

3 Epiphany 2004 SL  
"A Year of Growth"  
The Rev. Thomas W Simmons IV

This is a different sort of sermon for a different sort of Sunday. Today we had scheduled our Parish Annual Meeting. Unfortunately, the vestry felt it necessary to delay that meeting for two weeks and here's why.

**The past year we've had huge momentum and growth.** There's been great momentum in creating ministries and great momentum in pledging to sustain it. You know how it's been.

You all have been so generous, we doubled income last year and multiplied our ministries and have hired two new staff people, a sexton and accountant to really improve our facilities and our finances. We've dramatically increased our outreach giving. We sponsored a conference on evangelism, added Godly Play to our children's ministry, not to mention new seating and parking and helping to plant a new Spanish language church in Alexandria. It's great isn't it?

So with all this momentum in pledging and all this momentum in growing ministries, **we assumed that momentum would continue in 2004.** We planned accordingly, thinking big along this trajectory about new ministries and improvements in the year ahead. Unfortunately, the financial pledges that sustain it have, shall we say, plateau-ed sharply. We've lost the momentum there. There's even been a decline in pledges for 2004, by about \$25K.

So on the one hand we have very ambitious plans for growth in the new year. On the other hand the money isn't there at the moment to make it happen. Ministry costs money. This realization dawned on us in the vestry at our meeting last Tuesday: the halted momentum in pledging will halt our momentum in ministry as well. **And we don't want that do we?**

The disparity between what we planned for 2004 and what you all pledged is \$84K. For the last several days the vestry leaders have been busy redrawing their ideas and proposals and have come up with about \$40K in cuts and deferred spending - including the DCE. That leaves about \$30-45K that we still need to fund. It includes things like the salaries of our sexton and treasurer.

So we need to deal with this reality. What are we going to do here? We have some choices to make - as a congregation and each of us individually - regarding our stewardship and the next year at St Peter's Church. We are going to talk about that for the next two weeks.

What I'd like to do this morning see what Jesus and Paul have to say. We'll find guidance in their words. They describe for us what the Church is and how it lives and grows and the role each of us plays in it.

They show the church not as an organization as people typically think of it, but as **an organism**. It's like a grape vine and a human body. That's how Jesus and Paul describe it. The point is that it grows like all living things do.

The Christian organism is a living thing that GROWS - whether it is individual Christians, ministries or churches. And that's what we've seen all around here over the past year. We've seen vigorous, gorgeous growth, like what happens to my forsythia in springtime, or my six month old daughter all the time.

In Paul's teaching, the church is the Body of Christ and all of us are members of it. We are body parts, each doing what it does best for the body. It's on the banner as you enter the church.

As the Body of Christ we are growing up into "the full stature of Christ." **We're growing to be like him**. We are changing and becoming mature Christians, mature human beings and a mature, thriving community of Christians at St Peter's.

That transformation brings growth across the full spectrum of life. We grow in faith, in community, in care for each other and compassion for the world, in giving, in knowledge, in ministry, in resources and size. Our hearts grow. Our relationships grow...and so do our parking lots.

And several things help that growth to happen. That's what Jesus teaches in John 15. A healthy Church grows like a grape vine and **careful cultivation accelerates and directs that growth**. God cultivates his vine by pruning, watering, clearing away dead branches and enriching the soil.

He's doing that to us in the Church and we grow. Each of us is the subject of the Gardener's attention. He waters, feeds and prunes. He's working on us so we can grow, for "it is the will of my Father that you bear much fruit."

Our job is to go ahead and grow, like he wants us to. And as we grow we help others grow, too. It's like we are both the plant and gardener. It's part of every thing we do here: growing and helping others grow. Or to use another image, we're Building Christians for Service.

We are building a church that builds Christians more and more effectively, each year building more ministries, raising up more people to lead and teach and organize and pray and cook and reach out and to enhance our common life here.

**So how do we build a church like that?** There's lots of different ways, but it really comes down to each of us investing ourselves serving God and each other in this place. St. Peter's Church will be what each of us makes it, and because we are members of the body, each of us has a vital role to play.

What's your role? Think of it as your special **talents** and passions. How much **time** are you willing to invest in bringing them alive to serve God? So it's your time and talent. It's also your **treasure**, your hard earned money - and there's lots of stuff out there to buy. God calls us to include him in our financial decisions, to invest wisely and to build up the Church and bring Christ to the world.

Paul describes our use of time, talent and treasure using the body image. "The spiritual gifts Christ gave us are...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ." These are gifts God has given each of you to use.

Paul describes the result: "the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth and building itself up in love."

**We are those joints and ligaments knit together**, we are those different parts working properly together, each doing its share to make it grow. He's talking about you and me and the person sitting next to you in the pew. He's talking about our stewardship of time, talent and treasure.

Our church is growing. Our budget needs to grow. Our giving needs to grow, too. As your faith and spiritual maturity grows, your giving needs to grow with it. As you grow in this way, the church grows with you. See how that works? Neat isn't it?

**OK, so what about the \$85K?** I'd like to see us close that gap. I'd like to see the financial momentum we had last year continue in 2004. I like to see us hire someone to lead our youth ministry. I'd like to see us make a big investment in evangelism so we can be more effective in reaching out to all the people moving in around us. There's a lot of things I'd like to see us do this year, if we have the money for it.

So here to talk a little bit about that are Diane Bell and Mark Baker.

## Concluding Appeal

We've been a little complacent in communicating the vision and financial information. Resting on laurels.

Haven't given much feedback and info. We have been remiss.

Plus with the new financial team and system we were focused on many other things and it's taken more time to get our brains around the issue.

Deeply grateful for those who increased pledge this year, especially those who made first time pledge.

I'm sympathetic with those who for whatever reason felt need to reduce pledge. It's been a tough year financially and it's also been rocky with the unfolding drama of the Episcopal Church.

Were all in different places in our spiritual maturity and journey and the way we calculate our pledge and there are many who don't pledge.

But we are all in one place together right year in the year ahead. We all face this challenge together in all the different places we are in.

I hate to do this, but I'm going to ask you to reconsider your pledge decisions for the coming year.

There's a lot more we'd like to accomplish. We've built the infrastructure for future growth.

But this is not just budget driven. But it's a matter of your commitment and trust in God.

It's a matter of your willingness to sacrifice in service to God and to trust him for his provision in the year ahead. "Is God is calling me to do more? Can I do more?"

Tait and I are increasing our donation to the church and I hope you will consider doing the same.

I trust that God will provide for our vision and work and we will continue to lean forward to future opportunities, confident that God will make the road rise under our feet. He will guide and provide for us so we can do the work he has given us to do. He'll do the same for you.