Rector's Annual Report—Delivered January 29, 2012

This past June, I was caught by a portion of a hymn running through my head and heart like a mantra. I have asked our friend, Shelley Engle, to sing that quatrain, the four lines of each half verse, this morning:

If our love were but more faithful,
We should take him at his word;
and our life would be thanksgiving
for the goodness of the Lord.

The hymn is "There is a Wideness in God's Mercy." The themes of thanksgiving and gratitude in the context of community transfixed me. The meditation also lifted me out of my doldrums following my father's death. The practice of remembering the graces God has given me, telling another person of those graces became a daily ritual. We have so much to be grateful for in this parish; our communal worship rich in word, music and the sacred gifts of bread and wine; our education programs; the groups by which our church is supported in prayer; our fellowship opportunities and the many ways our members go into the world in service to our brothers and sisters in any need. Most of all I am grateful for the relationships we share, both individually and corporately. This is a church which many have only imagined; I chose this hymn as the focal point for our stewardship season and you responded with your own gratitude statements and reflection on what it means for you personally to be a member of Christ Church. You were grateful and generous—we believe our pledged income will exceed $740K this year. This is phenomenal and will allow for us to make adjustments in compensation and most importantly we will meet the diocesan mandate to provide no-cost health and dental insurance to any lay employee working more than 1,000 hours a year or half time. It will allow us to "rest" our small but important building endowment, taking no draw in this calendar year and most of all it allows for the continuation of these ministries and programs which make Christ Church a dynamic agent in the neighborhood, our city and the world. And we live our lives in gratitude "for the goodness of the Lord."

As I mentioned earlier this is a parish church which other Episcopalians have only imagined. A church teeming with people of every generation from birth to wisdom. Fader wrote some 16 quatrains for his hymn only eight of which are found in the hymnal version. One that did not make the edit was this:

Souls of men, why will ye scatter
Like a crowd of frightened sheep?
Foolish hearts, while will ye wander
From a love so true and deep?

We Episcopalians have definite ideas of what exactly defines us. These would include our time of worship where we sit and whom we deem as an appropriate companion in the breaking of bread. This limits the spirit and is killing the Episcopal Church. It is born out of an unnecessary need for safety in one's environment. Christ Church sets this notion on its ear. You open your arms to everyone: children, singles, families, gay and straight, wealthy and "not so much," all are welcomed and invited to the corporation of the body. And it is transformative. To those outside who question the wisdom and ability of having children with us in worship I offer the following account. Two Christmas' past, we added a 3:00 p.m. service that would accommodate families for a 50-minute service that honored the tradition of the Episcopal Church while focusing on the younger aged communicants. In order for the service to be streamlined, I removed the list of names from the prayers of the people. Wyatt Norris, a second grade student and one who has never been told that he was not welcome in worship, asked his

mother, Tracy, why—"we need to be praying for them, they need us," he said. Our inclusivity has made it possible for our very youngest members to know and love the liturgy. I sent word to Wyatt that I would not omit the names ever again--"That's good" he told his mother." The love so true and deep, you never scatter and run, rather you open your arms and make each one a vital participant.

But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify his strictness
With a zeal he will not own

Most hymnals do not include this half verse. How often do we limit God by wanting strict definition of what God will and will not allow? I do believe that at the hour of my judgment, God, the one judge, will ask me why I limited His love, why I did not and could not see the grace and glory which surrounds me each day. God's mercy is limitless and the only authentic response to that mercy is gratitude and humility. I am reminded of the words of David, the psalmist, "What is man that you should be mindful of him?" We are redeemed in Jesus, so what do we do now? It is not our actions that bring us to the kingdom--the kingdom has been delivered so how might we respond? How about we work to create and engage a world where Jesus is realized. This is true gratitude, this is true humility, that we not only welcome the sojourner to our assembly but that we go out seeking the lost. Last Sunday as I was speaking to the confirmation class we looked at the church's levels or tiers of ministry, the laity, you, are the first and most important agents in the church. We see, on average, just over 320 people each Sunday. Those 320 go out to literally thousands of lost, cold, broken souls. Volunteerism is ministry of the highest order. Thousands of hours are dedicated by the members of Christ Church, from replacing light bulbs, to comforting the sick, to singing God's praises, to teaching life skills to young mothers, to adorning the altar, to clothing those seeking employment, to teaching our children the goodness of the Lord, to caring for the orphan in other lands, to tending those who grieve, ALL, to glorify God in gratitude and humility for all we have been given. Now what?

There is grace enough for thousands
Of new worlds as great as this:
There is room for fresh creations
In that upper house of bliss

Ours is a labor of love not a burden of responsibility; A zeal of joy not of strictness. Brothers and Sisters, the party is just getting started. A friend and mentor was talking with me the other day, I was extolling your generosity and telling him that well over 100 people share in the labor of keeping the building which houses Christ Church working both inside the building and out. He replied that it's not enough. "If there's 100 there, there should be 200. If there's 200 there ought to be 300." He is right. For God's grace to reach thousands each one of us must commit themselves to ministry both inside and outside of this building. There is much to be done in gratitude and joy by invitation and engagement. You are changing the world, receive and find yourselves empowered by the grace God gives you to continue and expand your walk.

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And our lives would be thanksgiving
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