

Congregational Date: Church of the Good Shepherd 138th Annual Meeting

Date: January 27, 2019

Speaker: The Rev. Alanna M. Van Antwerpen

Topic: Priest in Charge Report

Yesterday, I was returning from a visit with my family after lunchtime when I indulged in a “Dove” dark chocolate square. The candy wrappers are like fortune cookies...this one happened to say, “Things have to fall apart for them to fall together.”

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Isn't that the truth? As most of you know, my mother's been in treatment for lung cancer for over a year. In a lot of ways, like any family, certain ways of being or rhythms of life have fallen apart on this journey. And yet, new patterns of life, conversation and inspiration have emerged.

This quote also has resonance as we gather today as a Church community. “Things have to fall apart for them to fall together.” Over the last nearly nine years of journeying with you all, there have been phases to my time with you—seasons of change that have held us all, then fallen apart in some way in order to fall back together reshaped in new patterns.

From my very first conversation with Pastor Odie back in March of 2010, we spoke about his long tenure at CGS. We spoke about the eventuality of his retirement, the congregation's pastoral transition and process of calling a new Rector. We spoke about how difficult it would be for him to say good-bye after three decades of service here at CGS, and a life-time of being a priest in the church. And although we had no idea what was in store, we spoke about the possibility of my ministry with you all—learning the practices of ministry CGS had to teach me, while bringing my own gifts to bear and the seed of possibility that I might accompany you on this path of transition “if it all worked out”. Together we all embarked on this wild, varied journey of walking together in Christ.

Those first few years for me here at CGS were filled with excitement, eagerness and building relationship with you. Serving in the Sunday School with Jill Rosier and Mary O'Reilly has been a source of deep joy, and faithful witness as the teacher brought their dedication and passion to bear in helping all our children articulate their relationship with God through the stories of our faith tradition. From worship, to adult faith formation and outreach I was in awe of the sheer capacity of this community for engaging relationship with Christ individually and collectively, then bringing that message of Good News to share out in the world.

After the first three years, I settled into my time with you. As a community we moved through the grief and trauma of saying good-bye to our Organist and Choirmaster Patrick Hagan who died suddenly. We walked the path of moving through our loss individually and collectively, falling apart even as we were held in God's tender care and mercy. Then through the leadership of the Organist Search Committee with the dedication of the personnel committee and staff we welcomed Brett Greene as our Music Director as life once again fell together for us in a new season at CGS.

Then, knowing the rough shape of Pastor Odie's departure date, we began laying the groundwork for the process of transition, community engagement and discernment for the time ahead. The next few years were filled with conversation about formation opportunities to articulate all the various leadership roles of our lay ministers from adults to youth to kids. We had Sunday forum series on 'Who's in charge around here anyway?' At the same time I began initial conversation, prayer and dreaming about our application to the Lilly Endowment for their Congregation and Clergy Renewal process. In conversation with our Lilly discernment team, Executive Committee and Vestry, we submitted an application for the "Crossroads of the Cups: A journey of the Past, Present and Possibility" in 2015 with the roll-out in 2016 as we once again entered a new phase of life and ministry together as we considered the theme's bearing on our life of ministry. Having been enriched through worship, Christian education and the "Walking in the Light" program—the community was situated to receive the news of Pastor Odie's retirement in early 2017.

Even in the midst saying good-bye to Pastor Odie, a Curate and Interim Consultant search was underway for this transitional time and everyone was getting used to the idea of pastoral change. Then after Pastor Odie's departure, we were laying the road before us as Rector Search Committee Chairs were identified. At once my ministry with you has been one of hospice chaplain in supporting this process of grief saying good-bye to Pastor Odie—then as mid-wife, helping coach the birth of a new era of ministry as you prepare to receive a new Rector.

In that regard, during these past two years of the official interim, CGS has shown the reality of our faith as a resurrection people, that with any transition 'life has changed, not ended'. This time has been marked by making room for the work of the interim transition, for growth of Lay leadership, staff, for the outstanding work of the Rector Search Committee and for Good Shepherd to receive a new Rector this year. Your incredible staff: Pastor Kate, Pastor Fred, Brett, Laurie, Abbie, Mary, Nancy and Brian have gone above and beyond in their dedication during this time. They have done the logistical, spiritual and emotional work required of a time such as this. Your Lay leadership in the Executive Committee (Jill, Brian, Becky and Chris) and Vestry has done the same, working vigorously to learn their piece of the puzzle of CGS' common life. This past year especially they have not only received the knowledge our former Rector imparted to me about how things work around here, they have taken ownership with vision and their own sense of discernment about CGS' future. As a community we have intentionally practiced resiliency for change through the leadership of the Visioning Team, which as a task force promoted both new ideas and old practices in new ways. You only have to look at the Appendix of our Annual Report this year to see how much has been going on. We have gracefully learned how to fall apart so that things can fall together as Christ invites us into a future that is both here and not yet.

It turns out that little wrapper was right, we are a people who are held in the story of a God who shows us resurrection life. With this in mind, over the next few months, just like others before me, I will spend some time with you all as I say 'good-bye' as I take my leave before the new Rector arrives. In conversation with the Bishop, Canons, Staff and Lay leadership—I will depart Good Shepherd four Sundays before the new Rector begins their ministry with you all. My departure date could happen as soon as the end of March, depending on the new Rector's start date but it will not be after Sunday, May 26th.

My mother's health and needed family support is a shaping factor in my timeline. As clergy, we are not eligible for the federal Family Medical Leave Act, so I have spoken to staff and leadership about taking some pro-rated vacation time planned over the next several weeks in order to be with my mother and support my family during this time.

This is a piece of the road that we are building as we are walking it, just like at night when we can only see as far as the headlights will allow us to. But some things are certain, the rhythm of my life is changing sufficiently that this clarity is needed. It is also certain that space and time before the new Rector arrives is needed to allow appropriate time for one ending which allows room for a new beginning. In her generosity and capable leadership, Pastor Kate will be here for that month bridge with supply clergy to support the community and help receive the new Rector. Pastor Fred will continue to consult with Staff, leadership and the community for any needed support. As you could imagine, I will leave plenty of information, handouts galore, for your new Rector and be available to them in any capacity that is helpful to them before my departure date.

In closing I want to express my deepest gratitude to you all for the companionship, formation, and mutual ministry over the years. I am indebted to you all, to Pastors Odie, Charles, Kate and Fred; our staff past and present in Patrick, Brett, Laurie, Sarah, Andrea, Abbie, Jill, Mary, Marcie, Kelly and Steve, Dan, Nancy and Brian.

As I have said before and will continue to say, "The Love is Real."

Most of all though I need to express my lifelong gratitude to Franklin, my husband and Norah, my daughter who are my heroes who show me God's love in ways that are profound, funny and surprising. They make me a better person, a more faithful person in Christ. They, along with my parents and family, are my life partners who have supported me each and every step of this varied path. They have all given me the time, space and strength to fiercely love you all in ministry as we show praise for God.

So in faithful service to God, and even in the midst of knowing that "things have to fall apart for them to fall together" let us continue to know that life will change, not end; loving fiercely with God as our compass who will guide us on our journey, always showing us the path to resurrection life. Amen.