

What a delightful and energizing celebration we had last week! I am so very grateful to all of you who made our 100th anniversary possible: to our senior warden, Elizabeth Moran who took the initiative to get things rolling and spear heading informative displays, to Clarissa Brown, our organist, organizing musicians, to Benjy Lowry and Shelly Gallender and Kate Jackson and numerous others for the magnificent reception in the parish hall and gardens. Thank you for the extra efforts of altar guild, flower guild, ushers, vestry greeters, videographer, photographer, Eucharistic Ministers, Readers, Acolytes, and our deacon emeritus, Rosalee Glass. And thank you to those who worked so diligently on trimming and weeding and planting; our campus looks the best that I have seen it in my brief tenure. Our Treasurer, Terry Mello, tells me that we reached our goal to fund the new audio visual system and we'll honor all donors in next weekend's Tidings. And I am thankful for our Bishop, Thomas Brown who took time to engage and listen to many of you and who through his sermon, helped articulate why all this hoopla in the first place. As is custom, the Bishop Discretionary Fund was the recipient of the loose plate offering that day. It truly was a remarkable celebration; the presence of the Holy Spirit was palpable.

I hope you found the day encouraging as we make preparations to hone our unique mission here at St. Thomas' and eventually discern who God is calling to be our next rector. Before we go there, we have three important things happening this month in our church home. The first is the Summer Luncheon slated for Saturday, August 17. That's just two weeks away. This is an opportunity to invite the wider community onto our beautiful campus and connect informally. It is an experiment to see if this is an event that is life-giving or not. The second is that I could not find a priest available to celebrate the Eucharist on August 25. I have asked our Deacon Emeritus the Rev. Rosalee Glass to lead Morning Prayer and preach on that day at 8 and 10. This too is an experiment of sorts responding to a shortage of priests and a gradual realization that we may not be able to fund a full-time rector in the future. As you are aware, my wife, The Rev. Barbara Briggs is rector of St. Margaret's, Belfast. She is 3/4 time and therefore that congregation has a cadre of five people trained to lead morning prayer and preach on the fourth Sunday each month. The Great Pandemic of 2020 helped us to recall that Morning Prayer was once a staple in many Episcopal parishes across the U.S. The third thing is that we are working with our local middle school to provide sixteen backpacks with school supplies for youth in our area. This too is an experiment, partnering with others beyond our walls to be the hands and feet and heart of Christ.

Our Vestry will be meeting a week from Tuesday and one of our agenda items will be to build a parish calendar for 2024-2025. Obviously, we will need to plan a meeting to have a parish conversation about the best way to proceed with the repair or redesign of the chapel and bell tower. My hunch is that it will take more than one meeting. And the reality is that we cannot begin the process of calling a rector until there is consensus about the tower. I also will consult with the Rev. Suzanne Roberts, Canon for Transition Ministry to see what her recommendations are for a timeline in calling a rector.

In my estimation, we are entering a new season. I detect more energy and engagement and general health throughout our parish. It is a season where we can have deeper conversations about where God might be calling us.

We of course need to think about how we are fed. What sorts of formation for adults and youth to help us be built up into the Body of Christ? We are proposing to begin the season with a weekly Children's Chapel and occasional informal gatherings of young families; this will be a start before we go on to other things. Also, I am proposing to identify several people that would be willing to lead one session on some aspect of our Anglican faith tradition, so that one week might feature Holy Scripture, Church History, Social Action, Prayer, Church Polity, etc. What would it look like if we used these sessions of Christian basics and used these as a way that people might prepare for Confirmation, Reception, or the Renewal of Baptismal Vows?

Over the next few weeks, our Gospel readings focus on the Bread of Life. It is a good time to ask ourselves, what nourishes us and sustains us? How do we (in the words of Jesus to the crowd) "*work for the food that lasts for eternal life.*"?

Let's be clear about what Jesus is offering: he's holding out Olympic Gold; he's offering the bread of life – the food of myth and legend, the stuff which grants life eternal.

And yet there is nothing we can do to grasp or earn it. Jesus says, "believe". It is sheer gift. Communion and baptism are God's visible words of love and forgiveness, given in a form which we can receive. The sacraments are God's physical, visible words for God's physical, visible people. And as the Catechism says, we receive grace as we participate in this sacramental life. It is *God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills* (p. 858).

John says that the people ask, "*what miracle will you perform so that we may see it and believe you?*" In other words, "Prove yourself, Jesus." Does that sound familiar? How much easier faith would be if God would just give us a miracle.

God rarely does what God is supposed to do. Our God is a God of surprises, of upheavals, of reversals. And so rather than do what God is supposed to do, God does the unexpected: instead of pronouncing judgment in the face of our sin and selfishness, God offers mercy; instead of justice, love; instead of condemnation, forgiveness; instead of coming in power, God came in weakness; and instead of giving us a miracle, God gives us God's own self. The whole of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are summed up succinctly in the invitation to come to the Table: "The gifts of God, for the people of God." These gifts are for you. Take, eat, and be thankful. And may grace abound.

*The Rev. Paul Briggs  
11th Sunday After Pentecost, 4 August 2024  
St. Thomas' Church, Camden, Maine*