

Rector's Address – May 15, 2011
The Rev. Ruth Lawson Kirk

Day by day they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.

It always amazes me that plans can be set for an event, like our annual meeting in its new form, and then as the pieces fall into place, I recognize God's design woven through it. We chose the third Sunday in May as a good time after Easter and before summer, little knowing this year it is also Good Shepherd Sunday.

Who is our Good Shepherd but Jesus, who is alive and present to lead this church by the power of the Holy Spirit? By prayer and conversation, your vestry, your clergy, your committees, and your staff strive to follow the way of Jesus as he guides Christ Church to our next season of ministry. We are listening for his voice, speaking through scripture, sounding in the exchanges of ideas and hopes, whispering deep in the heart. As we gather to celebrate our ministry, it's important for us to remember the Good Shepherd.

Because this Sunday is Good Shepherd Sunday, certain passages are appointed. And so from the book of Acts, we hear a description of the first community of the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem in the months after his resurrection. The description is of an energized and attractive assembly. In the verse just before our passage, 3,000 people were added to the small band of believers.

- Those new in the faith devoted themselves to learning from those who had walked with Jesus.
- They broke bread and prayed together.
- They counted the needs of others more highly than the need for personal property.
- They spent time together in worship and fellowship.
- There was a feeling of goodwill among them.
- Lives were being changed as more and more people sensed the liberation offered by Jesus and came into their fellowship.

I couldn't ask for a better passage of scripture for us to hear on the day of our annual meeting. This is exactly what I want our neighbors to say about Christ Church.

By God's design we are called to share the ministry and mission as Christ Church Christiana Hundred. We each have a share, from the newest of the newly baptized to the most senior member. We share in God's call to be a community of faith that others can talk about as a glad and generous place of goodwill, active in prayer and worship.

Sharing is a hard lesson to learn. It's a lesson our preschool teachers model daily for the young children in their care. Sharing and cooperating is not only polite behavior, it is a

manifestation of mutuality and honor. In our mission statement we proclaim that we share the beauty and power of God's transforming love. That is a huge gift to share. I want Christ Church to be known as a congregation that shares the power of God's love within our assembly and with those beyond our membership who also desire the liberation and blessing of Jesus.

Within our assembly, in the past year the vestry asked each committee to consider its structure, clarify its purpose, and offer a process for leadership transition so that other members can share in the work of being Christ Church. Some committees have expanded, some are re-energizing, and new leaders are assigned. We are intentionally acting in mutuality, honoring the gifts and talents, the perspectives and wisdom that sharing work provides. We spread the responsibility for our common life among us, flattening the pyramids or silos of power. This mutuality and honor demonstrates God's love at work within Christ Church.

I also hope that we can reach out to others who are not a part of our active membership, to invite them to share with us in the beauty and power of God's transforming love.

A number of times as I greet those leaving a wedding or a funeral, someone will shake my hand and tell me they used to come to Christ Church, or that they are a member, but don't come very often. I know there are many reasons why people break away from community, but I also know that these are people we are to seek out and welcome back. Our work is to heal old wounds, to forgive and forget past offenses so that we ALL may be changed into one faithful community identified as followers of our Good Shepherd, Jesus. Remember how the shepherd leaves the 99 to go look for the one that was lost? I wonder who you can help the Good Shepherd find to bring back into the fold.

We all know that we live in uncertain and volatile times. Perhaps that has been true in every age, but after a longer season of prosperity and relative peace, the last decade has been tumultuous on many fronts. We have friends and loved ones that are unemployed. We have friends and loved ones in the military. Our journalists report increasing numbers of homeless families in our area, and the statistics on Wilmington's violence seem to rise with the price of gas. The wars, floods, tornadoes, and tsunamis begin to sound in biblical proportions, and fear floods the nations. Some radio prophet has the gall to pronounce that he knows the date for judgment day, and it is next week. "About that day or hour, no one knows," said Jesus, "only the Father." Something tells me if God didn't let Jesus in on it, God hasn't spoken it to the producers of Family Radio.

When fear oppresses, Christ Church must proclaim, by word and example, the freeing and saving Good News of Jesus Christ. We must draw those who are hurting and broken to the peace and serenity that is life here in Christian fellowship with God in the power of the Spirit. We begin by praying for them. As you know, each Tuesday morning, a few of our members gather for ten or fifteen minutes of intercessory prayer. This is an excellent time to

demonstrate our share in the power of God changing lives. My hope is that we can expand our ministry of prayer for others as an invitation, an opening for the saving love of God.

When false prophets capitalize on the anxiety of these days, we are called to speak of the peace and unity of God's people and to invest our time and talent in cooperation with the power of God to bring light to those in darkness and hope for those despairing. I want for us to expand our ministry of caring and outreach, not only by providing gladly from our treasures but also by inviting those whom we serve to worship here with us and share in our fellowship. Then we will be a living example of the words from Acts. Lives will be changed as more and more people sense the liberation, the salvation of Jesus and come into our fellowship. Then we will witness with glad and generous hearts.

I look for two measures that can indicate we are living such a joyful witness. The first is attendance. If we are inviting others into our faith community, our attendance should increase. In the past year our attendance at offerings for Adult Enrichment has grown, but attendance in worship has not. I will strive for an expansion in opportunities for worship at Christ Church. My hope is that we have another weekend service by this time next year. Added children's services, the labyrinth that will be created this summer, and other occasional services allow for a variety of worship forms where we can know and share the beauty and power of God's love.

I also ask our members to set aside those activities that conflict with their regular participation on Sunday mornings. There are six days for all the rest of our life choices, but only one Sabbath. No organization is going to make room for holy time, your time to be in God's presence and to strengthen the bonds of love that are created in the prayer and fellowship that is "church." It must be your choice as you follow Christ. More and more, I want our story to be that at Christ Church we spend holy time together, we learn from one another, we break bread together, and we pray together. I will watch our attendance and work with the worship committee to increase opportunities for holy time.

The other indicator that says we are a faith community as vibrant and attractive as the early church in Jerusalem is our Christian stewardship. The point of stewardship is to grow our relationship with Jesus through the use of the time, talents, and finances that God has entrusted to each of us. When Luke writes that the members of the Jerusalem church would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, he was talking about Spirit-led and transformed people who practiced a sense of mutuality and honor with *what they had* as well as in *what they did*. For the first time in five years, we measure an increase in our annual pledges to fund the ministry and mission that is given us all. I hope this increase is an indicator that we are pairing faith witness with finances and becoming more Spirit-led in our own sense of mutuality, sharing from the resources God has entrusted to each of us.

And then there is the indicator we cannot measure but can sense. In our prayer and worship, our fellowship and service, we are called to witness our embrace of God: Father, Son and

Holy Spirit. I hope we deepen the spiritual life of this community as we embrace the height and depth, the breadth and length of God's grace and power within and among us.

I look forward to the proclamation of our faith as we continue today's worship, gather for some highlights about our common life, and break bread together. We share two meals today—the first is the Body and Blood of Christ making us one with God and in communion with one another, and the second is the fellowship of a feast prepared for glad and generous hearts. I think you will find a measure of the goodwill that is brimming over in this community.

I thank you for your participation, your sharing in the life that God weaves together at Christ Church. Take a moment to look around and see the design God is creating among us. Give praise and thanks to God for the signs and wonders of his love at work in this church. Thank you for the privilege of serving as your rector.

And now to God be the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.