

Sermon - January 23, 2011

By The Rev'd Canon Dr. Lorne Mitchell

I speak to you in the name of God, the Author of all life, the Creator and Redeemer of all that has been, all that is, and all that is to come. Amen.

I have a list.

It's quite a diverse list.

It's a list of 5 events, activities or projects that have happened here at St. James' over the past year. Each thing on this list has become amazingly popular. Some on the list have been happening for a while - others are more recent. But although these activities are all quite different - **they have one thing in common**. Can you spot what that one thing is?

Here's my list:

- 1) The Memorial Garden
- 2) The Christmas Day Turkey Dinner
- 3) The Wednesday Meditation Group
- 4) The Save the Bells Campaign
- 5) The October Choral Evensong

Can you spot the one thing all have in common?

What they all have in common is this:

People outside our church membership have been invited to participate.

In fact, it's more radical than that: Our church leaders for each of these activities have actually gone out of their way to invite and make it easy for people in the wider community to participate. They have blurred the boundary between St. James and the wider community.

A number of years ago, Judith Rose, Susan Fox, John Spencer and others had this great idea of starting a Memorial Garden - "God's Holy Acre" - a garden where a loved one's ashes could be placed to rest; a garden with roses and trellises and benches; a place where families could gather in the shadow of the church bell tower and point to the name of their loved one on a granite wall - and remember. It was not going to be a place outside the community - but a place inside the community where the ongoing life of Stratford was very much all around. It was a wonderful idea. But before the idea could become a reality there was an important decision to be made: was this Garden going to be open to anyone in the Stratford community? To those who brought the Garden into being the answer was obvious... Yes!

For several years now Jan Mullock has organized the St. James Christmas Day Turkey Dinner. We all know how wonderful it is to gather in a warm home at Christmas with family and friends and good food. But Jan and others in the parish know that for those who are alone and have nowhere to go, Christmas day can be the loneliest day of the year. So each year turkeys and vegetables are donated and cooked; the tables are set; decorations are arranged; and a wonderful turkey dinner with all the trimmings is served. Over the years, the feeling of real joy has spread. People from many parts of Stratford approach Jan or phone the office and say: I've

heard of your Christmas dinner, do you need some help? Can I volunteer? For Jan and Tom and others in charge the answer is obvious... Yes!

Many of you know The Rev'd Glenda Meakin. Lynn and I first met Glenda while we were beginning our theology studies at Trinity College in Toronto. Since she retired from parish ministry she has been honorary assistant here at St. James and has put an enormous amount of energy into helping people practice Christian meditation. It started out with a meditation group Wednesday afternoons. I think right from the beginning, Glenda thought that this might be something of interest even for people who were not church members – people who yearned to first experience the peace of Christ in the silence of meditation. She certainly was right – and when newcomers came she made sure that everyone felt very welcome. People from all over the community have now come and experienced Christian meditation here at St. James. We now have regular times of meditation 2 times a week and a contemplative Eucharist once a month. When people in the wider community ask members of the group if they can join, the answer is a resounding ... Yes!

Four years ago, our Bell chimer Peter Ryde came to me and said, Lorne, in 2009 the Bells are going to be 100 years old. We should do something special. Well, that little idea grew and grew and grew. Before long “doing something special” had turned into a \$200,000 project that would replace the old bell frame, re-tune the old bells, install 4 new bells and rebuild the entire chime stand. A terrific group from the parish formed a Save the Bells committee and began putting together the outlines of a fundraising campaign. They knew that a lot of people in the city appreciate our bells so they made particular efforts to reach out to them. Still, as the campaign kicked off the big unknown question on their minds was this: would the people of Stratford be interested in participating in this project? ... Before long the answer rang out loud and clear... Yes!

Last September, the choir was so glad to be back singing in our beautiful church. They put a brave face on it – but truthfully you'd be hard pressed to find acoustics as difficult as the Knights of Columbus Hall. So when I sat down with Susan Nagtegaal and others on the Choir executive, there was a renewed desire to add numbers to our choir both on Sunday mornings and for Choral Evensong. It occurred to us that there were probably a number of people out there in the Stratford community that really might like a chance to sing in a church choir. Perhaps they'd be interested in singing with us. A decision was made to start extending invitations to people by word of mouth and see what would happen. As many of you well know, what happened was wonderful. People in the community jumped at the opportunity to sing with the choir in this fabulous space. The choir at our first Choral Evensong in October was over 40 voices strong. The worship was beautiful and powerful and the fellowship that has since developed is a real blessing to all. More people around town are now asking if they too can come and sing. Susan Nagtegaal is delighted to answer with a resounding ... Yes!

And we could add other events to this list too; for example the Variety Sale, The Dickens Reading of A Christmas Carol or The Choir Workshop we just had with Schola Magdalena. All These are moments where it's easy for the wider community to participate.

So what's going on? Why is all this happening?

Well, for me, the answer is simple. Though we're far from perfect, we, here at St. James, are trying our best to follow the example of Jesus. You see Jesus was the master of blurring the boundaries. In fact he ignored them. Most rabbis taught just in the synagogues - not Jesus, he taught by the shore, on the road and on the mountains. Most rabbis of that age wouldn't talk with women - not Jesus, he seemed to talk with them all the time. Most Rabbis wouldn't be seen with sinners, tax collectors or the homeless - not Jesus. He seemed to go out of his way to be with them. And when he brought together his disciples he didn't load onto them heavy rules and expectations. When Jesus called Andrew and Simon Peter, he didn't first ask if they would believe everything he said, or be loyal, obedient and trustworthy - he simply invited them to follow. Jesus made it easy for people hear the message of God's love - easy to participate in the fellowship that comes with that love.

You know what folks? People out there in our community want to have a relationship with God. They want to feel God's love and participate in the fellowship that comes with that love.

Right now, I feel quite strongly that we need to keep doing what we've been doing. We need to keep blurring the boundaries between St. James and the wider community. We need to keep creating inviting spaces where it's easy for people in the community to participate in our tradition, our spirituality, our outreach and our fellowship.

Because I think each time we find a new way to do this... Jesus smiles, and says... Yes!

INFSHS Amen