

Annual Meeting State of the Parish Address, Church of our Redeemer, Lexington MA
Rev. Kate Ekrem, Priest-in-Charge
Scripture: Micah 6:1-8, Matt 5:1-12

I recently saw an ad for a new TV show. The show is about three middle aged guys, I think it's called "Men of a Certain Age." The ad shows the three of them talking about the meaning of the word Sisyphean, while pushing a stone up a big hill, whereupon it of course rolls back down to the bottom again. The show is about modern life, the pressures of work and family and taking care of aging parents and how we often feel like we're pushing that stone up the hill, only to have it roll right back down again.

The ad made me think about what our church has to offer our community, the good news we have to share, that we don't need to keep rolling that ball up the hill, all by ourselves. Jesus says today from the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, Blessed are those who mourn, Blessed are the meek, and the merciful and the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. This passage has been pointed to as more important than the Ten Commandments in defining what it means to be a Christian. Jesus gives a blueprint for a way of life that's maybe a little different from pushing that stone up the hill all the time, a way of life that gives peace and freedom. And that's good news!

Today is our Annual Meeting, when we celebrate all that we've done this year and look forward to the year to come. This past year one of our major accomplishments was the work of the strategic planning task group, putting together this (the newsprint version of our strategic plan diagram). This is the actual newsprint the task group used, and I love this version because it shows the hard work and thought and re-thought and "let's move this over here" kind of discussion that went into bringing all your input together. This is about the good news we have to share, and how we can share it. It's about what is special and wonderful about this community, it's about being who we are, building on our strengths, sharing what we have with those who need to hear about the good news.

The task group collected information from all of you in lots of ways, but one was an adult forum we had back in the fall. At that forum, people talked about the Redeemer community in an incredibly inspiring way, as a community that gives them the support to be authentic, be themselves, to be who God has called us to be, live our lives according to what we believe. As Ted said, Christianity is not an idea, it's a way of life. A way of life that's life giving and freeing. Jesus' words in the beatitudes give us a blueprint for that way of life, as does the prophet Micah, who reminds us that all God requires of us is to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

We have good news to share, good news of this way of life that frees us from the Sisyphean nature of life. How do we offer it? How do we get support for following the Christian way? Just as Jesus gives blueprint for Christian life, our strategic plan gives us blueprint for community that can and already does support us in that way of life. A community that nurtures us and empowers us through worship, that forms us as Christians, that sends us out to serve those in need in mission.

At this time last year, I said 2009 was a year of big changes. This also a year of changes – we have a new music director, a new parish administrator - but on the whole it was a pretty steady year. We did all the good things we usually do, from a wonderful Patriot's Day pancake breakfast to the Fun Fest to the Advent Procession. We got a lot done, which Connie, your senior warden, will talk more about downstairs. It was perhaps a back to normal sort of year, a getting

ready for what's next sort of year. A good year for us to ask ourselves, who are we? What's important to us about this community? What's essential about Redeemer?

And that's just what the strategic planning group did, talking with more than 40 of you one-on-one, asking what to you is essential about Redeemer. What are your dreams and goals for this community? Besides talking with people, the task group also used all of the recent cottage meetings, planning documents, and parish profiles that so much work went into in the last 5 years or so.

Our task group chair Peter Lund will go into much more detail about the objectives and goals of the strategic plan downstairs, and you will be hearing much much more from your vestry, asking for your ideas on those objectives, in coming months. But basically what the task group heard from all of you was this: That Redeemer is about worship, formation, and mission. Worship that is intergenerational, formative for children and youth as well as adults, and that involves lot of lay leadership. Formation and learning for our children and youth but equally importantly for adults. And mission that sends us out to help those in need around issues of hunger, education, and the environment.

And we also have hopes and objectives about having the resources we need to keep the worship, formation and mission going and growing. Resources of space, people, and money. So that's what the sustainability circle is about, how we sustain and grow what we're doing.

This is not a strategic plan that says, let's be something complete differing in 10 years. This is a plan that describes who we are right now. What we love about Redeemer. What's special about this place. It describes the good news we have to share. Knowing who we are helps us come together as a community. We're not small groups off doing things on our own, but a community where our worship is about mission and our mission is about formation and our formation is about worship and vice versa. In a way they are all ways of saying the same thing, all ways of following that blueprint of Jesus', and we all engage in all of them together.

Our strategic plan is about focusing on our strengths, and sharing what we love about who we are with our community. Recently I had one of those playground conversations, maybe you have them, too. I hope you do. Actually it was a sledding hill conversation. I was standing there with another mom in the neighborhood, watching our kids sled, and she said, you know, we're looking for a new church. One where we can be together as a family. We've had a tough time this year. And I told her a little bit about Redeemer. And she said, you mean parents and kids go to church together, Sunday school is not during church? And there's an adult forum where I can go and learn things, too? And you guys have the food pantry, too, and oh, you're doing other outreach? Wow, that sounds like a church we should explore.

Because people are hungry for church. They are hungry for the good news. There is something special about being a church centered around Jesus Christ, around this blueprint Jesus gives us. You can go lots of places to volunteer to help the needy, you can go lots of places and enjoy good music and great children's programs. That's not what makes us a church. What makes us a church is being a community centered in God, doing these things as part of being on the Christian way, following that blueprint of Jesus and the prophets, sharing the good news with those who need to hear about God's love and God's peace. That's the plan we have for who we are now and who we want to be in the future.