

The Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost—Year A—Rector’s Annual Address

Judges 4:1-7

Psalm 123

I Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

We’ve got **weeping and gnashing of teeth** in the gospel, so I’m really glad it’s Annual Meeting Sunday, and I get to give my Rector’s Annual Address instead! But you know me better than that—I’ll get back to that gospel passage, eventually.

So, I want to start with **thanking my colleagues**. God had been good and blessed us with **talent** beyond measure.

Thank you, **Greg**, for showing us what it means to love with all your heart and body and mind and soul. You are a prayer warrior, a healer, and are always ready to listen and give me wise counsel. I can’t imagine doing this ministry without you as my partner.

Thank you, **Lynn**. You have moved into the work of Parish Administrator with ease and have made it your own. Thank you for your energy, your warmth, your willing spirit, and your sense of joy. Thank you for helping me think through so many aspects of our common work, for laughing with me all along the way, and for always being willing to stop and eat dark chocolate with me.

Thank you, **Pat**. You continue to be steady on the finances, and even more, you hold all this history about St. Luke’s for having been here forever. You bring perspective to our challenges, deep wisdom, and such a calm and peace, which is always helpful when dealing with money and finances. You rock.

Thank you, **Suzi**. So, when I called Suzi for the fourth time to help us out in a bind, a voice said, “*Just hire her already!*” And so, we did. You bring such amazing gifts to your work. You believe in the gifts and possibilities of our choir, and you love them. You also bring such a breadth of knowledge of all the ways we can lift our voices in praise. I also value your leadership capacity and all that you have learned along your journey. I am a better leader for working side by side with you. Plus, you are just a blast to craft liturgy with!

Thank you, **Joby**. You are the newest addition to our core staff. When I sat with you for the second time last January to sort through what in the world to do with our Organist position, like with Suzi, a voice said, “*Just ask him if he’s ever thought about being the Organist at St. Luke’s.*” And so I did, and so you had, and so you discerned, and so here we are, and I couldn’t be more delighted. What you are able to do on that organ, and what you create at that piano is *amazing*. You lead us with confidence, which frees us to offer our most fervent praise.

You know, we did a nationwide search for our Organist/Director of Music, and the gifts we needed were right here, all along. We’ve got the best music team ever, anywhere. Thank you both!

Thank you, **Sean**, who continues to lead our youth program with passion, energy, love of Jesus, and love of our youth. In the middle of this fall, **Elise** and **LB**, began their process to come alongside Sean in this work. They, like Sean, bring a well-formed spiritual life from excellent youth programs, and a whole host of gifts and ideas and energy. Sean has shaped a strong youth program and ministry of presence, and we are now set to continue that program when the time eventually comes for him to graduate. LB and Elise are also offering their gifts in our newly formed Sunday School class for older elementary

youth. And a shout out to **Sidney** who has joined us as our College Music Intern bringing her gifts and spirit to our choir. Having our college students serve among us blesses us beyond measure!

Thank you, **Charles**, for working in the early morning hours before the world stirs and doing all those chores to keep our space clean and our building tended to.

And thank you, **Brianna, Victoria, Sarah-May, Sarah, Alana, and subs Jessie, Julia, and Carmen** for tending our Nursery and being that first loving expression of community for our youngest St. Luker's.

All of these are your staff, and I couldn't be more blessed to lead them and work alongside of them. As you encounter them, please thank them for all that they do.

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And I need to thank my family, **Jim and Julia**. **Jim**, you continue to walk this journey with me every step of the way. Thank you for your soul companionship, for your support and encouragement, for your wisdom, and for reminding me that I am more than this vocation, blessed though it is. You remind me that we are made *to love* and *be loved*. And **Julia**, you continue to keep me grounded in joy and wonder, and you continue to be my best teacher. Watching you grow this year has been an ongoing series of moments- closest-to-Christ for me. Thank you for sharing me with this community; I know that's not always easy. And beloved St. Luke's, thank you for loving my family so very well.

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What a year! As I looked back at the goals the Vestry set back at the beginning of this year, it is amazing how much we have accomplished together.

In **Outreach and Social Justice**, we have continued to walk with our **immigrant brothers and sisters**. We hosted **workshops to help navigate legal issues** and explore what **sanctuary** looks like in our day and time. And, we took on a new initiative by joining other churches in the **Summer Feeding Program** to help families bridge over the summer when schools can't provide needed meals.

In **Parish Nurture**, we've continued to work with **new ways of doing Coffee Hour**, matching sponsors and hosts. The **Men's Group** has been resurrected—yay! And we launched seven **Supper Groups** that have served several purposes. Not only do they provide intimate gatherings to share food and know one another better, they are also teaching much needed practices in listening, non-reactivity, respect, and circling back when we hurt one another—skills we all need in this larger cultural moment that we are living through.

In the area of **Newcomers**, we **hosted our first gathering** in a long time and leaders of ministries got to share their passion for their thing. Our **St. Luke's Welcome Brochure** was brought to completion and is a great resource to give to new people—new people can now indicate their interests, and ministry leaders can invite them to participate. And, we now have **someone who is following up with those who visit St. Luke's**, extending our Sunday welcome in a personal way.

In the area of **Finance and Stewardship**, the budget was developed earlier than ever thanks to our Treasurer, John Whitehead, the **Vestry** took the step to **lead this year's Cottage Meetings**, making visible their role as leaders in our community, and we had **eight laypeople** give **powerful witnesses as to why they give**.

In **Christian Formation**, we've had great lay leadership step forward to guide our work with children. In addition to **Godly Play**, **new classes** have been started—one for **parents** and one for **older**

elementary youth, with a cool new model developed called *Heroes and Saints* to help our kids connect to the great saints of our tradition, as well as to modern day heroes. And, did you know that those **older elementary kids make we're-thinking-of-you cards** and send them to folks in our community who just need an encouraging word? To date, they have made and sent out 21 cards! And, **fellowship among our young families** is growing as they connect through their **Supper Group**.

We ventured out into our first attempt to **help people discern their gifts**. Some things worked well in that process, some did not, and there is much for us to learn. This is important work that we need to go deeper with, and ultimately, we will be blessed by understanding all the gifts that the Spirit has placed among us.

You may not be aware that the Vestry has formulated a values statement to be used by any group using our space. Let me share it with you because it's powerful.

Values We Ask You to Honor: Norms for Groups Using St. Luke's Space

The St. Luke's community has been blessed with a wonderful physical space, and we feel called to share it generously with the wider community. In discerning how and by whom the space may be used, we return to our core values as a community:

- *Live the way of Jesus*
- *Strive for justice and peace among all people*
- *Respect the dignity of every human being*
- *Be a sanctuary*
- *Be an instrument of Christ's love*
- *Extend compassion*
- *Extend healing*
- *For all*

While we do not expect the groups using our space to follow the way of Jesus, we do ask you to honor our core values as you do your work within this sacred space. To this end, we ask that you and those participating in your event:

- *Respect the dignity of every human being*
- *Be mindful of tone in word and deed and honor all through your words and deeds*
- *Engage your work with compassion, a spirit of healing, and love*

Groups have told me what an impact this statement has made on *how* they have gone about their work. Little by little, we are changing our wider community and how we talk with one another in ways beyond our imagining.

And then, there's the biggie—**the construction of our Solar Picnic Shelter**. What began as a dream and went through years of planning and raising funds finally came into being in the last few weeks. I would like all those who worked on the committee who brought this dream to life, who gave resources to make it happen, and who came and helped construct it to stand so we can thank you, and a special shout out to **Bob Oelberg** for his design and **Chase Ambler** for his expert supervision of the construction. This will provide us space for fellowship and play for years to come. It will be a gathering place for all the 12-step communities and all those who use this space throughout the week. It will be an icon and reminder of our commitment to care for the earth, and those sunrays pointing out will remind us that our mission is always to wider community and to the world. What a glorious symbol of the things we hold most dear!

That's a lot of life that got birthed this year. And then there's **all the ongoing life** among us that keeps us grounded and enlivens us, that gives us ways to grow and serve, that deepens our connection with one

another. **Lots of ministries in lots of directions** that give voice to **lots of passions**—all done out of love of God and love of neighbor.

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So, during the Cottage Meetings, we asked—

1. What keeps you coming back to St. Luke's?
2. When you come to St. Luke's, what hunger are you seeking to feed?
3. How does St. Luke's feed you spiritually to navigate tumultuous times?
4. What could St. Luke's do to help you thrive right now with a full heart and spirit?
5. In these times, what is St. Luke's call in our wider community?

Lynn has typed up all of your responses, and we will send out those questions in Survey Monkey to get responses from those who couldn't attend. So, this week, I discovered *Word Cloud Generator*—oh my gosh!—it takes all the responses and analyzes them by how often they appear. So, take out your Word Cloud insert page for St. Luke's. These are the top 100 words out of all your responses to those five questions—the size represents how frequently they appeared—what do you notice? What is important to us? (*pause*) **Community, people**, I was glad that **Jesus** showed up pretty prominently, **world, continue**—what an interesting word, **liturgy** and **music** and **sermons, place**.

The need for us to get our tank filled on Sunday morning is stronger now than it's ever been. We need to **feed on our Lord** to have **the strength** we need to do the work that is being asked of us when we **go out those doors**. Our **music** and **liturgy** and **sermons** do that. And **community** and **people**—it's everything for us. The need for **connection** is so strong right now, and we feed on our **relationships** with one another. Life is rich here. We're not perfect, goodness knows we're not perfect, but we are committed to our life together.

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Which brings me to **our work ahead**. So, put the Word Cloud away, cool though it is, so we can focus. Looking ahead, I always like to think in terms of our **inner work** and **outer call**.

Our first piece of **inner work** is **relational**, and it lies in that last practice that we read in our Supper Groups—*"We cannot guarantee a safe space—we can and will say or do things that hurt one another. If someone says or does something that hurts you, have the courage to say "ouch," circle back and work it through. If you say or do something hurtful, have the courage to own it, circle back, and work it through."* This is where the rubber meets the road; this is the work of mature Christian community. **To talk about things that matter**, to do **kingdom work**, we have to be able to move through **uncomfortable spaces, hard conversations**, and the **real-live wounds** that we inflict on each other—we have to have the **courage** to say *"you hurt me,"* and the **grace to hear those words said to us**, and then, **to grow through it, together**, to a deeper place. The alternative is to *attempt nothing important and ignore the hugely difficult and complex issues* facing our country and world, and yes, church; the alternative is to *stay on the surface and walk on eggshells*. A lot of churches do just that, but that's not enough for St. Luke's. You have always wanted more; you have always wanted to go deeper. And so, we will stay at this practice, blundering along together, discovering the depths of what it truly means to be community.

There are two pieces of **material inner work** that we will be addressing in the coming year. This spring we will move forward with **major repair work on our drive and lower parking lot**. And a committee has started working dreaming about **a major renovation of our kitchen**. **Community, people, fellowship** are central to us, and the center of any good community is food and the kitchen. So, I've invited that committee to dream of what they really need and want that will enable us to grow this part of our common life. We'll keep you posted!

Our last piece of **inner work** is more **communal and organizational**. The one area of goals that we didn't get very far with this year has to do with exploring *Shared Ministry*. *Can we just agree to ditch those words?* Those words don't seem to land well for us; it conjures up a scarcity mindset of churches who can't afford priests and laypeople left to do everything. What feelings does that picture raise for you? (pause) **Overwhelming and exhausting.**

I don't think that's lifegiving, or even faithful. And yet, I am aware, that in our current structure, people often feel *overwhelmed*. **Vestry** feels *overwhelmed*, **ministry leaders** feel *overwhelmed*, **worker bees** feel *overwhelmed*, and *burnout* is a too frequent outcome. The speaker at last week's Diocesan Convention, Mary McGregor, said something that stuck with me—she said, “*When people are operating out of their gifts, they have energy.*” So, the questions before us: **How do we continue to help people discern their gifts, and call forth gifts they might not even know they have, and set them free to work from those gifts? What structure do we need to support people in their work and ministry? How does Vestry need to be structured to help people discern and call forth gifts, and hold the spiritual vision for this community, and do the work that is theirs to do with regards to minding the Finances, and Annual Giving, and tending our Building and Grounds? And how do we not load them up, additionally, with also leading lots of ministries in a hands-on way?**

I have been turning these questions over in my heart and mind and prayers for years, and recently, I realized, there is a piece here I just can't figure out. **I and the Vestry need help to figure this organizational/structural piece out, and the wonderful thing is, there is help available.** And so, the Vestry and I will be working with someone in the coming year who brings wisdom and experience and insight into church dynamics that can help us chart a way forward for our next season of life together. I recently learned that churches go through a life-cycle with their priest every seven years. In February, I will begin my fifteenth year with you. We're just completing our second cycle of seven and preparing to start our third cycle. I think this will be fun and energizing work for the Vestry and for me—a grand adventure! And ultimately, this work will serve us all because we all want the same thing—to love and serve God *and* our neighbor with energy and passion and life. *The way forward will be revealed, and everything we need* to accomplish the mission we've been given, *everything we need*, will be found among us.

A lot of today's **gospel passage about the talents** is troublesome, I'll grant you that, but there are some kernels of wisdom **buried** within it. In that day and time, a **talent** was a crazy, huge amount of money—*20 years' worth of wages* to be exact—so, what is given to that **one person** was a **superabundance**. And just for a moment, let's let go of the incredible *income inequality* that is only exacerbated in this passage—set that over here. *So, what happens when we bury the abundance of talent that we've been given?* Years ago, I heard Brené Brown say this: “*There's no such thing as creative people, and non-creative people. There are only people who use their creativity and people who don't. Unused creativity doesn't just disappear. It lives within us until it's expressed, neglected to death, or suffocated by resentment and fear. Unused creativity is not benign. It metastasizes. It turns into grief, rage, judgement, sorrow, shame.*” Maybe that's really what Jesus is trying to get us to see. **Burying our talent, fearing a harsh taskmaster God, takes us to the outer darkness, that place of lament and sorrow and anguish.** But in reality, **God is saying to us, “I long to co-create with you; what can we make of this together?”**

So, unleashing our collective creativity and talent in this place isn't just about getting the work done; it's about helping all of us come alive and enjoy the deepest connection possible with the Creator, one another, and our neighbor far and near.

So, **going deeper with our gifts and figuring out what supports and organizational structure** we need to live those gifts, this is part of our **inner work** for the next year.

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What about our outer call?

It is all around us every day. Our country is as **divided** as I can remember in my lifetime. Every day, we hear **bad news, tragic news, out-of-control news**. There is a **heaviness** to our society. **Fear is rampant. People are on edge**. There is a **weariness**. And beneath all that, there is a **yearning for connection** and almost a **powerlessness about how to get there** across these great divides. **Our society is wounded**. As I pray about all of this, I become more and more **convinced** and more and more **convicted** that this is **our call**, as **the church**, as **the Body of Christ**—to be **ambassadors of good news, people of hope, relentlessly pursuing justice and mercy**, and most of all **to be healers**. What other *institution* in our society will **help us heal these wounds**? *Who else* even talks in these terms? *Who else* sees the **ministry of reconciliation** as central to their identity? *Who else* **lays down their life for the other**—whether that **other** is a person of a *different race, a different class, a different level of education or life experience, a different gender or sexual identity, or a different political party*? **Brothers and sisters, this is our work.**

We need to continue to **bridge in every direction, across every divide, starting within our own church and moving out from there**. Clergy across our wider community have been meeting regularly, and we need to extend **these relationships to encompass the people of our congregations**. As we gain experience in the **model of these supper groups**, as we **gain skill in listening deeply and telling our own story**, we need to **seed these Supper Groups and conversations across our wider community to listen to and grow our understanding of those who see the world differently**. We will continue to look for **training** that can help us in this work—whether that’s bringing **Community Resiliency Model** trainers in, learning how to be a **Trauma-Informed Congregation**, training in **Civil Discourse**, or offering **The Daring Way**—we’re going to keep **building our capacity**, so that we can **walk with courage in the way of Jesus, extending our arms wide to touch, and hold, and heal all that is flying apart**.

And we will keep coming to **this well**, every week, coming to let the **Word of God** *break open our hard hearts, confessing our complicity in all that is torn*; we will keep **coming to this table**, *reaching out our hands acknowledging how hungry we are*; we will keep **drinking in Jesus**, *down into the depths of our soul*; we will keep **singing our hearts out**, *relentlessly shining our light in our world that is quickly forgetting what it means to hope*. As Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians would remind us: **“Let us keep awake and be sober...and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation, the hope of our wholeness, as individuals, as a society. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”**

Oh, the world needs some **hope** right now, and we who are **death and resurrection people know how to rise when all seems lost**. So, let this be **our call** in the year ahead, to **encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed we are doing**—that’s that **“continue”** part from our Word Cloud—so that *we can be “a sanctuary and an instrument of Christ’s love with compassion and healing for all.”*

So, let’s **celebrate what we’ve accomplished together, do our inner work, and step forward in faith and courage to answer the call of our time**. And through it all, we will **walk together, with one**

another by our side, with **Jesus before us, behind us, and beside us**, with **God holding us in the eternal** “*and all shall be well,*” and **the Spirit setting us on fire**.

We can do this. It is my deepest privilege to *lead* you, to *follow* you, to *learn from* you, and to *be transformed* by you. Dear St. Luke’s, some Sundays I look out at you, before we process, or from the Celebrant’s chair, and **I just drink you in, and my heart just about breaks for being so full**. I know how lucky I am to be among you. I know how blessed I am to be priest, here, among you, who really do **yearn to follow Jesus and his way**. Not all churches are up for that ride, but you are, and I keep growing right alongside you. So, for all that you are, *and all that I have become because of you*, **I love you with all my heart**. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
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