

3 Epiphany C. The Feast of the Annual Meeting and Baptism of Willa Morgan Holmes

Luke 4:14-21

I think I might be the only person who refers to this Sunday as the Feast of the Annual Meeting. It is not usually in the same category as Christmas Eve and Easter for exuberance and energy. I love it, but for some reason the annual recitation of the by-laws has never quite captured the popular imagination. It is a day when we do some boring stuff, but it is also a day when we step back and take stock of where we are and where we're going as a people. And for that project, there's no better context than what we have today, as we baptize Willa Morgan Holmes and read this mission statement passage from the gospel of Luke.

Willa's baptism impresses upon us the "why" of much of what we do here. Baptism is both the cause and the goal of such seemingly disconnected tasks as refilling candles with oil, keeping the yard clean, and drawing up a careful, faithful budget. We do them because they are perhaps unglamorous parts of the baptized life, life in community dedicated to worshiping and following God. And we do them so that the good news of God's work among us will continue to be proclaimed from this place, with more people making the promises that are the foundation of our life together. Willa's baptism gives us ready-made answers to imaginary questions: why did you volunteer so much time to working with the youth group? Because I have known the life-changing love of God. Why did you participate in the parish clean up day, even though it meant you missed the first half of the Bears game in a year when they were actually good? So that more people might come to know the life-changing love of God.

Of course, baptism doesn't make God love us. We are not baptizing Willa *so that* God will save her from something. We baptize her because God already loves her. We baptize her to make visible to us the ways that God is already doing saving work in and through her life. It is a communal sacrament, that blesses all of us and implicates all of us in Willa's life. The promises that we make in baptism insist that we cannot do this alone. Not only do we need God, but we need each other. All of us will promise to support her in her life in Christ, and all of us will promise to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship—fellowship: being together, hanging out. This isn't a trick to get people to come to evening events at church. It is a perfectly realistic acknowledgement that the life we seek to lead is not one of lonely heroic struggle, but is only possible as a shared life.

And of course we all know that a shared life with this many people requires that sexiest of ministry tools: spreadsheets. We'll read some spreadsheets this afternoon when every single one of you returns for the business portion of the annual meeting. If your eyes begin to glaze over, or your wrath begins to rise, I encourage you to remember this baptism, the soul of our shared life. But also as we review our past year and look forward to our next, we must remember that this isn't just any shared life. We aren't baptizing

Willa into just any community, and we are not at liberty to measure our success by just any institution's standards.

We are a community formed to follow Jesus Christ of Nazareth. In Luke's gospel reading from today, Jesus begins his public ministry in his hometown, by standing up in the synagogue and adapting passages from Isaiah to form a mission statement. This conglomeration of verses describes what he is setting out to do and throughout the gospel of Luke, this is what Jesus does. It doesn't sound very churchy: in the power of the Spirit, to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The year of the Lord's favor is probably a reference to the year of Jubilee, when every fifty years all slaves were freed, debts were forgiven, and land was restored to families that had lost it.

None of this obviously involves going to church, though Jesus was in the synagogue when he said it. None of this obviously involves a robust Sunday School or a beautiful choir or well-practiced acolytes. It is a matter of being out in the world, engaging with the powers and principalities that misrule and deform people's lives. And doing the messy work of engaging with the real people who have been wounded by this misrule and deforming abuse. We do all these other things—going to church and Sunday School and singing in choir and acolyting—because of that same lesson we learned from baptism: because we cannot do it alone. The mission of the church is the same as the mission of Jesus. And all of this is because this is the best way we can think of to do it.

We, at St. Christopher's, do a whole lot of stuff, and some of the numbers we'll report today are very impressive. But the rubric that matters most is whether we are following along faithfully in Jesus' wake, continuing to live true to his mission in this world. The most relevant question we can ask ourselves today is the extent to which we are proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captives, and so on. That is the community we are called to be and it is the community into which we are baptizing Willa, in the hopes that she will join us and teach us in this work. It is a great privilege to try to live into this call with you. Amen.