

A CHURCH THAT HEALS

A “State of the Parish” address by All Saints' Rector
at the 2012 Annual Parish Meeting

Good morning! **Thank you for coming!** Today, you could have been in a number of places, but you chose to be here, with me and all these good people, as we celebrate the life and witness of this grand, old parish. All Saints' Episcopal Church is celebrating 270 years of life this year! Next year, we will mark the bicentennial or 200th anniversary of the dedication of what many of us now call the “Court Street” building on this campus, which today houses classrooms on the first floor and the Parish Hall just through these doors. As most of you know, at the turn of the nineteenth century, All Saints' held worship in that sacred Court Street space, before the Historic Church was built. A few hours from now, we will “keep the feast,” sharing the sacrament of Holy Communion in the Historic Church. Then we will gather in the Parish Hall, where we will celebrate Black History Month with a *different* kind of feast, what we might call a “soul feast.” If you have lunch plans elsewhere, you might want to reschedule them and bring your appetite to the Parish Hall today!

But first, I want to talk, think and pray with you for awhile this morning about my vision for this parish (SLIDE 1). I have just celebrated my fourth anniversary as rector here, and I have been thinking about those four years in general and about other annual meetings in particular, especially the one two years ago, which, as you may recall, was surrounded by blizzards! But all that snow didn't keep us from having the annual meeting, and these “hints” of snow this weekend are reminders of what happened two years ago and all those other times in our lives and in the life of the church and the world, when it's “a blizzard out there.”

Two years ago, in addition to the blizzard out there, there was, for me, a blizzard “in here.” Some members here had been strongly confronting me about my leadership. A few people demanded to know: ***What is your vision for All Saints'?*** A handful of folks wanted to know why I wouldn't resign, wanting me to depart sooner rather than later. By the way, this kind of behavior is quite normal in congregations. In fact, I'm told that large-church senior pastors, including Episcopal Church rectors, typically find themselves embroiled in some major conflict within the first three years of their tenure. So we were right on schedule, even a bit ahead of the curve – you could say “above average,” to borrow Garrison Keillor's phrase.

But the frequency and the severity of the conflict, the blizzard-like nature of it all was such that I knew I needed to ask for help. So I prayed about the conflict, talked about it with trusted clergy colleagues and our bishops and tried to resolve things as best I could. Things did seem to improve for awhile. Then, when I returned from a six-week sabbatical, there was a series of events that I've learned is also common in congregations. It's called “post-sabbatical bad behavior.” When that happened, I said to myself, “Enough!” A few people were still making life pretty difficult for me and others, and while I knew I was “part of the problem,” I also knew I wanted to be a more active, helpful part of the solution.

So I contacted an experienced church consultant, and we, the Vestry and Rector of All Saints', began a process of conflict resolution and healing. You might say that, since last Fall, we've been in counseling together. Like any partnership shaped by God's covenant of love and forgiveness, your Vestry and I have also been on a spiritual journey together, a journey toward **healing**. I'm pleased with what we have been able to do in that healing journey so far, and yet, I know the hard work of healing has just begun. In the midst of our healing process, I have been given a gift. I have come to some real clarity

about my vision for All Saints' Episcopal Church, and I want to tell you about it today. My vision for this parish is that we would become, more and more, **A Church that Heals**. A church that heals by, in the words of our mission statement, *reaching out, creating sacred space and welcoming ALL*.

A church that heals (SLIDE 2). All Saints' has been and still is on a journey, for 270 years now. It's a journey that includes a grand witness to the love of God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, here in downtown Frederick. Yet like the journey of Jesus, All Saints' is also on a journey toward healing. A journey toward healing others, to be sure. But All Saints' is also on a journey of healing *herself* – to be sure.

So what might that healing look like? What IS healing (SLIDE 3)? Healing, in my experience and in the life of the church for more than 2,000 years, is, simply, about **health**. Susan Nienaber, a Methodist elder, marriage and family therapist and senior consultant who specializes in resolving conflict in congregations, says that the true measure of a healthy congregation is the degree to which a church tolerates not just bad, but outrageous behavior. Healing, both in our own lives and in the life of a congregation, is about learning, more and more, how to exercise healthy, Christian behavior. It's also about what we now commonly call **wholeness** – think of the term “holistic health,” in mind, body and spirit – and **wellness** – who isn't aware or part of a “wellness” initiative these days? The word **recovery** might not come to your mind when thinking of health and healing. But to those of us blessed to have worked with the 12-Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous or any of the sister fellowships of AA – now part of an international movement that some call the 20th century's most important source of spiritual health – for some of us, recovery is all about healing.

The last two words I'll suggest as synonyms for “healing” are two church words: **restoration and reconciliation**. The Catechism in the back of *The Book of Common Prayer* asks, “What is the mission of the church?” The answer: “To **restore** all people to unity with God and each other in Christ” (p. 855). At the 11 am service today we will, as usual, make a public or General Confession of our sins and offenses. But our Prayer Book also offers a private, confidential and ancient sacramental service called “The Rite of **Reconciliation**,” or, as it is more commonly known, “Confession.” If confession is, as the old saying goes, good for the soul, it **is** good because it seeks to restore and to **reconcile**, to God and to the church, the soul of a penitent person – someone who knows they have made mistakes, someone who truly wants to change their behavior and their life, someone who seeks God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of others whom they have failed to love as Jesus loves. All of us, if we are honest, all of us are candidates for some kind of confession. We are all imperfect Christians. No exceptions! We all need repentance, amendment of life, forgiveness, restoration and reconciliation in our lives. Ten days from now, we will begin the season of Lent, a wonderful opportunity for us to receive the kind of healing we all need.

There are also false kinds of “healing” we do NOT need (SLIDE 4). These are well-intentioned ways in which we imperfect people sometimes behave, ways that never really heal others, the church or the world. Usually it's those efforts of ours that try to fix, cure, correct, control, perfect (in the sense of shaming others for not being perfect) or judge someone else. While Jesus clearly cured many, he could not, the Gospels make clear, cure everyone. Today, the cure of souls and bodies is still reserved to God, with doctors, clergy and other caregivers as imperfect instruments of healing. And because most diseases are not 100% curable, “cure” may not be as important to a suffering human being as “care” is. I believe the kind of healing we long for, the kind of true healing we want and need is the kind of care and healing God provides, in the particular person of Jesus, the “Great Physician (SLIDE 5).”

As we come to the end of the season of Epiphany, we have been hearing each Sunday from the first chapter of Mark, the shortest Gospel account of the four. In Mark's Gospel, the story of Jesus is stripped-down, ruthlessly edited. Every word counts. Two Sundays ago we heard just eight verses. It was

Mark's first story of healing, when Jesus rebukes an unclean spirit in a synagogue, and everyone is "amazed," asking, "What is this?" (1:21-28). Last Sunday we heard the next eleven verses, about Jesus' healing Peter's mother-in-law of a fever, then curing others of various diseases and casting out lots and lots of demons (1:29-39). Today's six, short verses from Mark tell the story of Jesus healing a leper.

Week after week, it's healing, healing, healing. Next week, too, by the way! We simply cannot escape, if we are paying attention, these stories of the healing ministry of Jesus. And what is the response of the crowds to his ministry of healing? "*They brought to him all who were sick or possessed...*" (Mark 1:33). "*And people came to him from every quarter...*" (Mark 1:45). And next week: "*So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them*" (Mark 2:2).

In a part of Mark's second chapter that, due to the nature of our liturgical calendar, we won't get to hear on a Sunday this year, Jesus asks, in a more contemporary rendering: "Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? (SLIDE 6)" He knows when he says this, of course, that everyone ultimately gets sick. Everyone, sooner or later, will need the kind of healing Jesus brings. "I'm here," he says, "inviting the sin-sick, not the spiritually fit!" (*The Message*, Mark 2:17)

Of all the healing stories in the Gospels, one of my favorites, one that has captivated me for the longest time, is found in John's gospel account (SLIDE 7). I want to read that story now, from the same contemporary version I just mentioned, called "The Message":

Near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem there was a pool, in Hebrew called Bethesda, with five alcoves. Hundreds of sick people—blind, crippled, paralyzed—were in these alcoves. One man had been an invalid there for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him stretched out by the pool and knew how long he had been there, he said, "Do you want to get well?" The sick man said, "Sir, when the water is stirred, I don't have anybody to put me in the pool. By the time I get there, somebody else is already in." Jesus said, "Get up, take your bedroll, start walking." The man was healed on the spot. He picked up his bedroll and walked off. (5:1-9)

"Do you want to get well?" Do you want to be healed? That's the question of Jesus that I have held close, especially in this part of Maryland so close to Bethesda! Do I, do you want to be healed? Does anyone really want to be healed of a sickness that has become, in essence, an old friend, something that has possessed them for so long, something they have found ways to cope with and accommodate for thirty-eight years? Does a family or a church really want to be healed of old, familiar things that have been going on for a long, long time?

Years ago, a nun who ran a soup kitchen in Erie, Pennsylvania, wrote a Lenten meditation booklet for the people who came to eat and work there. One day, I picked up the booklet and read something she wrote, something I have never forgotten: "***There isn't anyone you couldn't love, if you knew their story.***" Do you believe that bold, audacious statement? It means that you can love anyone you meet, if they are willing to tell you their story, and you are willing listen, really listen to that story, until it goes deep into your heart.

This week I read a reflection called "Lessons from Prison (SLIDE 8)." Here's part of it. It's a story about Angola, the Louisiana maximum security prison filled with "the worst of the worst – rapists, kidnappers and murderers. The average sentence for its inmates is more than 90 years. 85 percent of the people who enter the prison never go anywhere else." A new movie called "Serving Life" tells a story of four inmates who have just volunteered to serve in the prison's hospice....As they complete their 40 hours of training, the inmate caregivers learn to always wear plastic gloves, how to put on fitted sheets, how to move patients in their beds, how to bathe and feed them, and how to care for the bed sores that often

accompany the last stages of life.” The prison warden, who “championed that cause of hospice...says, 'I'm going to dig your grave, someone else will dig mine.' Somehow, in the midst of the deepest human despair, hatred and suffering imaginable...dying patients and life-sentenced prisoners become a community...a congregation, if you will, that teaches people to reach beyond their own needs and to care for others.” This teaches *us* at All Saints' something about hope and healing (Jim Wind, “The Leading Edge,” in Alban Institute's journal *Congregations*, issues 3 & 4, 2011)

“When Mike (an Iraq War veteran) walked into my office,” a religious studies teacher in a nearby university says in another article I've just read, “I knew something was wrong. His normally pale face was a deep lobster red. His hair was mussed, and he was carrying a large, empty cardboard box. Instead of discussing his courses he rambled incoherently about a trio of ducks that were following him around...campus. The purpose of the box, he said, was to help him catch the ducks....It gradually dawned on me,” the teacher said, “that he was hallucinating. As the semester progressed, Mike's mental health deteriorated dramatically. He was expelled from...classes...(and) arrested in the student union for being disruptive.” His fellow students, who didn't know what to do, “were afraid of Mike and wanted him removed from campus....As his condition rapidly worsened, the Lutheran campus chaplain decided to call Mike's parents, who rushed to campus...(and) located a (mental health) facility....Mike was hospitalized for ten weeks, then took a leave of absence from the university.” He eventually returned, graduated, is gainfully employed, takes his medications, “understands the vigilance necessary to keep his conditions under control and is happy and productive. But for every Mike,” the teacher ends her story, “there are also many other men and women struggling to integrate their combat experience into their lives. Ready or not,” she says, “the church will be asked to help them” (Jane Donovan, “Battle Scars: Veterans turn to clergy for counseling,” in *The Christian Century*, February 8, 2012).

Sisters and brothers in Christ, how about it? Are we ready? Do we want to hear these stories? Do we want to love and serve alongside prisoners and veterans and the poor and the dispossessed and the other people on the margins of life? Are we ready to be both elders and learners, both teachers and students of healing? Do we ourselves want to get well? Do we want to be a church that heals?

Those who are in search of a church that heals (SLIDE 9) are people who feel in any way captive or imprisoned by their lives; those who are veterans of all kinds of wars, out there and in here, inside themselves; and those who are afraid of dying alone. On Friday I turned the corner of a hospital floor, only to bump into a woman who was looking for a place to bury her mother. *Yes, I said, of course, we can talk about having the funeral at All Saints'. You are not alone.* Now, I confess that, sometimes, I am oblivious to the needs of those in need of healing. But this time, I was grateful that I was ready, willing and able to help. Those who are in search of a church that heals also include those who are sick and tired of being sick and tired; and those who are so tired of being sick, they really, REALLY want to be made well.

If you are one of the people I have described; if you are in search of a church that heals, **you're in luck! All Saints' is a church on a journey toward healing (SLIDE 10).** And All Saints' is learning, more and more, that in order to be a church that heals, we have to be a church that knows that we need healing, too. The world needs what the great Dutch Catholic priest Henri Nouwen called “wounded healers,” people and churches and other groups who know that it is out of our own wounds, out of our own woundedness, that we can most authentically offer healing to others. We must learn to become wounded healers, or we will surely become un-healed wounders. All Saints' is a church that heals, but All Saints' is also a faith community that knows it needs, like all communities and all families do, its own healing. And I believe that All Saints', like all families, needs and wants that healing, more and more.

There are people who have just found a home here (SLIDE 11). One new family recently found our Sunday evening service, and they have made their way to Sunday mornings, too. Another new person

came here years ago and didn't quite find a place to fit in. A died-in-the-wool Anglican, she has come back home to All Saints', once again, and now, she helps welcome other new people. And there are people who are waiting to come home, people still lying near the healing waters of Bethesda, people needing someone to offer them the healing touch of Christ. How can we become more effective vessels and instruments of healing for all whom we welcome in this and all the sacred places and spaces of our lives?

All Saints' is a church that heals, at the same time she is being healed and restored. Just look at the progress that is being made right outside our Church Street doors (SLIDE 12)! The photo on the left was taken December 6. The one on the right was made yesterday. Just look at what has happened in less than ten weeks! I hope you will see for yourself, perhaps as you leave today, the beautiful new pathway to healing that now leads from the front of our campus to the Memorial Garden! I give thanks to God for all of you who participated in the “Living Stones” capital campaign, with special thanks to St. Mary's Chapter, whose members have given so generously, time and again, to restore these buildings and build up this church.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, please understand me. This is hard work, building up the body of Christ, restoring the foundations, healing the church. It is the work of restoration, but it is also the work of transformation. God is always doing a new thing, a healing thing among us. And as with all new things, there will be resistance. There will be resistance to healing. Think about it this way. When you are taking an antibiotic, and you begin to feel better, don't you wonder sometimes whether you really need to finish all that medicine? As one of our leaders put it recently, “Change is hard, and hard change is harder.” Our healing work is more than just managing our “buildings, bodies and bucks (SLIDE 13).” It's about the body, mind and spirit of Christ, and it's about our own bodies, minds and spirits. Getting help with this kind of healing can feel like harder work than if we tried to just “go it alone.” But we are in this work, this life, this healing together. And, as I said last year, we must learn, more and more, to collaborate in Christ. We must want to be healed, together.

A church that wants to be healed, like All Saints', will learn to ask for help (SLIDE 14) – one of the hardest things we human beings have to learn, over and over again. There is no room in the church for “Lone Rangers.” We must learn to ask for help. And for people of faith, help means prayer. We must learn more and more how to pray, how to ask for divine help – help from God, through Christ, in the power of the Spirit, by our prayers. Once again, Lent is a wonderful time to learn more about prayer. We must also learn how to ask for human help with healing. The Good News is that we already have professional help, through our Alban Institute consultant, and amateur help through the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland. “Amateur” means lover, so, for the love of God, we are receiving healing help from our Bishops, their Canons and staff and other members of our diocesan family. This is why it is so important that we make a real investment in this healing work we have been given by God to do (SLIDE 15). With God's help, and with all of your prayers, we will become, more and more, the church that heals.

I want to ask you now that, when I mention a ministry of this parish in which you have taken part during the past year, that you would please stand, as you are able, as I mention each area of All Saints' ministry (SLIDE 16). All Saints' is a church that heals, through ***reaching out, creating sacred space and welcoming ALL.*** All Saints' is a church that is learning about healing by ***reaching out, through our Outreach and Pastoral Care ministries (SLIDE 17).*** And we want to become a more healing church by reaching out more! All Saints' is a church that heals by ***creating sacred space, through our Worship, Formation, Stewardship and Administration ministries (SLIDE 18).*** And we want to become a more healing church by creating more sacred space! All Saints' is a church that heals, by ***welcoming all through our Hospitality and Fellowship ministries (SLIDE 19).*** In fact, we want to be a more healing church, through all of our ministries, by learning what it means to truly welcome ALL God's children at All Saints'!

Dear friends in Christ, healing, as you know, is about many things, including the holiness of God and the salvation of people (SLIDE 20). If we want to be healed, if we want to be made whole, made well, I firmly believe God will honor our desire to be restored and reveal to us some of the signs of our church's wellness. Episcopal priest Tom Ehrich talks about Church Wellness in terms of “best practices,” a phrase well know in the business world (SLIDE 21). Here's what he says about a church that heals. **When we embrace healing and wellness more fully:**

- we will see growth in the number of people who want to belong to and be an active part of the life of this congregation.
- we will see our mission & outreach work become even more vibrant than it already is.
- we will discover more and more members' lives formed in God's Spirit and transformed for ministry.
- we will take risks, without fear of failure, because it is not success, but faithfulness that God asks of us.
- we will deal with our conflicts openly and with confidence that God is in the middle of the hardest work we will ever do – love one another.
- we will be able to deal more creatively with change and transformation.
- we will find that our lines of communications, both formal and informal, will open wider, and we will find that we are creating a safer place and a more sacred space for all of us to bring our deepest yearnings and hardest questions.

And last but far from least, when we embrace healing and wholeness more fully, we will not be afraid to hold one another accountable and to be guided by this parish ministry's outcomes, not by our own, personal preferences.

So, how about it (SLIDE 22)? Are you in search of a church that heals? If so, what gifts of healing do you need? And what gifts for healing do you bring to this community of faith? Your gifts are welcome here (SLIDE 23)! May God give us the wisdom and skill, the knowledge and patience, the gifts and graces to become, more and more, a church that heals.

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The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
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