

All Saints Anglican Church

Springfield, Missouri

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Almighty Father, whose will is to restore all things under the authority of Your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, be merciful to your people as we seek to know Your will for us, individually and corporately. Lead your church by the light of Your Gospel and help us to be one people, united, renewed and restored, by the power of Your love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Later this morning we will be holding our annual congregational meeting. We will discuss our shared vision for this church and seek the Lord's leading so we may clearly know our purpose and mission.

It therefore seems appropriate to spend this time in our service today thinking about the state of the church, both in general terms, and with to regard our own congregation as we look to scripture for guidance and consider our life together.

I believe that individual churches, individual congregations, are called into being for unique tasks. As we look around us in this community we see churches which have very different missions and programs but are successful and prospering. Their programs and styles differ, but we should all share one common goal, that of building up Christ's Kingdom, bringing the lost to salvation and discipling new believers in the faith, the only scriptural mission of any and every congregation.

We know that the world, as God created it, was good. It was the perfect place in which He and His created beings could interact. God saw all that He had made and said that it was good. But man's rebellion shattered that perfection and brought sin and death into the world.

Throughout the Old Testament we find prophecies of God's intent to restore all things to the perfection He had originally provided. His plan for restoration was promises in today's Psalm. "The LORD will give strength unto his people; the LORD will bless his people with peace."

Even today we look for the fulfillment of His promises.

The ultimate fulfillment of God's plan required the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ who was born and lived among us, living the perfect life we cannot live, dying for us as the one perfect sacrifice for our sins, allowing us to come into full relationship with

the Father. In today's Gospel we heard again the story of how Jesus went to John and was baptized for us in the Jordan. Like every action, every deed of His life, His baptism was done for us, witnessing to His complete and perfect fulfillment of every law and every prophecy.

When He had completed His life among us, when He had died on the cross and descended into Sheol to witness to those who had died in the hope of His coming, when He had risen from the dead and was about to return to the Father, Jesus gave us one final commandment:

“He came and spake to them, saying, all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

You will notice that Jesus gave us both a commandment and a promise. We are to go AND He will be with us.

The church is called to an heroic task. It applies to the whole church, but also, in a very specific way, to even the smallest part of the church, even to a congregation like our own. We are to be witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ, telling our community, our region and the entire world that Jesus Christ has come, that He has died and risen and that He will come again.

We are called to an heroic task. We are called to join those heroes of the Old and New Testament in living lives of faith.

Hebrews 11: 39 – 12: 2 states it well:

And all those, having obtained a good report through faith, yet received not the promise. But God has provided better things for us, that they through our witness might receive the fulfillment of the promise. Therefore seeing we also are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily besets us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking only to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, ignoring disgrace, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

We do not face this seemingly impossible task alone. We find joy in the witness of

those who have gone before us, that great cloud of witnesses to God's grace and power, looking only to Jesus, the creator and completer of our faith, knowing that His promises were sure, true and unbreakable.

We can look around us and see the prophecies which have already been fulfilled and know that those which remain unfilled will be fulfilled in God's good timing.

In the meanwhile our task is to run the race, to be witnesses to the amazing news of God's grace and love for us (John 3: 16):

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

What better news could there be than that? The curse of sin has been removed, eternal life is ours with the Father and this broken, dying world will soon be restored to the perfection God originally intended for those who believe. Paul states (Romans 8: 18 – 27):

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the whole of creation waits in eager expectation for the revealing of the sons of God. For all creation was subjected to the results of sin, not by its own choice, but by the actions of the evil one to whom it became subject through mankind's sin. Yet the hope of all creation is that it will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we also, who already possess the first-fruits of the Holy Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, that is, the redemption of our bodies.

For this is the hope of our salvation. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, waiting patiently for it.

In the same way, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

We seek direction and we must do so, to know the specifics, the details of God's desires for us, for All Saints, that we may truly be the “Light of Christ.” But we can know the larger plan, the “Big Picture.” It is given to us in the Word.

We are to be at work – working to spread the Good News, working to bring the lost to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, working to help those who come to mature in their faith – working and also waiting, watching for the soon return of the Lord, eagerly

looking for the signs of His return, yet not resting in that hope so long as there is one more lost person to whom we can speak.

We have begun our fourth year as a new congregation. Did you know that less than one-third of all new churches last that long? We have grown in number, but more importantly, I believe we are more mature in our faith and in our vision. We are realistic about what we can do with our still limited numbers and resources, but we know we can do a great many things, all of which are in keeping with the Word and the promises of God.

This is an exciting time to be at All Saints. It is an exciting time to be about the building up of God's Kingdom.

Does all that sound properly scriptural and encouraging? I hope so, but now I want to turn to language which is a little less biblical, but which I think can speak to our condition in other ways which I think we also need to hear.

Three or four years ago, when we were meeting as a home group, we looked forward to the time when we could begin holding services and functioning as a “real” church. Those were rather heady times and there seemed to be a feeling, as I remember it, that when we actually start holding services all our issues would be addressed and we would be beyond any of the problems we were then facing. Little did we know!

There were two metaphors I remember first hearing then, but still hear from time to time. The first was that starting a church was a lot like herding cats. Do you remember that one?

The second metaphor was that we were in a situation which was a lot like flying an airplane which was still under construction.

Both metaphors were fairly apt and actually quite accurate.

Now, three years out, I think I may have a better understanding of them and I want to share it with you. I think they still speak to our situation, but they also offer a bit of insight into where God is leading us.

The first is this: Cats can't be herded. Have you watched any of those nature programs on TV about really big cats? I think they show us some things which are also true of the smaller domestic varieties we're more familiar with.

Cats just don't herd well. They live in “prides.” That is a very telling term since

cats congregate because of some natural affinity – they take “pride” in what they are and in the other cats with whom they choose to associate.

Cats hunt in prides and when they find food they all share. There may be a bit of snarling over who eats first or who gets what part, but they do share. We can learn from the unherdable cats. We shouldn't want to be herded in the first place. We want to be led, but only by God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, not by any man or woman whom we tend to elevate to some false position of authority. We need to come together and stay together because of a natural affinity, an affinity based on our common love of God and our desire to serve Him.

My second thought is that the airplane is still not finished but there is some good news as well as some bad.

The good news is that the frame of the fuselage is more or less complete even if it isn't as yet fully covered. The bad news is that we still don't have any landing gear. Maybe the bad news isn't so bad after all. It means we can't land without crashing but the church isn't intended to land. We are expected to keep flying, keep working, until the Lord calls us home. Billy Graham said that he doesn't find the word “retirement” in scripture. That may speak to our condition collectively as well as individually. We have no choice but to keep this odd craft in the air.

Our church really is a lot like an unfinished airplane. We have the basic framework in place. We have structure. Gerald is leading our worship and grounding our services. We have a functioning women's group and we guys are finally getting our act together and expect to soon be meeting every month. We have children's Sunday school classes and an adult class. We have an altar guild and a hospitality committee. Our choir is growing, both in numbers and in the commitment of its members. In fact, our music program is taking off, thanks to Dick Pickard's leadership. Our Wednesday evening Prayer and Praise service is growing, both in numbers and spiritual depth and I believe it may soon be a very important part of our communal life as well as a significant way of reaching out to others in the community. We love to get together and share our food and we don't squabble too much about who gets the best parts.

We have agreed, formally or informally, on some groups and ministries we want to support and we are tithing our budget to support those missions.

I think we can safely say we are functioning as a church. We just need to learn how to do it better. I'd certainly not want us to get so comfortable we only think of ourselves as some nice little club, a gathering of the elect. Many of us came from churches like that and are happy with a bit of unsettledness if that is the cost of real effectiveness.

Are we seeking the lost and bringing them to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ? I hope so. We don't seem to be doing it in any organized way or with any real system. Maybe that is also for the best. I for one am most comfortable with one-on-one conversation with those I know, rather than with some sort of general appeal to strangers. I'm sure there is a place in God's plan for both approaches. Gerald tells us he has rarely seen such a friendly congregation, always ready to welcome newcomers, not just in a formal way, but as valued members of our family.

I believe God is moving among us. He, by the power of His Holy Spirit, is forming us into His image. I believe the state of our congregation is sound, moving forward and still seeking our unique mission. I'd not want us to ever become comfortable or complacent.

We must always be moving forward, keeping the plane in the air, running the race that is set before us, looking only to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. Amen.