

**The State of the Parish Address  
January 31, 2021**

I believe in the Holy Spirit...not because the Creeds...both Apostles and Nicene tell me to do so. I believe in the Holy Spirit because I KNOW the Holy Spirit is an active power in this world. I KNOW so because of experience.

I could recount numerous experiences of the Holy Spirit, yet today, I want to tell you of the presence of the Holy Spirit in bringing this sermon to life. And the sermon is longer than usual.

Since it is the Annual Meeting...a once-a-year event, I knew some time ago, that today's sermon would be a "State of the Parish address." The Annual Report gives you a journey through this last year...the ups and downs...and hopefully you came away after reading it with a sense of the state of the parish. Let me say up front...the state of Grace Church is very good...very, very good if you take in consideration this most unusual year. I could stop here...but I won't. I can't because the Holy Spirit is urging me on.

We are going to work backwards as I bring you into the presence of the Spirit in this place.

Yesterday, the 11<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Oregon was consecrated. A grand liturgy of the church...even with only 50 people in attendance.

I'm going down a pig trail for a minute to talk to those of you who worship with us via your computer, Ipad or phone. At the rectory, Jim and I watched the consecration yesterday, computer hooked up to the tv. Excited to be watching this wondrous liturgy, I was struck quickly that I wasn't there. Tears flowed down my cheeks; lip quivered. I have had the pleasure and honor of attending many ordinations of deacons and priests; consecrations of a number of bishops, and wonderfully, the consecrations of two Presiding Bishops in the National Cathedral in Washington DC. I LOVE these liturgies...and yesterday, it pained me not to be there in person. So, for all of you who have been patient worshippers with us all these many months via FaceBook and YouTube...thank you. I had a sense yesterday of just how painful it is to be separated from community in worship.

Back to the Holy Spirit...The Rt Rev'd Brian Prior Retired Bishop of Minnesota was the preacher. He and Diana, our new bishop, were in seminary together. He talked of what he learned from her...there were many, but two things caught my attention. One, was what it was like for Bishop Prior to become a friend, and be in the presence of someone who, because of her gender, or her race or perhaps even both, went unrecognized by those inside and outside the church. For those who don't know, Diana is Japanese American, raised in Hood River Oregon, near where her grandparents were put in the Japanese Internment Camps during WWII. Her husband is African-American, another race that for years, and even to this day, goes unrecognized inside and outside the church. Bishop Prior stated that he was grateful that the Church and the world now had Diana's face and all that it represents in a leadership position.

The second thing Bishop Prior told of was watching Diana come into understanding of just who she is. That growth comes from the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...especially when one is unrecognized by the greater world. It is a knowledge and growth from the inside out...the place where the Spirit finds a home.

That was a SMALL part of yesterday.

On Friday, Our Presiding Bishop, The Most Reverend Michael Curry...don't you just love the titles?...invited all the clergy of the Diocese of Oregon to a Zoom call with him prior to Diana's consecration. Oh, How I wish I could have had all of you on the call. Our church...and the world...is so blessed to have this man in our lives. An hour with that servant of God is like a weeklong retreat. The question he asked that I now lay before all of us is this: How do we help people to be true and real followers of Jesus? In asking the question, Bishop Curry talked of the past...the past of Christianity, the past of our country, the past of our church. He talked of the present...present and divided Christianity, country and church. More than once he talked of the storming of the capitol and the complete surprise that was for him. Never had he imagined that Americans would storm those sacred halls of our republic. He said one of our tasks as Jesus people is to help our country regain her soul; to be who we claim to be...one nation under God.

To cut to the chase, Bishop Curry gave us two guideposts for our work and ministry. The first is formation in community...and yes, he acknowledged that is a little more difficult to do these days. Yet he did not back off from the admonition that we must be in community, reading and teaching holy scripture, praying with God and one another, coming to this table with hands outstretched...and then, then the second part is for the church to provide opportunities for us Jesus followers to practice the ways of Jesus in the world. Community and service.

Some of you know that I try to work in threes...given the Trinity, that is my threshold. So...I've talked of yesterday, I've talked of Friday.

The third piece, really the first piece, came on Tuesday when I was writing my "Thoughts to Ponder" for the Wednesday GraceNotes. Some of you may have had the chance to read it; others may not. So a quick recap: I included notes from the history of Grace Church, this church, the first church to be built in Astoria. Started in 1864, with worship held in the County Courthouse...so much for separation of church and state...the first church built measured 63 feet by 24 feet, and held, here's the important part, held almost 200 people! Why is that so important?

Because the census of Clatsop COUNTY...not Astoria only, but the county was 498 people in 1860, growing 152% to 1255 by 1870. Somewhere between 500 and 1200 people lived in the county when in 1866 the first church building was opened. And yes, I imagine that the First Americans, the Clatsop people were not counted in the census.

Sit with that for a minute. A church built to hold almost 200 people in an area where that number represented roughly between forty percent in 1860 and a little less than 20% in 1870 of the population! What a dream! What a vision! What an answer to the call to tell the world the good news of Christ!

Yet, it doesn't just begin and end with numbers. From what I have heard and read of the settlers of Astoria and the surrounding area, there was much division...

Check out parts of Astoria today...and you will see remnants of the old divide...though called "Nordic" settlers in history books, there is great difference between Swedes, Finns and Norwegians. And then there were the Chinese, who by the late 1800s, comprised 22% of Astoria's population. And of course, the Clatsop people.

Do you get it? DO you? The founders of Grace Church, whether or not, they could articulate it, had a vision of building a church that could hold anywhere from almost a half to a fifth of the inhabitants of the county...not just city...at any one time. Multiple services would welcome a lot of folks to this table.

Sit with that. Sit with that for a while...and think of the Holy Spirit moving among the founders. A vision, a dream, a living out of St. Paul's proclamation in Galatians: In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free. Just children of God, siblings of Jesus. And Grace Church, from its earliest days, whether articulated or not, prepared a space to gather the children of God. No one will be turned away.

I find that amazing. I find that hopeful as we move into the 158<sup>th</sup> year of Grace Church. As we continue to discern of so much to do and be in this divided world in which we find ourselves, our history grounds us. As we wait for the name and then arrival of the 20<sup>th</sup> rector of Grace Church, we do not wait with hands folded.

Grace Church has come through a difficult time...not just this past year or the year before, but in times throughout its 157 years of existence. And still Grace has kept the faith; still Grace has kept the mindset of the founders that there is provided a place at the table for one and all. No one gets turned away.

That is the state of Grace Church. It is very, very good. You stand on the broad and sturdy shoulders of many. People who were dreamers, yet more important than that, people, who with the Holy Spirit, made their crazy dreams into reality.

As I prepare to leave you, I encourage you to stand tall, be dreamers...and more than that...make your dreams, Grace's dreams, her founders' dreams, GOD's dream into reality.

I know you can do it. Your ancestors did it in the past. Now...now...is your time.

There is a sweet, sweet spirit in this place...always has been, always will be, because it is the Spirit of the Lord.

Amen.

.....

The Reverend Betty S. McWhorter, Interim Rector