

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander  
Easter 7/The Sunday after the Ascension (A) ~ 17 May 2026  
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda  
Acts 1:6-14  
Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36  
John 17:1-11

Five years ago, when we were still in the throes of the pandemic, members of the St. Dunstan's Vestry spent the summer crafting a new parish Mission Statement. Some folks did remember, vaguely, seeing a Mission Statement years before, but – as is so often the case – no one knew what it said.

Not a single soul. It was long, they recalled, but no one had a clue about the content.

That seemed like a problem. We had to do something.

So we decided to start fresh and to reimagine our purpose, even in the midst of COVID.

Working together on Zoom, we set out to articulate our “why” as a faith community. We had two criteria: It had to be succinct, and it had to be memorable.

And before long, through prayer and reflection and lively discussion, our Mission Statement was born. Clearly the Holy Spirit was on the Zoom with us. If you turn to the front of your bulletin, you'll find it there, as it is every week, below the cover art. It's just eight words. Say them with me?

*Seeking God*  
*Building Community*  
*Growing Faith*  
*Reaching Out.*

This is the framework we use to organize our life together. Pretty much everything we do as a parish can be grouped into one of these “buckets.”

But even though the bullet points are listed in a line, from left to right, it's important to understand that they aren't meant to be a continuum, or an order of operations. We don't start with “Seeking God” and make our way, step-by-step, to “Reaching Out.”

What would happen when we got to the end? Would we “graduate” from Church?

By no means!

The life of faith doesn't work that way. It isn't linear, or sequential. You don't check a bunch of boxes and then click “Finish.”

Let's think about our Mission, about who we are as a parish church, a little bit differently.

The problem with the weekly bulletin is that it's flat. It's two-dimensional. And so maybe our Mission seems that way, too. But imagine if it were printed on a Mobius strip. I bet you've seen one of these before (*demonstrate*):

You take a piece of paper, twist it, and connect the two ends...So it's one continuous surface, but in 3-D.

Amazing, right?

The Mobius strip represents connectedness, and growth, and change – some of the very values we hold most dearly as a congregation. It also represents infinity, or *eternity*; there is no beginning and no end.

And the words on the paper just flow, in and out, all of a piece.

*That's* how the life of faith works.

All of these things – seeking God, building community, growing faith, reaching out – are going on all the time in this parish. They are all points of entry into the Body of Christ.

What do I mean by this?

I don't know *all* of your stories (yet...), but I do know many of you well enough to realize that you are here for a whole host of reasons. You are all over the place!

Some of you are at St. Dunstan's because you are looking for friends, for folks who – like you – want to be part of something bigger than themselves. Maybe you live alone, or you're going through a transition, or you're just tired of seeing the same people every day at work or on the Trail or at the Giant.

*You* are the Mission of this parish.

Some of you are here because you want to find ways to serve – in worship, or through one of our many ministries.

*You* are the Mission of this parish.

Some of you are here because you want to feel God's Presence. You come to pray, to reflect, to meditate, to be quiet before our Lord. You come to share Christ's Body and Blood in the Sacraments. You come for mystery, and grace. You come for music, or visual art, or light, or the beauty of this sacred space.

*You* are the Mission of this parish.

And some of you are here because you want to learn more about Jesus, more about the Bible, more about the Church. Or maybe you have questions, or doubts, and you want to test them out. Maybe you're angry at God.

Yes, you, too, are the Mission of this parish.

You see? The life of faith is not lock-step; we're not all in the same place or motivated by the same things. It's not "one size fits all." Church isn't a factory churning out identical Christians on an assembly line. (Thank goodness!)

And, most importantly, there is no entrance exam, no hoop to jump through, no need to prove goodness or purity or adequate belief.

If there were, this building – and every Church building around the world – would be pretty empty.

Fortunately, that's not how the life of faith works. Each of us is invited here, each of us is welcome here, no matter *where* we are or *how* we are – joyful, curious, broken, ashamed, hurting, hoping. You name it.

And guess what? Jesus promises He will be with us there... wherever "there" is. Each of us belongs, and each of us has a role to play. We are called to be His witnesses.

In our reading from Acts today we hear the story of Jesus' Ascension, His physical return to God the Father 40 days after Easter. Many parishes observed the Feast of the Ascension this past Thursday. I have to say the Ascension is one of those bizarre, supernatural moments in scripture that always leaves me scratching my head.

*What was THAT?* I wonder.

I don't really understand it, and I can't explain it, so please don't ask.

What I *do* know is that Jesus' closest friends are left scratching *their* heads, too. I imagine them asking themselves, *What now?*

Each of them has been called into fellowship, into community, with Jesus, presumably for a specific reason. I have no doubt that Jesus knows why, but I

suspect that it isn't at all clear to them.

Especially now.

For Jesus' followers, who have walked with Him, eaten with Him, argued with Him, loved Him, and failed Him for three years, it must feel as though it's all over. He is gone, and they can't check any more boxes. They're stuck. It's as though they are on the edge of a cliff, at the limit of the known (flat) world, and they see no way forward.

We can picture them standing there, mouths agape, eyes trained toward the sky. It's almost comical.

*What was THAT?*

What Jesus' friends can't possibly understand in the moment (even though they have been told...) is that *they* are the Mission now. Jesus said that they would be His witnesses, and so they will.

Each of them has a role to play. No doubt they are confused and angry and scared and uncertain...*and* they have been invited and welcomed into this fellowship, this community, for a reason. They are to spread the Gospel, share the Good News of Jesus, and help nurture the Body of Christ.

Because of *them*, there is a Church here for *us*, now.

Think about that for a second. Jesus' followers don't always get along – they don't even necessarily always *like* each other – but somehow, they figure it out. Together, they build the Church. It isn't always pretty, or elegant, and they for sure make mistakes. But they live and embody the Mission entrusted to them by Jesus, and He promises to be with them in all of it.

You and I are called to live and embody His Mission, too.

I don't know whether you noticed, but in this passage Jesus' friends are called *apostles*, not disciples. Tricky, tricky! *What's the difference?* you ask. *Aren't the two synonymous?*

No, they're not. *Disciples* are those who follow; *apostles* are those who are sent.

This forlorn band of head-scratchers are sent *out* to tell others what they know to be true.

They are sent to tell others how they have been a part of something bigger than themselves.

They are sent to serve. They are sent to do ministry in the world.

They are sent to pray, and to partake of Christ's Body and Blood in the Sacraments. They are sent to share God's mystery and grace.

They are sent to learn and to teach, to ask questions and to share their doubts.

And so, my friends, are we.

Because of *us*, there will be a Church here for our children, and our children's children, and generations to come.

Or will there? That's a serious question.

We in our day must *live* the Mission of the Church – actively, purposefully, with intention. We are being sent to spread the Gospel, to share the Good News of Jesus, and to help nurture the Body of Christ. We have been invited and welcomed into this fellowship, this community, for a reason, and we have to do *something*.

We are called to be His witnesses.

May it be so, *Amen*.