

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
10:00 a.m. Celebration of the Holy Eucharist
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany; January 28, 2018

“Annual Meeting of the Parish”

Scripture: Mark 1:21-28; 4 Epiphany B RCL
Note: Preached on the Sunday of the Annual Meeting of the Parish

Today marks my third opportunity and honor to speak with the congregation gathered on the day of the Annual Meeting of the parish. Three cycles in our life and ministry together is a significant milestone, as it means I am no longer entirely new in the midst of this community; however, I am hardly a seasoned veteran with little more to learn about St. Stephen's Church. In fact, nearly three years in your midst is enough time to know there is more to know, and it brings us into the time of earnest transition, when new patterns of life, relationship, staffing, and ministry are being established even as the church carries on with venerable traditions and service. I am so blessed to report what I expect most of you already know... that in the midst of transition, this congregation is served by rock-solid leadership from capable wardens, a caring Vestry, engaged ministry committees and teams, and longstanding leaders in the TEC and Youth communities.

Yet even while St. Stephen's Church is moving along, we are also gearing up! Both expected and unexpected changes see us now in a season of discernment while

we search for new ministry leaders in several areas of our corporate life. This past week we welcomed a new Sexton to service with St. Stephen's Church, one who ministers to the community by the care of the church facilities and grounds and the management of repairs, renovations, and maintenance. We currently have a dedicated team of church members searching nationally and locally for ministers to lead and guide our Children's ministries and our Youth Community. At mid-year we plan to call a full-time professional communicator to continue enhancing our information and relationships while connecting our members with ways to be more fully participative in the life of St. Stephen's Church while serving God in both church and the surrounding community. I do sort of liken this work to establishing some of the basics, laying down the infrastructure, so to speak. In order to carry out our ministries fully, we need good working systems, capable staff members, dedicated leaders, and sufficient resources. The generosity of this congregation is ensuring those resources. Good leaders continue to step forward in service. And I expect 2018 to be a year of building and rebuilding, renewal and creativity in our ministries together, and I am excited to see what St. Stephen's Church will become. And these blessings lead me to a brief word on Mark's gospel...

In today's reading, Jesus is confronted by a man possessed of an "unclean spirit." And he asks Jesus: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" I don't think he understands. It is as though what is evil

cannot imagine why anything good would ever choose to encounter it. And can evil not understand that the good that is Jesus would seek less to destroy the one who is evil than to invite that one into a healthier, happier way of being? *What have you to do with us who are evil, Jesus of Nazareth?* Well, the same thing that Jesus would have to do with those who are not so evil: to offer abundant life, to call us to live a better way, to reassure us of God's love for all even when we act unlovable, to call us to do what is good.

And given that Jesus does just such things even for us, inviting us into this community of faith, giving us such an opportunity to build abundant, good lives, I think maybe this morning for us who enjoy communion within St. Stephen's Church, the question we might consider on Annual Meeting day is: *"What have we to do with you, Jesus?"* Look:

We are getting our house in order, attending to the needs of this church and working to strengthen all areas of ministry, from pastoral care to administration, Stewardship to Sunday School, communications to hospitality. Okay, that's good.

Many of us are engaged in outreach ministries, taking St. Stephen's beyond our walls, so to speak, to support other area ministries. That's good.

But “*What have we to do with you, Jesus?*” is also a deeply personal question. I mean, Who is Jesus in our lives? What have we to do with him? Are we moved beyond the sustaining of church to a deeper witness in the world? What is next for me and for each of us in our work to bring shelter to homeless people, to share food with hungry people, to comfort frightened and displaced people, to counter the rhetoric of fear and division with a sense of relief, belonging, reassurance, and love?

In a recent *Nooma* discussion class on Wednesday night, our video presenter, Rob Bell, reminded us of the response of those who have something to do with Jesus.

From the First Letter of Timothy:

As for those who in the present age [have plenty][ASIDE: AND AS A COMMUNITY THAT MEANS US], command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share...

What have we to do with Jesus of Nazareth? To be concerned with what is good is to be concerned with the good of all... like Jesus is. I look forward to that work with you in the year ahead.