



## Our Best Selves

Rowan Williams, citing Desmond Tutu, has said that he is persuaded there are two kinds of egotists in the world. There are egotists that are so in love with themselves that they have no room for anyone else, and there are egotists that are so in love with themselves that they make it possible for everyone else to be in love with themselves. They are at home in their own skins. It doesn't mean that they are arrogant or self-obsessed or think they are faultless. They have learned to sense some of the joy that God takes in them (Williams, *Being Disciples*, 52)."

We all know, even those of us who do not teach for a living, that children are sponges for the models we set in front of them. Because I have a person in my extended family who has small children, I'm reminded of how much children take in; presented with the right models and repeated affirmations they have the chance to flourish and develop such a strong sense of identity that others around them will want to grow. This process is largely hidden but impossible to miss. Leaving aside Augustine's thoughts about how we are shaped by our environments and the habits that

form us, it is truly wondrous to see these young people develop (if you can get their attention) into their own best selves. They are, by and large, free from the self-consciousness that goes with adolescence. They show me what it is like to have an openness to the world which is harder for adults cultivate, with the pressures between work and parenthood, ones that have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

In Storytelling (which is infinitely less forbidding than "Bible Study"), we have been talking about the healings of Jesus—blindness, deafness, exorcisms and the rest. I have been trying to emphasize that Jesus heals us from the inside-out, which they appear to accept even if they don't completely understand (Who of us does?). What Jesus allows in restoring sight to Blind Bartimaeus, speech and hearing to another, sanity to the Gerasene demoniac, is wholeness. God does not want us to be held captive by what limits us or the contraction of our hearts when we are less loving than we could be. When Jesus heals the blind in the company of the disciples, he is giving them (and us, by extension) the opportunity to drop our own blindness.

# St. Paul's Church

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He extends the community by offering the healed person as the best version of themselves and, in the process, allows the onlookers to become the persons God created them to be.

The same dynamic happens in our communities. Taking a cue from our young people, we are looking to develop our priorities in our time and place to be the best parish we can be. Because this pandemic is not entirely through with us, we cannot predict with absolute certainty what the landscape will be in the fall, when our ministries will be indoors and we will have the "almost normal" we have been craving for more than a year. My hope is that it will include closer relations with Rutgers, the presence of new people in our church and ministries, as well as the ministry of our new deacon Jeannie. The wonderful part is that we can be free and confident in who we are, with God's help allowing the community to be the best it can be and allowing God to take joy in all of us.

-Fr. Mark

# Civic Engagement

*Ninth Annual*  
**Chancellor's  
Awards for  
Civic Engagement**  
June 29, 2021



## Honors College Staff

In fall 2019, Honors College staff partnered with Fr. Mark Smith at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Camden to provide meals to the homeless on the first and second Sundays of the month. Before COVID, students and staff gathered at the church to cook and serve food to more than 100 homeless and food-insecure individuals and families. Despite COVID, starting in March 2020, the Honors College staff continued its partnership with St. Paul's by bringing ready-to-serve casseroles, side dishes, and desserts on Sunday evenings so that the staff there could package and distribute the hot food to homeless and food-insecure individuals and families who lined up outside the church. At a time when many would have stopped such a service to the community due to the health challenges, the Honors College staff persevered to ensure that homeless and food-insecure individuals and families would have meals. It is a true testament to the spirit of civic engagement that exemplifies Rutgers University-Camden's dedication to support the community within the city of Camden.

As I have said before in other contexts, the pandemic was a stress test for our ministries to our homeless guests in ways it would have been difficult to imagine only two years ago. Especially in the spring and summer of 2020, when little was known about the virus and the methods of transmission, many people stepped into a situation full of guesswork, where the only givens were the needs of our guests and our obligation as people of faith to meet them. As is often the case, the people who continued to come to St. Paul's and help us prepare food on Sunday mornings and evenings did not want any sort of recognition. They simply wanted to lend a hand in helping a population that had suddenly become

more vulnerable than ever, beyond the food insecurity they had always faced. They were from many of the parishes from Project Interaction, but they also included Individuals who were willing to step into a gap when the situation demanded it.

The staff from Rutgers Honors College, who were relatively new to St. Paul's when the pandemic forced us to come up with new ways of confronting the ongoing need, were one of the groups who continued the work, even when their students were sent home. At the Honor's Banquet for Civic Engagement, they were presented with a "Spirit of Civic Engagement" award, recognizing their service to the community. The

award was unsought (these are a self-effacing group of folks), but they are representative of the support we have received throughout the pandemic and for which we are exceedingly grateful.

This fall, when our ministries return inside, we will have a day of recognition for those who helped us through the worst of the pandemic and its effects on the guests we could not have served without their help. Until then, I hope you will join me in prayers of gratitude for their faithfulness and determination in recognizing our responsibility to care for our neighbors.

-Fr. Mark

# Brick by Brick

*Young people say, "What can one person do? What is the sense of our small effort?" They cannot see that we can only lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time; we can be responsible only for the one action of the present moment. But we can beg for an increase of love in our hearts that will vitalize and transform these actions, and know that God will take them and multiply them, as Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes.*

## Dorothy Day

Looking over the last year, we have seen immense suffering, especially of those on the margins of our collective lives. Because we are human and we frequently indulge in the especially American heresy that we are responsible for our own destinies, can "pull ourselves up by our bootstraps," as a people we can be intolerant of those who stubbornly resist this paradigm to which we cling. If we accept that there are systems that make it far more difficult for some to succeed than others, which we affirm in our baptismal covenant when we agree to "renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God," we are asserting that this marginalization is all of our responsibility. Indeed, God will multiply our efforts but, like Jesus before the hungry five thousand, we have to take the first step.

These pandemic months, unrequested and deadly as they have been, have offered us an



equally unmasked-for perspective on how we are treating our neighbors, something with which we will have to contend as we plan to move our ministries inside. I believe Day is correct when she identifies this sort of belief in young people; insofar as they want to see change, many want to see it in a loaves-and-fishes sense, of a miraculous outpouring of grace (and effort) in order to effect this transformation, so that need, want and insecurity are a concern of the past. What we should be interested in, in my view, is the one-by-oneness of our work, the realization that it is only one human being we see at a time and that is how God works

through us. Brick-by-brick, God establishes the foundation on which we are able to build a way to address inequities, to heal our communities. As I have been reminded by the children at Camp Faith, the healings of Jesus happen one at a time; it is only after the healing of the individual that the community has an opportunity to change its mind.

I make these remarks because we are likely to see more young people among us in the year ahead, both those we know from our parish family and students from Rutgers. The pandemic and its aftermath will compel us to make some decisions about where to put our time and resources. We will have a vestry retreat to solidify some of our objectives, but my hope is that they will include addressing the questions of these young people from very different backgrounds, to cultivate an openness to what solutions are and that they are embedded in the sacredness of each person. God's work is in the relationship, and if those relationships are the currency in the kingdom of God, we must do all we can to foster them.

-Fr. Mark

## Stewardship!

Please continue to keep your pledges to St. Paul's current. Summer is traditionally a time for vacations and travel, which makes it harder to get our contributions to the church. If you would like to give electronically (by far the easiest and most painless way of giving, please contact Fr. Mark or the wardens on setting up such an arrangement with your bank.

## Vacation!

Talking of vacations, Kelly and I will be gone from August 2-9. The Rev. Allen Wakabayashi, the Episcopal chaplain at Princeton, will preach and celebrate on August 8. Please make him feel welcome!

-Fr. Mark