perspective
 - I have a unique view of the church, just by virtue of my place in it
 - As rector, I get to see how the all groups interact and work, both the tangible and the intangible
 - And I get to see the outcomes of the ministries of this church
 - Naturally, the work of a church is never done: there are always new opportunities that need seizing
 - And improvements on the current work that we do
 - On the short list at vestry, I mentioned that I hope that St. Mark's can can revitalize the new comers program
 - Start a lay pastoral care team again, visiting parishioners regularly who cannot make it to church

- And perhaps even intentionally and with a long term commitment focus on ministry at the ASU campus
- I also hope that in the future, St. Mark's can increase its pledges and offering to support a larger, full time staff
- But honestly, there are more things that I am proud of than I think need work
- I am grateful for the fact that we have been able to call three curates, two of them full time
- They bring new ideas and energy, and it has been in my opinion one of the best uses of the Willcockson endowment
- Which, by the way, I am proud of the way this parish handled receiving such a generous gift
- You all did not let that endowment become a crutch for our annual budget
- And instead we have been able to use that on extra ministries and capital improvements that would have otherwise been financially impossible.
- I also am impressed with how many of you volunteer at our Two Saints Kitchen, keeping the parish hall doors open each and every Saturday
- Feeding the hungry in our community, and not just by sending money to someone else to do it
- Not only is St. Mark's better for an outward, missional focus
- But the community of Jonesboro knows us by that work.
- We are also known for our Shrimp Boils, yes, the fun we have there,
- But also for the money we raise to give to other charities beyond our walls
- One of the secret ingredients, I believe, to church growth and development, is an outward focus
- Belief that what we do here is not just for ourselves, not just for members, but that we are here for a purpose greater than ourselves
- We are here to serve
- You almost have to give it all away to be keep it- I think there's something in the Bible about that....
- There are other ministries that any future rector will be proud to have:
- Our Christian education program on Wednesday nights- twenty something kids of all ages
 - That program could flourish even more if we had extra volunteers
- And of course, our music and liturgy program

- Sundays at St. Mark's would not be the same without our dedicated groups who serve on Sundays
- And our choir who are here every time the doors are open almost
- I will tell you a little secret- while on my sabbatical this past winter, I visited a few churches
- Very few had music programs comparable to what you all get to enjoy week after week
- The Sunday experience, complete with the vibrant and welcoming coffee hour, is among the amazing gifts that this parish offers to those who come through that door as a visitor.
- Even more, however, than these tangible ministries is the "intangible" that really sums up St. Mark's
 - Probably more important than just about anything is the "sweet sweet spirit" that you find in this place most weeks
 - A spirit of warmth, of welcoming, of being a diverse parish for anyone looking for a spiritual home
 - This is where I believe God moves and works- yes, all the other ministries are great and vital
 - But at a church's core is its identity: are we a people of God who welcome the people God sends its way?
 - Or are we a closed, inward focused club that looks only for people who look like us?
 - Every visitor that comes through the door will know the answer- and I am happiest about this intangible part of the work we have done
 - One person recently told me that it feels like everyone here on Sunday morning is actually glad to be here
 - And that the atmosphere is unlike most churches
 - In our Epistle reading this morning, Paul writes about this very thing
 - He says, "You have not come to something that can be touched"
 - And we offer to God worship and reverence, an intangible act for an intangible God
 - The intangible spirit of hospitality is among your strongest gifts- don't lose it
- In the Gospel today, Jesus criticizes the church going people of his day for getting this wrong
 - For focusing on rules and the human side of religion and losing sight of what is the most important
 - He calls them hypocrites, because the rules of appropriate and proper religion had gotten in the way of healing

- Had gotten in the way of their critical purpose:
- To bring people who are far away from God- to bring them closer to the God who created them and who loves them
- To be a bridge between lost people and their shepherd
- I have been asked by several people to name the pieces of St. Mark's that are most important
- That are fundamental to our identity, and something that should be a part of the search process for a new rector
- Something new potential rectors might be interested in
- And I have to say this is the biggie
- This is where all that systems theory and self-differentiation, and low anxiety bears fruit
- Without this holy and intangible warmth and welcome, St. Mark's would be a very different place
- I am proud of being a part of a place over the past years where this kind of ministry has flourished
- As we both prepare for what God may have in store for us next
 - I keep in mind that at the very core of our Christian story is the truth of resurrection
 - Jesus's death on the cross was not the end
 - Our deaths are not the end
 - And the changes and challenges we face in life also do not get the final word
 - Because God is a God of resurrection and potential
 - There is always more to come with God
 - And I believe God is calling us all to the next thing, even if it is not together.
 - And God is faithful
 - You have been an amazing first parish as I left seminary and began ministry here
 - You have loved me and my family, supported us, volunteered for ministries, given your tithes
 - You have challenged me, and taught me many things
 - So thank you
 - Keep doing the great things you are doing- heck, do more of it
 - And keep living and preaching that Gospel of healing, and hospitality, and resurrection.

Thanks be to God!