

The Twenty Sixth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 28—Year B—Rector’s Annual Address

I Samuel 1:4-20

I Samuel 2:1-10

Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25

Mark 13:1-8

What a year it has been! And I want to start with **thanking my colleagues** who do so much to enable our ministry and serve this community.

Thank you, **Greg Erickson**, wherever you are on your sabbatical right now, for continuing to be an incredible partner in ministry. You are a praying, steadfast, faithful, walking, talking, breathing, disciplined, servant leader with a heart bigger than anybody I know. You are a Deacon’s Deacon, always lifting our eyes to Jesus, and helping us to walk in his way.

This year saw a big staff transition in the **Parish Administrator** role. We said goodbye to **Lynn McNeil** in August and hello to **Susan Musilli**. So, thank you, **Lynn**, for the joy of sharing ministry and work with you these last two years. Your sense of hospitality, calm, and joy are simply infectious, not to mention your capacity to juggle a thousand balls and keep us moving forward.

And thank you, **Susan**, for jumping in the deep end from the get-go. You have met the challenges of the position, which has a big learning curve, with eagerness and determination. You, too, bring gifts for hospitality and calm, a love of people and a sense of ministry, as well as incredible gifts in administrative organization. You are already finding more efficient and effective ways to do things. You are doing a fantastic job, and I can’t wait to see what you open up for us in the year ahead.

Thank you, **Pat Kohles**. You continue to do your work as **Financial Secretary** with diligence and calm, with equal measures of *realism*, which you want when it comes to finances, and *hopeful optimism*, which helps us avoid anxiety and scarcity. You have a can-do attitude, and this community trusts you to help us steward their offerings faithfully. Plus, you are the historian amongst our staff, always providing us with wisdom and the long view.

Thank you, **Suzi Mills, Director of Music**. You continue to be a joy to work with. I love crafting and creating liturgy with you, and I love *watching you love our choir*. Under your leadership, our choir has grown strong, both in numbers and in the capacity to make beautiful music. And I learn so much from *your journey as a leader*. You are a true colleague.

Thank you, **Joby Bell, Organist extraordinare**. We really do have the best on the bench, you know. I watch what happens to our singing when you are supporting us and leading us with the organ or piano. It is magic. You dance with this congregation in ways that leave me in awe. And your preludes and postludes and improvisations lift our hearts in ways we didn’t even know we needed. It is a rare organist who is confident enough and tuned in enough to always be listening for where the organ can drop out and let the voices soar—**Joby** is that rare bird. And he keeps introducing us to wonderful students. **Sarah**, it is a delight to have you with us again.

The world is in a hard place these days, and I am so aware that when we don’t know what to say or how to pray, we *sing*, and sometimes, we just need to let the beauty of the music and the vibrations of organ heal us from the inside out. Thank you, **Suzi** and **Joby**, for opening up holy space for our souls to praise and lament, heal, and be readied for service. We really do have the best in you two.

Thank you, **Sidney Ginn**, our **College Music Intern**. You have brought so much to our choir, even finding ways to record different parts to help choir members learn their parts. You have anchored that far corner of the upper row. We wish you every blessing as you move out from this community come December.

Thank you, **Sean Damrel**, our **College Youth Intern**, who is now in his 4th year leading our youth program with passion, energy, love of Jesus, and love of our youth. Sean has built a solid foundation, and he, too, will be leaving us come December to move on to his student teaching and then graduation. Sean had vision to see what could exist amongst our youth, and he has shepherded our youth to a place of strength. Sean has helped to shape leaders—following in the footsteps of St. Luke’s youth throughout the ages, currently *three* of our youth serve on the Diocesan Youth Council. That’s saying something for a congregation our size! We will miss you, **Sean!**

We saw another transition in our **Cleaner** position. After many years of service, we said goodbye to **Charles Oaks** and hello to **Lisa Houser**. **Charles** performed great service for us for over a decade, but the time came for him enter his well-deserved retirement. We brought on **Lisa**, and she has added her own touch to her work. She is one of the most diligent **Cleaners** I’ve ever known. It didn’t take her long to find her rhythm, and immediately, there was a freshness to our space.

And thank you, **Alana, Victoria, Sarah, Sarah May, and Taylor and subs Jessie, Carmen, Mattie, Bailey, and Lyndsey** for tending our Nursery and being that first loving expression of community for our youngest St. Luker’s.

All of these are your staff, and I couldn’t be more blessed to lead them and work alongside them. They are faithful, diligent, gifted and talented. As you encounter them, please thank them for all that they do.

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And I need to thank my **family**. **Jim**, you continue to be the most amazing partner anyone could hope for. You listen to me dream, and you keep me grounded. You remind me that I am more than what I do, *though you believe deeply* in what I do. You understand ministry in the deepest of ways, and you live it in your own life. You know that we carry this treasure in clay jars, and you teach me, over and over again, the beauty of forgiveness and grace and the power of getting back up after a face-plant. You remind me that our love is always held in a bigger Love—thank you for being on this journey with me.

And **my children—Jimmy and Mattie**—they continue to be my very best teachers when it comes to remembering what matters most in life. They continue to teach me lessons about strength and trust, power and perseverance, hope and passion, and the power of a fierce and tender heart.

St. Benedict talked about the monastic community being **a school of love**. *Well, my family is that first school of love for me*. Thank you for always pushing me deeper into **the love that surpasses understanding**.

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St. Luke’s, there is so much to **celebrate** this year, so many **milestones** that we reached!

In **Outreach and Social Justice, Creation Care** took on new energy as we joined the **Creation Care Alliance of Western North Carolina**, and we completed the **Solar Picnic Shelter** as an outward and visible sign our commitment to the stewardship of creation, not to mention becoming a fabulous new place for fellowship—it was a great spot for our **Summer Picnic!** We have continued to walk with our **immigrant brothers and sisters** helping to sponsor the **Project ID** efforts that provided a photo ID to

our immigrant neighbors. **Food insecurity** continues to be an important focus of our outreach. The **Mary Boyer Garden** continues to share its bounty, and we joined other churches in the **Summer Feeding Program** doubling the number of families we served this past summer to 7. And our commitments to **Hospitality House** have continued to be a staple of our outreach to neighbors in need.

In **Fellowship**, we continue to search for sustainable, creative ways to do **Coffee Hour** and our other big **Fellowship events**, and we're making progress through these efforts. Our **Men's Group** continues to gather faithfully, and our **Women's Group** continues to nurture the spiritual lives of our women, even while they keep searching for that balance of activity, rest, study, and play. Our **Supper Groups** completed their first cycle. We learned a lot along the way. We've seen **real community form for our families with young children** as a result of this program. We've **tackled some difficult conversations** in these groups, and we **know each other's stories** in ways we didn't a year ago. And, **St. Luke's** has continued to live into its **reputation** across the diocese as a **laboratory** to try new things. Just last weekend at Diocesan Convention, we were asked to share about the **Supper Group model**, both the *Practices for Talking About Things That Matter* and the **structure of the conversation** itself. People are hungry for spaces to cross divides and talk about things that matter. *At St. Luke's, we dream, we create, we share—that's part of who we are!*

In the area of **Newcomers**, our dedicated Vestry person who follows up with visitors is making a tangible difference. We now know more about *why people come*—and even more, *why they come back*—than we ever did before, not to mention helping people get integrated more deeply into the life of the community.

I don't know if you've noticed, but we have a **burgeoning group of people in their 20's** coming to St. Luke's. I refuse to call these people young adults because they're full blown adults with adult lives and responsibilities. I've asked them what I should call them; they're thinking about it. But I tell you this, *they are passionate about Jesus and about the Episcopal Church*. They know they are bucking the trend of their peers; they are here because they want to be, and we can learn a ton from them.

We continue to do the work of **Pastoral Care** with one another. We said some tough, tough goodbyes this year as **some** of our community entered the **communion of saints**. And as you do so very well, you walked that **journey with the dying** and with the **grieving**. **The Threshold Singers** continue to do such a beautiful ministry in this regard, as well as the **joy they bring to the aging**. Our **Lay Eucharistic Visitor** ministry continues to be a staple of care, done quietly and behind-the-scenes in the most sacred of spaces. And some of our goodbyes were the goodbyes we had to say when faithful **St. Luker's have moved away**, reminding us that we're all on a journey faithfully seeking to follow God's call.

In the area of **Finance**, we passed the lowest deficit budget in years. Good management of our resources over the years enabled us to have the cash-on-hand to address repairs to our parking lot in the \$40,000 range. And the **New Consecration Sunday Committee** did a knock-the-ball-out-of-the-park job with our **Annual Giving** campaign this year! New energy was recruited into that committee, and they, in turn, brought passion and celebration to the whole understanding of **stewardship**.

In **Christian Formation**, we now have something for every age birth through high school. We have had to set up a **second nursery** for infants because we're having more babies, and babies and toddlers need their own dedicated spaces! Parents value the time they have together on Sunday mornings in the **Parents Group**. Our age 3-3rd grade children are getting steeped in the wonder of our sacred stories in **Godly Play**, and there's a whole new crop coming up. Our **older elementary kids** now have their own

class. And the **High Country Episcopal Youth Community**—*youth group*—is a consistent staple of fun, community, and spiritual formation for our 6th-12th graders.

The **Friday Book Study** continues their deep exploration of life and faith in the books they read, and an even deeper exploration of what it truly means to live together in community as they risk the deepest parts of themselves with one another.

We have the largest **Claiming Jesus and His Way Adult Confirmation Class** that we've had in years—lots of energy and passion and deep questions of faith.

In **Worship**, we've moved forward with a **Lay Liturgical Coordinator** to assist the priest in the oversight of all of the ministries that make our worship life possible. Our **Choir** has never been stronger or more glorious, with the added benefit of all our gifted **instrumentalists**. Our **worship is beautiful and reverent and joyous** thanks to our **greeters and readers, servers and acolytes**, as well as those who serve behind-the-scenes **baking bread and arranging flowers and caring for linens and tending the altar**—we even **recruited new folks into the Altar Guild** eager to serve—yay!

We have recruited a **Building and Grounds Committee** and they have already completed a walking-tour of our building and grounds looking at all the things we need to address. They are prioritizing these needs, and then figuring out manageable ways that all of us can take ownership of the care of this sacred space that, truly, has been entrusted to us. They organized a **great workday** yesterday! Our **Kitchen Renovation Committee** began their work this past year and will continue that dreaming in the year to come. And **Building and Grounds** is one of those places where numerous parishioners, men and women, make profound contributions, quietly and without fanfare. I know because I see these saints working around this place throughout the week.

So, we have much to be grateful for, and much to celebrate as we gather together today.

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As we look forward, I like to think in terms of our **inner work** and **outer call**.

First, our **inner work**. We devoted our **Vestry Retreat** last year to the whole question of **engagement**. *How do we help people engage their gifts and skills and talents and give them opportunities to serve from these places of strength?* This is the challenge for every church I know, so we're not unique in this. We've had some ah-hah's this year.

We watched as **Maggie Sparks** recruited a powerful **New Consecration Sunday Committee**. We saw people take on leadership roles in that work that had not done so previously, and the fruits of their work have been overflowing. And, it appeared that they actually *enjoyed* this work and felt *fulfilled* in it. *How did that happen? How do we bottle this?* Well, one learning is that Maggie went out and **asked people to serve**. She **recruited people for this service** and said, *"We need you."* Maybe over the years, our fear of asking too much of people, our fear of imposing upon people, *has made us too timid*. Maybe people are just **waiting to be asked to serve, longing to be invited into deeper relationship, yearning to be challenged to make a deeper commitment**. It's something for us to think about.

We had a similar reaction when we **recruited the new Building and Grounds Committee**. We **discerned**, and **prayed**, and then **sought out people who had gifts and skills and passion in this area**. *Every person we asked said "yes," and everyone made the first meeting*. That never happens. It was incredible to watch these minds work as we did a walking tour of the building and grounds. I'm a priest, I don't know anything about rooflines or settling concrete or diverting runoff, so I simply was in awe of

their wisdom and experience. *What did we learn here? People like to put their gifts and experience to use. Match gift and need, and you get passion and energy.*

Then, we come to **recruiting Vestry leadership**. That is a harder road. Every year, the **Nomination Committee** makes *many* calls. We are deeply **grateful for those willing to say “yes,”** and we again have a **gifted group who will join in this ministry of leadership** for the coming year. *But we do wonder about all the “no’s.” Why don’t people want to serve on Vestry?* Well, **people tell us it’s too much. Three years is too long.** And when the **Liaison** role to a **Ministry Area** turns into *leading a Ministry Area*, **it’s way too much.** You also have to be **Confirmed to serve on Vestry**, and much of our *leader energy* lives in people who are **deeply connected to St. Luke’s, but not Confirmed.** We can talk about *why Confirmation is important* another day, but for purposes of talking about **Vestry, it does limit who can serve.**

So, we’ve decided to get **creative.** *We’ve cleared this through the Diocese, and there is nothing in the canons to keep us from moving forward with this experiment.* Starting with this year’s class:

- **Vestry terms will be 2 years.**
- We’re **decreasing the size of the Vestry**, taking it from 12 to 8 over the next couple of years.
- And, we are **narrowing the scope of work.** The Vestry will get back to tending the **canonical responsibilities**:
 - **oversight of finance and responsibility for stewardship**
 - **oversight of building and grounds**
 - **joining the Rector in providing spiritual vision**
 - **keeping the big picture in view**
 - **and engaging all in the ministry of the parish**
- **Vestry will no longer be Liaisons to Ministry Areas**, but each month, two of the **Ministry Areas** will attend the Vestry meeting and report what’s going on in their area.

We are excited about getting back to **the essence of Vestry leadership!**

For this to work well, it means that our **Ministry Areas** have to be vibrant, organized, and actively engaged. *We know that many of you are already engaged in these Ministry Areas—thank you!* What we wish to do *now* is bring **clarity** to these areas and to **increase engagement.** And so, **during Advent**, we’re going to be **asking every single person who attends St. Luke’s regularly, everyone who considers St. Luke’s to be their community of faith, to choose one of the seven Ministry Areas and to make a commitment to put extra energy into that area in the coming year.** These seven areas are the ones we’ve long had:

- **Outreach and Social Justice**
- **Fellowship and Newcomer Integration**
- **Pastoral Care**
- **Finance and Stewardship**
- **Christian Formation**
- **Worship**
- **Building and Grounds**

We’re **inviting you to operate out of your gifts and passion.** Once we see who’s in each area, then we’ll **discern the Convener energy.** *You don’t have to have expertise in an area to be a good Convener, you just have to have the gift for calling people together and helping them organize for the mission.*

And, **parishioners and Ministry Areas** will have **staff support to help match gifts and passions with places to serve**. This fall, the **Vestry approved** moving forward with a **Parishioner Engagement Facilitator** staff position, and I'm pleased to announce that **Elizabeth White** has said "yes" to this call. This is a position we've been needing—someone dedicated to **helping all of us engage our deepest passions and helping Ministry Areas figure out the most effective way to organize for ministry**.

In a nutshell, we have turned our organizational structure on its head. We are dreaming of a new way to **set energy free for ministry and call forth leaders and conveners to lead in places where they have experience, gifts, and passion**.

The other piece of inner work is simply the ongoing work of **living in community**. Again, in the spirit of **St. Benedict, St. Luke's is a school of love**, and in this **school of love, as in our families**, there are **times when we hurt each other**. It's that **15th practice** in our *Practices for Talking About Things That Matter*: **"We cannot guarantee a safe space—we can and will say or do things that hurt one another. If someone says or does something that hurts you, have the courage to name the hurt, circle back, and work it through. If you say or do something hurtful, have the courage to own it, circle back, and work it through."** Brothers and sisters, this work never goes away.

Our world has become increasingly hard-edged, sharp. So much anxiety is floating around with an added dose of urgency. **In gentler times, people took time to talk and make known their needs. Now, we can come at each other with demands**. So, I'm asking us to **take a step back and breathe** in our interactions with one another. **Slow things down. Take your time. Lead with curiosity and questions**.

And as you do this with each other, I would also ask that you approach staff this way. Please know, they **juggle a lot of balls at any given time**, and each and every one of them **understands their work as ministry; they are here to serve you**. It's also **really hard to have 100 bosses**. That's why, *in the Episcopal Church, our structure is set up for the staff to work for the Rector, so that staff only have one boss*. Know that as you bring your need to staff, so are others, and I'm often in the background helping to prioritize needs and workload.

So, **whether it's with one another or with staff**, those wonderful **"I Corinthians Chapter 13 virtues"** *will serve all of us well—love is patient, love is kind. Lead with kindness, practice patience; do your part to soften the hard edges of our world*.

And **when you receive a hurt, or cause a hurt, circle back and work it through**. *This is kingdom of God work, and it is deeply transformative*.

As for our **outer call**. Well, **all that I just talked about** comes into play as we **move out into the world beyond our doors**.

We need to continue **practicing talking about things that matter**, so that we can **continue to be yeast in the leaven of our broken and divided world**. We will be **starting our second round of Supper Groups in December** with a slight modification. Since scheduling and hosting have been challenging for some groups, we are going to **choose the second Friday of the month to come together here in the Great Hall for heavy appetizers and fellowship, and then break into small table groups for intentional conversation**. *If you want to just come for fellowship, that's fine, too*. But we need to **keep practicing the skills of listening attentively without formulating our rebuttal, as well as growing our capacity to tell our story**. I still **dream of seeding these groups in the wider community**. Maybe some of us will be brave enough to launch in that direction in the coming year.

The **High Country Multifaith Clergy and Leaders Group** made a powerful public witness in leading the way on our recent **Candlelight Vigil in the wake of the shootings at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh**. *We have been working on those relationships for three years.* We are deeply aware that a **corresponding group of laity from our congregations needs to form and come together in a similar way**. We hope to launch this in the coming year.

The work of stitching back together the torn fabric of our society is the work of our time. This is the ministry of reconciliation.

Sometimes, this work will take the form of a **Candlelight Vigil**, a beautiful, powerful, **public witness of solidarity with those who are bearing the brunt of the hate that is moving across our world**.

Sometimes, that work will be **the gritty work of advocacy or protest as we tackle the more subtle forms of injustice woven into our common life at the level of policies that aren't just**.

There are **always tricky things to tease out, but the call to stand with the least of these and keep them ever before our eyes, is commanded by our Lord over and over again** in a multitude of ways. So, yes, we have to keep **putting in the hard work of grounding ourselves in the deep places, discerning wisely, and then courageously acting when the gospel demands that we do so**.

We don't choose the times in which we live. In this morning's gospel, Jesus is clear that these are crazy times—**People coming in his name to lead many astray; wars and rumors of wars; nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom; earthquakes and famines.** But Jesus continues, **"This is but the beginning of the birthpangs" "The birthpangs"—something is in the process of being born—as it was then, so it is now.**

We don't choose the times in which we live, but we do choose how we respond to such times with courage and faithfulness, hope and expectation. Here, we can't game out specific plans—in good Advent fashion, it's about being **watchful and awake**. As we continue to walk in the way of Jesus, **HE will make clear what will be asked of us, both individually and collectively.**

I continue to stand in awe of you and the community we have formed here at St. Luke's. You don't take your faith for granted, and you yearn to follow Jesus faithfully. You are courageous in a thousand different ways. You lean into experiments, and you share all that we learn together *generously*. You are evangelists, always telling the good news of this community, and all that you experience here, out in our wider community.

It's a **privilege to serve as your priest and to walk this sacred journey with you. I love you all—thank you for allowing me to learn right alongside you as we live and work together** in this **blessed school of love**. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
November 18, 2018