

Nothing is as wonderful as knowing Christ.

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

4th Sunday after Epiphany, Year B. January 29, 2006. Rector's Address on the occasion of the 2006 Annual Parish Meeting.

Since this is the day of our Annual Parish Meeting, I want to share some thoughts about our past and some hopes for our future. Last October, when we were beginning our annual stewardship appeal, I wrote that one of the best ways to understand the Christian life is to see it as an *adventure in faith* —like walking a steep trail up a mountain, led by Jesus. When the Lord called his first disciples – as we talked about last Sunday – he didn't interview them in advance, and he didn't ask them for any commitment up front. Neither did he tell them where he'd be leading them. He just said, "*Follow me and I will make you fish for people.*"

Much later, Jesus made clear to them that continuing to follow him was going to require willingness to put their personal ambitions aside, take up crosses like the one he was about to bear, and keep on walking in his footsteps. But by that time, the little band of his closest disciples had come to love Jesus so much and trust him so completely that they'd have paid any price to stay with him and share his destiny.

From that day to this, Jesus hasn't changed. And I don't think he expects any less of disciples now than he did in the beginning. Maybe we can learn something from Paul. When he met Christ on the Damascus road, Paul was on the fast-track to power and influence in Judea. He was a student of one of the greatest rabbis of his time. He had a brilliant future ahead of him. But he gave all that up —just to follow Jesus, just to be "on the upward way" with him, living the adventure of faith. Paul wrote these words to the little church in Philippi, people to whom he apparently opened his heart more fully than to anyone else: "*Christ has shown me that what I once thought was valuable is worthless. Nothing is as wonderful as knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.... All I want is Christ and to know that I belong to him.... [So, then] I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.*"

I want to use Paul's words as a guide for us today, but I'm going to start at the end, with his closing sentence, "*Let us hold fast to what we have attained.*" By the grace of God some good things happened among us during 2005. We grew, both in full-time resident members and in part-time folks who count Christ Church as their Aspen church home. We had a fifteen per-cent increase in Sunday attendance. Financial support for the church exceeded anything in our history. And – as a part of that – we passed along to others, both nearby and far away, the highest level of charitable outreach giving anybody can remember.

We started the year by raising a lot of money to build homes for people in southern Thailand who'd lost everything in the tsunami. We collected a record amount of food and money to help hungry and homeless people in our own valley through Feed My Sheep. We adopted more needy families through Holiday Baskets this Christmas than ever before. We partnered with other churches to help the devastated Episcopal Church and community in Bay St. Louis, MS, a town where most families lost their homes to hurricane Katrina. And we're committed to helping them straight through 2006 because there's a lot left to do down there. In addition to these special undertakings, we doubled our regular charitable outreach budget. When Jesus began his ministry, he repeated the words of Isaiah, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*" If through our charitable giving in 2006 we can continue bringing good news to the poor, then we'll be following in the Lord's footsteps.

On the home front: if we plunge into the ambitious task of remodeling or rebuilding our church in the years ahead – a project that seems more necessary with every day that passes – we're going to need to keep up or even exceed the high standard of stewardship that we set in 2005. So, as Paul said, "*Let us hold fast to what we have attained.*"

I started with his final words, now I want to wrap up things up with the first words Paul wrote in the passage I quoted: "*Christ has shown me that what I once thought was valuable is worthless. Nothing is as wonderful as knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*" Here's the challenge for us! How many of us could say the same

thing: “*Christ has shown me that what I once thought was valuable is worthless*”? That requires a revolution in our thinking, a transformation of our minds.

I love it that our congregation is named “Christ Church.” I love that name because Christianity doesn’t have anything unique to offer the world *except* Jesus Christ! There’s a sad tendency in some mainstream churches to be uncomfortable with the Christ of the gospels. But when we get uncomfortable with Jesus it’s generally because he’s challenging our complacency and our easy, relaxed, anything-goes-as-long-as-we’re-all-just-nice brand of relativism.

If we’re to be the church the Lord wants, there has to be a deep, personal conversion to Christ in the heart of each of us. How wonderful if we all came to the point where we could honestly make Paul’s words our own: “*Christ has shown me that what I once thought was valuable is worthless. Nothing is as wonderful as knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*” —I can stand up here and preach this every Sunday, but only the Holy Spirit can make the words go from our heads to our hearts.

I’m convinced that Jesus is God’s answer to the world’s needs. He’s the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is Lord, whether other people choose to recognize it or not. —I’m talking about *Jesus* here, not about a specific theological system or a particular denomination within world Christianity. I’m talking about Jesus, the carpenter, the Son of God.

We all know very well that it’s much easier to be good “church members” than to be good disciples of Christ. But in 2006 I want us to move from just being church members to being *disciples*. What will it take to get this transformation going? I suppose there are a variety of things that could kick-start it, but I only want to name two this morning... two things that fall within the realm of the possible for us in 2006.

First, we have to *decide to be serious about worship*. Worshiping the Lord on Sunday is not just an “option” for disciples. It’s an expectation. Worship re-sets our spiritual compass, re-orientes our minds, and re-focuses our attention on God and God’s will for our lives. Worship reminds us of what has *true* value. Without solid commitment to worshiping God every Sunday in the Church, it’s easy to slide into spiritual indifference. —And when I say “worship,” I’m not just talking about taking up pew space. And I’m not talking about coming to church mainly to hear a sermon (as flattering as that might be to the preacher). I’m talking about “*offering ourselves, our souls and bodies, as a reasonable holy and living sacrifice*” to the Lord. I’m talking about coming before God every Sunday morning to “report for orders,” asking, “Lord, what do you want me to do this week?” —and expecting to hear an answer.

Second, we have to *decide to be committed to one another*. As I said last Sunday, being a disciple of Christ “means living with Jesus day-by-day, and living with Jesus really means living with each other day-by-day, because *we* are the Body of Christ. The Christian life is not about ‘Jesus and me.’ It’s about ‘Jesus and *us*.’” Our mission statement is: CHRIST CHURCH—SHARING HIS LOVE. Sharing Christ’s love has to begin with one another in the Church. It’s not that the Lord doesn’t want us to reach out in love to our neighbors, whether they’re Christians or non-believers. We know he does. But if we can’t love our brothers and sisters in Christ, it’s unlikely we’ll ever love our neighbors and it’s a virtual certainty that we’ll never learn how to love our enemies.

Authentic commitment to one another demands that we *know* one another —not superficially, like people who only see each other at parties, but deeply, as people who pray together, work together, and share their lives with one another —good times and bad times, joys and sorrows alike.

Today we’re holding our Annual Meeting and moving into 2006. We do so with gratitude for all that God has done in us and through us in the last year, eager to “*hold fast to what we have attained*” —but equally eager to do whatever the Holy Spirit shows will move us from merely being “church members” to being disciples.

Please pray with me. *Lord, we offer ourselves afresh to you this morning. May your Spirit renew our minds, transform our thinking, and empower us to share your love more effectively this year than ever before. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.*