

A Sermon by the Rev. Canon Jack Frederick Nietert on the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 28, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

The Bigger Picture

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

— Matthew 16:21-28

The Message Bible—The Rev. Dr. Eugene Peterson's version of the Scriptures—his own paraphrasing renders today's Gospel passage this way:

"Then Jesus made it clear to his disciples that it was now necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, submit to an ordeal of suffering at the hands of religious leaders, be killed and then on the third day be raised up alive. Peter took him in hand, protesting, 'Impossible, Master! That can never be!'

"But Jesus didn't swerve, 'Peter, get out of my way, Satan, get lost, you have no idea how God works.' Then Jesus went to work on his disciples. 'Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat, I am. Don't run from suffering, embrace it.'

'Follow me and I'll show you how. Self help is no help at all. Self sacrifice is the way, my way, to find yourself, your true self.'"

To that powerful message we can add: Through the valley of the shadow of death, by submitting to the power of Jesus Christ, there comes light and life. This is the promise of the cross. This is the Good News.

End of Sermon. Well...Actually I'm not finished yet.

I want to take some time this morning for us to look at our big picture corporately. As followers of Jesus Christ we have been promised light and life and above all have been given the greatest

gift of all, the gift of love. And we are a people that knows that ultimately love wins. This is the very core of Christian belief.

Where does that belief take us as the community known as St. Mark's Chapel? To me it means our primary mission is to raise up a population in the Port Royal – Beaufort area that knows that love wins. And for me that means we are to nurture a value system that says:

- Truth and honesty count.
- Integrity of being is important.
- We are to enjoy God's creation and also take responsibility for it.
- We are to seek good in all of creation.
- We are to value neighborliness.
- We are to be concerned about all the peoples of the world...including Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Hilton Head, and North Charleston.
- We are called to see ourselves and all others as people who are made in the image and likeness of God and are called to seek and serve Christ in all persons.
- We are called to be a blessing to all the people of the world.
- And, finally, we are to be a people seeking to be transformed by God's will for what is good and acceptable and perfect.

So much of what congregations—including St. Mark's—do is not flashy but is often invisible...but it matters enormously.

What is the true value of hope that is nurtured by congregations? How much is a pastoral visit to a dying person worth? What does the experience of singing great hymns really do for people? What is the total impact of teaching habits of compassion and generosity to a community of people over decades? When the homeless are fed, sheltered, moved toward jobs and befriended something more valuable than the cost of a blue plate special is being offered.

These are questions that a man by the name of James Wind has asked. He is the president of a wonderful organization called the Alban Institute. The Alban Institute, of which I have been a member for decades, is dedicated to the study and development of congregations. It is non-denominational and also includes Jewish congregations.

James Wind has recently written about a group called *Partners for Sacred Places* which is a Philadelphia based organization devoted to preserving historic places of worship. Recently the *Partners* group joined with the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Studies to do a pilot study of the economic impact of houses of worship on their communities. Their first results have just been published. The researchers studied twelve Philadelphia congregations. All had buildings over 50 years old and were willing to share their economic life with the researchers.

What the researchers found was that these twelve congregations—obviously handpicked—contributed \$52 million annually to the metropolitan community. The average of the twelve was \$ 4.3 million annually.

The research team looked at over 50 factors. Wind said that on average each congregation spent over \$2 million annually in their community—obviously slightly larger congregations than St. Mark's—paying salaries of community members, mortgages to community banks, and buy-

ing goods and services from local businesses ranging from paper supplies to parking signs. The twelve congregations also made more than \$8.5 million worth of educational contributions to their communities from day care to parochial schools.

But they also made other kinds of contributions that we don't think of initially:

- Special service.
- Concerts.
- Public events.
- Life cycle ceremonies such as baptisms, weddings and funerals.

These often have additional economic impact on nearby motels, restaurants and local stores.

The researchers also uncovered \$8.5 million worth of services such as: mediating struggling marriages, legal aid, helping people stay out of prison and helping people battling addictions or averting suicide. James Wind commented that we've always known that congregations did these sorts of things but now there is an attempt to calculate the economic value of this life-saving work.

Congregations also contributed more than \$1.3 million in community development services. For example, providing office space for new community groups or space for food co-ops. These twelve congregations also provided the equivalent of 24 full time volunteers per year who were an invisible safety net throughout the city that the researchers valued at more than \$3 million.

The researchers began to refer to the impact of these congregations as the "halo effect" and their point was that the congregations are worth more to the community than anyone—congregation members or community leaders—would have thought.

The researchers are now at work designing a larger project with a more truly representative sample of congregations and with more refined measuring techniques.

Well...

What is the St. Mark's Chapel community worth? What do we contribute to the Port Royal – Beaufort area? I suspect far more than any one of us might suspect.

What is the value of our mission?

As a people committed to letting Jesus lead, how do we stack up?

Amen.