

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 5/7/2017, Easter 4A, Acts 2:42-47 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, in case you couldn't tell by all the shepherd songs and readings. Every Easter season has one of these. They sometimes coincide with Mothers' Day, which can be nice, since mothers and shepherds have lots in common.

But today, I want to focus on our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, which is shepherd and sheep-free, but helpful, as we reflect on our time together as a church in preparation for our Annual Meeting.

You probably didn't become part of this church family to go to meetings, or because you needed to find ways to spend money on an organization. My call to ordained ministry did not rise out of a burning love for meetings and agendas and budgets and buildings.

That's why today's Acts reading can be so helpful. We heard, "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles."

Awe and wonder...that's what we seek as a church. Are you experiencing awe and wonder here at St. David's? Are you excited about our Annual Meeting? I am. I'm really grateful to be here with all of you, but I recognize that our levels of awe and wonder this morning are probably varied.

I'd like some of those signs and wonders described in Acts—wouldn't you? This very early church experienced numerical and financial growth, and made an impact on their community. We want that.

People scour the Bible to figure out ways to make this happen. "Four easy ways to grow your church fast." Well, you won't find *that*; but Acts 2:42 is a crucial verse about the church and about what's been at the core of church since the earliest church. We read about some core practices: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

Those aren't four easy ways to grow our church, but those are the ways to replenish our sense of awe and wonder when it wanes. Those are reasons to come together as a church. Those are ways to worship God together.

One of the things we do at annual meetings is elect vestry members. The vestry is the governing body of the local Episcopal church, and vestry members serve three-year terms. Vestry members sometimes need to have their sense of wonder reawakened. Serving on the vestry can be overwhelming. Vestry members often have to field complaints from members of the congregation, and run various parts of the church. I worry about vestry service feeling like another job to vestry members, and I worry that they will lose their sense of awe and wonder.

Last year, Michelle Eavey was elected to the vestry, and her area became buildings and grounds. It was not on her list of commissions she was interested in, but Hector Alonso was rotating off, and Michelle was someone who pitched in with buildings and grounds projects and was always ready to help, and encouraged her kids to help in whatever ways they could. She seemed a natural for the job—well, she seemed like a natural to Hector and me. Her eyes got pretty wide when we approached her about, “Hey, how about buildings and grounds?”

It’s a huge job, negotiating contracts and trying to liaison between the office and various contractors; and suddenly, everyone goes to her when the toilets are stopped up or a particular lightbulb is out or they think a part of the building is too warm or too cold or something’s dripping. Can you imagine coming to church with your young child in your arms and immediately being pounced on about something about the building? (By the way Michelle, I hear water running in the boy’s bathroom in the preschool wing. I’m not kidding.)

One of my best moments since our last Annual Meeting came when Michelle told me that as we look ahead toward this next year, she wants to stay on buildings and grounds. That is not what I was expecting. I thought a top priority for vestry recruitment this year would be—please, *God*—finding someone to take over this commission from poor Michelle.

But, Michelle has grown to love the people who actively work to take care of this place. And, before Ron Dale died, when he talked to me about why he stayed at St. David’s after seriously contemplating leaving, he specifically mentioned a thank-you note Michelle had written to him after he’d spent time talking with her about buildings and grounds. “I’ve waited my whole life for a thank-you note like that,” he said.

I worry about vestry members not only as they serve, but as they rotate off the vestry, because I worry that they will want to run away from church for a while. Often, vestry members do take a brief break from leadership; but so far in the past six years, we’ve been fortunate with vestry members sticking around and staying connected in this church which we love.

Michelle and her family didn’t come to St. David’s because she’s fascinated by whether or not our bathrooms are fully functioning. They were seeking God and a closer relationship with God. They wanted to see Jesus. Michelle and Hanby want their children to know Jesus. They also wanted to get to know other Christians, people who would be role models of faith and partners on the journey. They were seeking a community where they could devote themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Devoting ourselves to those practices as a church is how we hang on to the sense of awe and wonder that can get misplaced sometimes in the day-to-day parts of running a church.

It’s easy to idealize the early days of the early church in the book of Acts. Everything was new. Imagine the energy! “Day by day,” we read, “the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

It's easy to idealize the early times of St. David's, as well. We recently celebrated 50 years as a parish. I loved having the Reverend Peter Hogg here, and hearing about the excitement about what life was like here in the 1970s. I love seeing how things have changed, and imagining the excitement that came with each change. Getting a building. Expanding the building. Building a parish hall. We get excited about these things, but then we learn to live with them, and maintain them.

There's excitement when a pastoral relationship, like my relationship with you all as the rector: there's excitement when relationships like that begin, too. It's easy to idealize those early days. Things are new. We have to figure out who each other is and how things work. I'm still trying to figure out how the oven works in the parish hall kitchen, but I think I have the hang of the dishwasher, and I'm looking forward to teaching the whole vestry how to use it, so that there are more of us in the church who aren't terrified of a piece of kitchen equipment.

My relationship with the church is no longer new. I've been here six years. In clergy literature, they say that after you've been in a place that long, "look around: it looks like you." I can't say, well, everything wrong with the church is something I inherited from Phil or whoever. I can't blame the last guy after six years.

Vestry members rotate off every three years. In a church our size, the average tenure of a rector is supposedly about five years. I want to stay much longer than that. I want to keep this relationship healthy. I take my days off. The writing program I'm doing as a sabbatical is helpful as well. But looking to scripture, I'm reminded of the need to immerse myself in these practices of teaching and fellowship, of breaking of bread and prayers.

When people are new to a church, there's usually an early excitement. It's easy to idealize those early days. Looking for a new church can be energizing, and then: you finally found *the one!* But what's next? Sometimes people join, but then fade away within a year.

We have to stay grounded in these practices of the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers.

Sometimes as a church we adopt practices of corporations. We talk about mission statements and objectives, and all that can be helpful: but we're a church centered on the Bible. We're a church centered on the Eucharist, as I discussed last week. We're a church devoted to teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers.

I know some of you have already told me that you can't stay for the meeting, but I hope that everyone who can stay will, even if you did not bring a dish for the potluck. It's important for us to have some time of fellowship, to break bread together, to pray together, and to look at what's going well, at what needs to happen, and to remember together what brings us joy and wonder. How will we continue to serve Christ together?