

Annual Meeting Sunday – Feb 18 2024

Who here woke up this morning excited about the church annual meeting? By the way, if you raise your hand, I think that means you're automatically nominated for church council. This is not something most people get excited about.

The problem with church annual meetings is that just like meetings at your job, this isn't the main point. No one should be joining a church because you like meetings and Bourinot's Rules of Order. You have chosen to be part of this congregation, this church community of Zion, because you want to be part of doing God's work, not just talking about it.

And yet, each year we take the time to meet and do the business of the congregation, because the structure we have as an organization matters.

Budgets and delegates and councils are all intended as tools for ministry. We take time to celebrate and to look forward and to remind ourselves of the mission and purpose God is calling us to.

I want to share with you a story I heard a few years ago. On a dangerous section of seacoast, where shipwrecks often occurred, there was once a little life-saving station. The building was just a crude hut, and the station only had one small boat, but there was a small, dedicated group of volunteers who kept a constant watch over the sea. With no thought for their own safety, whenever they were called upon after a storm, they would spend day and night out tirelessly searching for the lost at sea.

As word spread about their bravery and dedication and people heard about their good work, they wanted to be associated with the group at the little life-station. Other

people gave of their time and money to support their important work. New boats were bought. New crews were trained. The little life-saving station grew.

Some members of the life-saving station were concerned that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. The first refuge for those saved from the sea ought to be a more comfortable place, they believed.

So they went to work, and added on to the building, replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building.

Now it was a pretty nice building—right there on the coast—so often, members of the lifesaving group would gather there for special occasions. They decorated it beautifully, and added everything they needed for good hospitality for each other and for their guests.

Not very many members were now interested in personally going out to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired professional lifeboat crews to do this work.

They did keep a nautical theme in the club's decorations, and someone even donated a very nice miniature lifeboat to be prominently displayed in the room where the club initiations were held.

It was right around that time that a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick and some of them were foreigners, difficult to understand, and the beautiful new club was in chaos.

The property committee immediately voted to build a shower house outside the club where shipwreck victims could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At their next annual meeting, there was a great deal of controversy. Quite a few of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities and focus on what was bringing in new members.

The expectation of going out at night during storms was not only unpleasant; it got in the way of the club's normal social life. Other members, though, insisted that lifesaving was their primary purpose, pointing out that they were still called a lifesaving station; it said so right on the sign.

At the meeting, they were voted down and told that if they wanted to spend all their effort just on the shipwreck victims, well maybe they should start their own lifesaving station. So they did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It too evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded.

History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of very nice, exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

As we gather today to do the business of the church, my prayer is that we remember who we are in this community of faith, and what God is calling us to.

The church exists for the people who aren't here yet. Our congregation is here not just for us, but for the people who haven't heard the good news of Jesus. We are

here today because our neighbours in Pembroke and beyond need to know that God's love is for them, just like we do.

We are people of God united in Christ, called to minister to each other and to reach out to all people with love, sharing the good news we have of salvation in Jesus Christ.

We are here to share the promise of salvation we have been given, the hope of God's coming kingdom, where those who mourn will be comforted, and the hungry filled, and the persecuted receive justice.

We're here because the Holy Spirit has called and gathered us to support one another on the journey of faith as we reflect God's love to each other and the world. If we can remember this calling, if we can remember why we are here, and act accordingly, we'll be in good shape.

Of course, as the parable of the life-saving station illustrates, it's awfully easy to get distracted. Both as a congregation and as individuals, we constantly need to be called back to following Jesus.

For some of us, it's the temptation to stay where it's comfortable, wanting to keep things the way they've always been, maybe back to before the pandemic, or even to decades ago. Maybe it's focusing too much on the building, risking turning the church into a museum instead of a tool for life-saving.

Maybe it's becoming just a social services center, providing some useful public service without being too specific about beliefs so we don't risk offending someone.

For some, it's the temptation described in the parable, becoming a social club instead of a church. Supporting friends in church is good and vital, yet we can't become insular and exclusive. For some, it's the fight for perfection, that if we can just do everything right and be the best, then everyone will admire what we're doing here and show up. I wrestle with that one sometimes.

Two thousand years ago, the church in the city of Corinth had similar problems, and they were tempted to split apart into factions. Different groups focused on different goals and priorities rather than working together. Some people were saying "I belong to Paul," while others said, "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas" (that's Peter).

Surely you can't imagine factions or divisions in a church today, right?

I wonder if some of their divisions were rooted in fear. I think fear is behind a lot of what divides us, whether it's in families or politics or the church. We like things the way they are, or even if we don't, we worry about things getting worse. It's so easy to see how things in our country, in our world, in our town, or in our church can get worse.

You can picture the followers of Paul worrying that maybe Apollos is leading them down the wrong track, or Peter's followers fearing that Paul is too focused on the gentiles and not paying enough attention to their own Jewish children.

At least when they're divided, they know where they stand. When we're divided into factions, it's all too easy for our factions to become part of our identity as we divide into different parties.

Hearing of these divisions, Paul writes this letter calling all of them back to the core of who they are. They are followers of Jesus, claimed in the waters of baptism in Jesus' name. For all of us, our primary allegiance needs to be to Jesus.

We can disagree on the little things, on song choices and how many readings and prayers to have, and where the best place to serve the coffee is, we can have differences on signage and lawncare, on all kinds of secondary issues, but Christ must not be divided.

We are church together, stronger together, united in Christ, and we have a mission. Maybe building a shower-house outside the life-saving station is actually a good idea, but only if it's for the right reasons, to serve those whom we are called to serve.

We don't need to live in fear, for as the Psalm declares, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" God can handle budget deficits. Of course, God does that by working through us as God's people, but God's not going to let our numbers get in the way of what the Spirit is doing.

We don't need to make decisions out of fear, or divide out of fear. "The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

All our decisions as a congregation, all our priorities as Christians come from knowing God's love, knowing that in the waters of baptism, God has claimed us. Our mission comes from knowing who we are as God's people.

Paul's command might be one of the most radical instructions in the Bible. He writes to them and to us, "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our

Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” That’s a tough command!

But we believe we’re not doing this on our own. God’s Holy Spirit is working through us. We’re not trying to save the world on our own – God’s already done that. We’re able to live for others, to care for those who aren’t here yet, because of what God has done for us. As the church, the body of Christ, we don’t need to fear the future, because we know who and whose we are.

We are in agreement that we want to follow Jesus. We’re committed to figuring out the details.

God has a purpose for us and we must continue on this journey of faith together, in this place, with these people, in Jesus’ name.” Amen.