



November 8, 2020
The 23rd Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey, Rector

Readings: Joshua 24:1-3, 14-25; Thessalonians 4:13-18
Psalm 78: 1-7
Gospel: Matthew 25: 1-13

In the house where I grew up, just inside the front door, there was a sign that read in beautiful calligraphy: *"As for me and my house, I will serve the Lord,"* a quote from today's reading from Joshua.

Even as I was too young for the meaning of the words to register, I knew that they were true. I knew that someone had decided, my parents had decided, that we as a household would serve the Lord. And I was safe and I could grow and I could explore in their decision. And, of course, they, each of them, had grown up in houses that served the Lord. Their own parents' faith shaping their own, their faith shaping mine and mine, well, I need to decide every day how my faith might shape that of my own kids. The decision passes from generation to generation. And our decisions shape generation after generation.

2020 is among many, many, many other things our anniversary year, marking 175 years since the founding of Christ Church Detroit. We would do well to remember, and perhaps it gives us a bit of comfort to recall, that we at Christ Church actually have a history of momentous anniversary years.

At this time 76 years ago in the fall of 1944, the world was at war. 118 men from Christ Church were deployed overseas. Times were tough, to say the least, and among many, many, many other things the leadership of Christ Church, its clergy and its Vestry, were starting to prepare for the 100th anniversary of the parish which would begin the following year in 1945.

As the neighborhood around the church had to come to have more needs than means and as the parish income was not meeting expenses, the clergy and Vestry voted that fall of 1944 11-3 to close the doors.

Now in our polity in the way that our church works, the clergy and the Vestry cannot make that decision alone, but rather it is a decision of the entire

congregation. And so a meeting was scheduled for early January 1945 to decide: *Do we close our doors or do we stay open? How do we navigate these very tough times...spiritually, emotionally and financially?*

The night before the congregation gathered to discuss, the *Detroit Free Press* ran an article, dated January 7, 1945, saying (and I quote), *"In historic Christ Church, now that slums have moved in and wealthy parishioners have moved to Grosse Pointe, is it to be torn down, stone by stone? That question, on the eve of the 100th anniversary of its founding, will be thrashed out with heat."*

At the meeting, person after person stood up to speak in 3-minute portions, and each one spoke in favor of keeping the doors open...of continuing to invest spiritually and personally here in Detroit.

One Vestryman, who had originally voted to close the church, expressed during that meeting his change of heart, saying (and I quote) : *"Last Sunday I visited the Sunday School classes and when I saw those children, I suddenly realized that the Christian church never progressed by quitting when the going got tough."*

Another spokesperson, Mrs. Harold Hastings, stood up and continued, saying, *"Rather, all of us should put more and more money into this church and build it into a testament of faith in the heart of Detroit."*

When the vote was finally taken after all of the speeches, not one vote was registered to support the Vestry recommendation. Everyone present decided to stay and invest themselves — heart, mind, soul and strength — here in Detroit.

Whenever I dwell with that I story, I can't help but wonder:

What if it had closed?

What if we had never met?

What if our and your families had not grown up here and become bonded into one large, diverse and vibrant family?

What if the heart of Detroit had a hole where today we experience hope?

What if the building had been razed and torn down stone by stone and passersby no longer took in the testament of faith, the tower of refuge and God, our every present help in trouble throughout all of the ups and downs and ins and outs of our lives?

What if our youth had not come to know trusted adults, such as our J2A and Rite 13 leaders, and found and claimed faith of their own?

In this past week two of our teenagers have expressed to me that All Saints' Day marked their baptism anniversary, and they shared their joy with me, each of

them independently, as they continue to marvel at how God is working in their lives.

What if they had not been baptized?

What if these doors were not here for them to enter, for us to celebrate love and marriage and for us to bury our beloved dead?

What if those of you have discovered or deepened your faith during this pandemic had not been able to land and thrive in its refuge and inspiration?

The faith that we now savor, the faith that nourishes us in these tough times is the fruit of the decisions of others who have come before us, in large part the decision 75 years ago to stay in Detroit.

After that decision was made, Francis Creamer, the rector, praised the decision that it was not (and I quote) "*made by sentiment, not made by an economic denominator, but it was made by the guiding spirit of Christ.*"

Joshua says something very similar to the Israelites, underscoring fervently that they too live upon the fruits of others' decisions and the very fruit of the Holy Spirit. Their lives and their faith are not their own, but they belong to, and with, one another.

Joshua continues, "*Now fear the Lord and serve the Lord with all faithfulness. Discard anything, any idols or worries or fears that get in the way. As for me and my household,*" Joshua says, "*we will serve the Lord.*"

This fall, in these tough times, the Vestry and our committees and the staff and I are, like our forebears, looking ahead to next year. The annual giving campaign is underway which greatly shapes our collective ability to share our faith and support our neighbors, particularly those we have yet to meet.

My household and I have been talking and, once again, my husband, Andy, and I pledge to give 10% of my income to Christ Church. And he, as a priest at his own congregation, will give 10% of his income to his church. That means that I pledge (and here you are my witnesses), I pledge to give Christ Church \$8400 next year — which comes out to \$700 a month. Now, for our family with young kids to clothe and feed and to provide for as they, in due time, approach college years, it is a stretch. It is sacrificial.

Our pledge draws us beyond ourselves and is a sacrament, if I dare go that far, a sacrament of trust that God is always doing infinitely more than we could ask or imagine. Our pledge is a sacrament of trust that God will do so much with us in this coming year to sustain our faith and our love and our hope which is so sorely and critically needed.

At the end of that meeting on January 8, 1945, Frances Creamer added, "We have made a decision. We must now show proof that our decision was guided by the Holy Spirit."

Now, you and I can look back today and know overwhelming that "yes, absolutely!" that decision was guided by the Holy Spirit which continues to bear fruit to us. We today taste and see that the Lord is good because of the faith of our forbearers, the fruit of the Spirit that they have dared to tend.

How do we know that it is the Spirit that call us to such sacrificial and daring actions?

Well, I believe that one marker of the Spirit is that it does feel risky...and, at the same time, it feels so right.

It is a sign that the Spirit is working among us, among you and with me, when it demands our very best efforts of mind, heart and soul...when it requires our resources of money, of time and energy in a sacrificial way that leads us to give to something much greater than ourselves and to serve not only one another but especially those who will come after us.

It is a sign of the Spirit working among us, among you and with me, when we are positioned to experience satisfaction and delight at reaching our goals to which we are led. It is even a sign of the Spirit when we encounter the possibility of failure, of not yet reaching them.

That means that we are risking enough. We don't know until we try.

AMEN