

A Sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
The Rev. Lucy D. LaRocca
November 10, 2019,
“Celebration Sunday” text: 2nd Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

You won't find Celebration Sunday on any standardized church calendar. The readings assigned for today do not recognize that at Zion we have set aside this day to celebrate the commitment of this congregation to be disciples of Jesus and to walk with one another in Jesus' way of love. Throughout the church year we observe other rites and rituals that commemorate an individual's decision to follow Jesus- Baptism and confirmation- but today we give thanks for this particular community and our commitment to support one another in our life of faith.

By now, we all know the trends and statistics. That belonging to a faith community is counter cultural in New England. That the decline of the number of Christians in every denomination is continuing at a rapid pace. In the last ten years, the number of Protestants in the North East has declined by nearly 20%. 11 Episcopal parishes in CT have closed or merged in the past 9 years. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Hartford has recently closed 26 CT parishes and merged 144 reducing their overall number of parishes from 212 to 127.

At Zion we have not been immune to the shrinking of our numbers. And yet, we have much to celebrate. God is as alive as ever and continues to inspire God's people to living into the good news of God's love for all people. We continue to gather for spirit filled worship and joyful praise of God. We gather to study God's word in bible studies and connect with other disciples in our region.

In the past year, we have honored God's creation with our sunflower garden, plantings around the church designed to attract and feed pollinators, and prayed our way around Hammonasset State Park. We have worked together to love our neighbors as ourselves with the distribution of food, clothing, and school supplies. We paid off the school lunch debt for all high school seniors in North Branford and have begun to use our new kitchen to feed our neighbors' body and soul.

And yet, when we look around our sanctuary on a Sunday morning, we may feel some sadness; for those who are no longer with us, for those for a variety of reasons cannot come to church on Sunday mornings, and for those who no longer recognize the value of gathering as disciples of Christ.

Throughout the thousands of years of Christianity, there have been numerous times of great hardship and change. In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians we heard the words of encouragement that he wrote to them, urging them on in their faith. “We always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you. God called you- so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught.”

You dear people of Zion, brothers and sister beloved by the Lord, God chose you. God has called you, to stand firm in the faith which you have received, even when it seems that much of society is no longer interested in faith and a life of prayer.

In his talk to convention, Bishop Ian Douglas acknowledged our dismay over the shrinking of the church and reminded us that God has had, since Jesus and the first Pentecost, and God will always have, the Body of Christ (the Church) that God needs to be about God's mission in the world. From the first century communities of Jesus' followers described in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles to this little church with the big heart (which is how Zion is known in some circles in New Haven) God will have the church God needs.

This may mean that we need to make changes in the months and years ahead- as we look to how we can best continue use our resources to do God's work in the world. In his address to convention, Bishop Douglas gave thanks to God for the parishes in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut which are embracing change and finding new opportunities to serve God's mission in their neighborhoods and beyond. He said, "Let us not fear the future – after all, the future is in God's hands. God will have the Church that God needs to be about God's mission. Let's join together. Let's join Jesus in this new missional age. Let's joyfully be about the work God has given us to do."

And what is it that God is calling us to do? From the prophet Micah we hear that we are to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. Jesus said the greatest commandment is to Love God with all our heart and souls and mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. When faced with a large hungry crowd, Jesus told his disciples, "You give them something to eat."

With these precepts and values in mind, we are to look out for how we can bring our gifts to bear on the situations that confront us locally, regionally, and globally. We saw that our neighbors were food insecure and we signed on whole heartedly to support the Food Pantry of North Branford. We noticed that some of our neighbors are isolated and that as a society we have become estranged from those around us. And so we have begun to offer no-cost community dinners.

God is not finished with us yet my friends. We still have so much joy, so much faith, and so much hope to give to the glory of God and for the benefit of our fellow human beings. I am excited for all the ways we will see God at work around us, among us, and through us in the months and years ahead.

I'll close with the words of Paul of Tarsus. Hear them as though they were written to each one of us. "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word." Amen.