

Rector's Report
The Rev. John D. Rohrs
2024 Annual Meeting

Introduction

I want to start with a word of thanks to everyone else who has spoken today. Andy Luke has been a terrific Senior Warden. He has been so generous with his time and wisdom, he's a great encourager, and he's clear-eyed and hopeful at the same time. I also want to recognize and thank Penn Rogers, Martha Sherman, Anne Pinion and Dick Hamrick. That group, along with Andy, has formed a wonderful Executive Committee. Of course, I also owe a lot of gratitude to Will Stanley and Fred Staley; I couldn't ask for better partners in ministry and leadership. I am so grateful to work with such gifted and committed people, and that extends to every member of our staff. We are really fortunate to have such a great team.

The inner and outer life

St. Teresa of Avila is one of the great thinkers of the Christian tradition. Her most famous book is *The Interior Castle*, in which she describes the centrality of prayer, and the importance of forming within our hearts and souls a dwelling place for God.

One of the things I've always admired about St. Stephen's – long before I came – is the attention here to the inner life. There's a wonderful focus on contemplative prayer and ministry, connecting more deeply with God and with each other. We see it in small groups and suppers, morning prayer, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, icon workshops, the Celtic service and compline, and much more.

This past year, we have focused not just on our own inner lives but on the inner life of St. Stephen's. Because of the double whammy of a pandemic and a rector transition, there was a real need for rebuilding, healing, and normalizing the patterns of our life together. For the first time in a long time, we enjoyed a full year of the normal worship cycle. We re-formed ministry committees, relaunched small groups, stabilized the staff and our parish finances – all the things you heard in the other reports. This has been important and fruitful work, tending to this dwelling place and to our life together.

But now I want to go back to Teresa. If *The Interior Castle* is her most famous book, her most famous quote is this: "Christ has no body now but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours." Elsewhere, she says it more plainly: "The purpose of prayer is not for the sake of enjoyment," she writes; "it is to give us the strength to serve."

In other words, the interior life is not an end unto itself. It's one side of a coin, one half of a cycle or movement. It is the deep breath in that enables us to breathe out in love. Richard Rohr, who (alas) I'm not related to, talks about it as the interplay of contemplation and action. Both are equally vital parts of the spiritual life. This is true for individuals and it's true for communities.

Our focus in the year ahead

It feels to me like the year ahead is a time to make that shift, or at least tend to that balance, in our life together. We won't neglect the inner work because it will always be foundational. But I'm excited for us to put more energy and focus into our ministries of outreach and action – the many ways we spread the love of Christ in the world. There's a tremendous legacy of that here as well, from our partnerships in the East End of Richmond, to our many food ministries, to our global missionaries, a history of mission trips and pilgrimages, our front porch ministries like the farmer's market, May Fair House, and café, and much more.

I'm excited for us to sustain and grow that legacy. Let me speak to a few things that I know are on peoples' minds. We have increased our outreach grants allocation in the budget this year, and that doesn't even include grants from May Fair House, the Women of St. Stephen's, and other designated funds. In our budget conversations, the vestry talked a lot about the priority of hiring an outreach director when we are able. We might try to combine that role with someone focused on membership engagement and development, which is all focused on expanding our mission and ministry. To be clear, that position is not in this year's budget. The Vestry felt it was important to pass a balanced budget and to stand on that solid ground after a difficult few years. But a staff position supporting our outreach ministry is a priority; we will be thinking and planning and working to that end, building congregational momentum to fund it when we can – hopefully in next year's budget if not sooner. The good news is that we don't have to wait for a new position to embrace this work. We have wonderful lay leaders and staff in place already, and we have all of you!

Much has been bubbling up in recent weeks. We are renewing our participation in local interfaith networks and we're planning a Lenten focus on interfaith dialogue and understanding. A group of parishioners is working hard to revitalize our jail ministry; it has been a logistical challenge but they are determined. I'm hearing more and more conversations about a desire to get back to a pattern of mission trips and pilgrimages. All of those are hopeful signs of things to come. Meanwhile, at the end of this month, we're hosting an exciting event in partnership with Lighthouse RVA, a new organization supporting women in recovery and transition. On Feb. 27 we're joining with them to welcome Becca Stevens here; she's the founder of Thistle Farms in

Nashville and has spoken here in the past. Tickets will be limited so stay tuned for more information in the next few weeks.

There's also a lot of energy coming from folks who have been a part of a Sacred Ground circle and want to take the next steps to deepen our commitment to the work of racial healing. We will be putting together a team of folks to help lead that effort. Meanwhile, I had coffee the other day with a woman who is helping with the restoration of a hidden cemetery in the corner of Bandy Field. It turns out there are as many as 100 people buried there, many of them descendants of slaves who labored on the plantation whose land encompasses this whole area, including where we stand now. After emancipation, some of those former slaves pooled enough money to buy some land and they built houses and thrived in this community until the land was claimed by eminent domain in 1955. The houses were razed and the cemetery was lost, but this group is working with the descendants and with archaeology students at the University of Richmond to map the cemetery and restore its dignity and beauty. There's a workday next Saturday, actually, and the blurb is in today's Spirit. It's a really meaningful project right in our backyard, and I hope it can be an on-going partnership for us here.

Those are just a few of the new things emerging. There are always opportunities to engage in our food ministries, to tutor children in the schools in the East End, to support ReWork Richmond, to help with housing repair projects, and more. There is something for every age, every interest – so many ways to be Christ's hands and feet.

So looking at the year ahead, I have an invitation and a challenge, to you and to myself. I'm going to do it with you. Let's all choose one internal ministry and one external ministry to commit ourselves to this year. Join a committee or a small group, serve as a reader or healing prayer minister or youth leader, join the altar guild or a cook team. All those roles support the inner life of this place. And then, tutor a child, repair a house, knit a prayer shawl, stock the food pantry, visit the jail, volunteer at Bandy Field. Strike that balance of building an interior castle for God and then breaking through those walls to carry that love out into a world in need. That's my hope and prayer for our life together this year. Thank you!