

Sermon/Rector's Address for the 99th Annual Parish Meeting of
St. Christopher's Episcopal Church in Oak Park, IL
On January 30, 2011, the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany,
(Year A) by the Rev. Paris Coffey

Readings (shortened to two): 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

Remember, brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And God chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful.

1 Corinthians 1:26-27 (NLT)

When I first saw the lectionary readings for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – shortened to just two for St. Christopher's Annual Meeting – I had to smile. First, I smiled because both readings seemed apropos for the **99th** Annual Meeting of a church long deemed the poor country cousin of Oak Park's larger gothic church. Second, I smiled because the epistle called to mind my own ancestors – thought to be far from the brightest and best – who hailed from the hard-luck hills of Tennessee and poor plains of rural Georgia. Granted, none of the beatitudes in the Gospel reading said, "Blessed are poor country cousins and rural or hillbilly clans." **Both** readings, though, agreed that "the poor – or poor in spirit," were blessed, along with "the persecuted, meek or weak, and less-than-wise." They're blessed because they know their need for God, and it is this that proves to be their greatest strength.

Paul writes to the church at Corinth, "Remember, brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And God chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful." Similarly Jesus says in the Gospel, "Blessed are the meek, the mourners, the poor in spirit, . . . for they will inherit, be comforted, will know the kingdom of God, . . ." In short, they – and hopefully *we* – will know what it means to be part of God's community, understanding that human wisdom, wealth, and rank alone are never enough to save us. This may **not** be what you want

to hear in your Rector's Report for our church's 99th Annual Meeting. Even so, it's what we need to hear – not just to remember that we've been blessed this year and in years past – but to understand that our blessings are radically dependent on partnership with God.

This can be hard to admit for rugged individuals who're used to being in charge. On the other hand, it was exactly what St. Christopher's had to do at the end of 2009. We had to acknowledge our radical need for God, for after years of growth, membership had leveled, attendance had waned (increasing minimally in 2009), and income had fallen, requiring us to draw down our endowment. We knew this couldn't continue, and so we prayed for the harvest like farmers in a draught, but likewise kept hoeing. We asked people to step up to the plate – asking you to give, with God's help, prayerfully and sacrificially – of the blessings you had received. And you did, empowering St. Christopher's to present a balanced budget not only for 2010, but for 2011 as well. Thank you for your commitment! We also had a 5% increase in attendance last year, and while we did not *quite* meet our 2010 budget, falling about \$2,000 short; it was far closer than the \$14,000 deficit we feared last fall.

God moved many friends and family of St. C's to make year-end gifts and bring pledges up to date, and we are grateful. Likewise, we are grateful for your faithfulness in funding our Spark Sunday Workshops for children age three through fifth grade. The Spark program was in part an unbudgeted expense, but at our Vestry Retreat last February we discerned that an improved Spiritual Formation program for young children was our church's number one priority for 2010. This meant choosing and purchasing a new curriculum and hiring three college-age students as teachers to bring much needed energy and continuity. The result has been great, and although greater faithfulness in attendance would improve this program even more, we have made important strides in teaching our children the biblical stories, helping them see God's presence in their own lives, and deepening their relationship with God, music, scripture, and one another.

Moreover, the whole congregation has benefitted, both from the unbridled joy we heard when the children sang in worship on occasion, and from their unpretentious performance in this year's Epiphany Pageant. Similarly, we were blessed by the commitment of our teenagers, who helped our younger kids in the Pageant with delightful abandonment. Their willingness to dress up as angels, shepherds, and yes – even a sheep – put younger children at ease. Thank you! We were also blessed by the inspiring sermons of this group following last summer's pilgrimage to Turkey. Without doubt, that trip was spiritually transforming, but it showed us, too, that our hard work and generosity in their support had been good stewardship of God's resources. I'm always touched by our friends' and members' commitment to our youth, including those like Mildred Perkins who never had children of their own.

Mildred died this past December after belonging to St. Christopher's for **95 years**, and I can't begin to tell you how much I will miss her. She deeply loved this church and its youth, and was always one of the first to send a check for youth ministry, including some in which they've served. Our church's youth serve in a variety of ministries like PADS, St. C's Back-to-Work-Clothes Closet, childcare, and our music program. We would love to have some of them sing in St. Christopher's Liturgical Choir this year/2011, but we've appreciated their instrumental assistance this past year, as we have that of adult members. Our music program, after all, always operates on a tight budget, possibly to your surprise since this program – under the direction of Mr. (soon to be Dr.) L. Richard Sobak – was designated at last year's Vestry Retreat as one of the things St. C's does best.

This was increasingly true in 2010 as Richard, working toward his Doctor of Musical Arts degree, offered several special services with choir, soloists, and orchestral accompaniment. These services were not only beautiful, well attended, and a wonderful spiritual gift to our community; but were also funded in large part by our organist/choirmaster's own monetary generosity. Clearly, St. Christopher's has been blessed this past year, affirming that when we align our vision with God's and seek together to fulfill it, God multiplies our resources, as God did in North Platte, Nebraska during World War II. This little town – alone on the plains in the

middle of the country – had a population of just 12,000 people, but it also had heart. Besides that, it had a train depot where railcars filled with American soldiers stopped daily en route to war. Wanting to offer their country’s servicemen and women warmth and support, North Platte turned its modest depot into a Canteen.

Staffed and funded entirely by local volunteers with no government assistance, the North Platte Canteen provided welcoming words, food, drink, and friendship every day of the year. It opened every morning at 5:00 a.m. and closed after midnight when the last train of the day pulled out, resulting in a town of 12,000 serving more than *six million* GIs by the end of the war. Bob Greene, former columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, wrote a book about this labor of love called *Once upon a Town: the Miracle of the North Platte Canteen*. Greene told too, though, of changes that came to North Platte after the war that included the disappearance of the train stop there, a decline in agriculture, and the loss of what little industry the town had. True, the tiny town of North Platte touched numerous lives – revealing that the gifts and generosity of a few can serve the needs of many. Conversely, North Platte’s later years reveal that we can never stop to glory in the past, but must carry on our work together to God’s glory and in service to an ever-changing world.

Indeed, this is what our church has seen this past year. We’ve seen the need to change, but even more importantly, seen the need to trust in, pray to, and partner with the Living God who uses economic frailty, lowly status, and human foolishness for good. Granted, St. Christopher’s is no longer a poor country cousin any more than my relatives (or most of them) are still dirt farmers or hillbillies. They – and we – have changed. No matter how much we change, though, we must never forget our need for God, for it is in partnership/in community with God and one another that we are blessed and changed by God to bless the lives of others. *Amen.*