

Sermon: "Welcome Back, Welcome Forward"

Welcome back! Nearly every pastor is saying this in September. We've been saying that here for 185 years. I say welcome back because most of you are returning but I also wish to say welcome to anyone who is here for the first time. It is a day to look around at familiar faces. It can be a day to renew a friendship. It can also be a day to make a new acquaintance. It is a day to appreciate those people who are new here and those who are familiar among us. That is the most important part of "Welcoming Sunday. It doesn't matter if you are new or renewing. It's a day to celebrate!

I also wish to say...welcome forward. Those words are probably not being said as often by pastors. But it recognizes that the blank-page church year is upon us and filled with much hope and possibility.

In scripture today we heard that Jesus used the mustard seed in his parables and here is why the comparison fits the church. A mustard seed is one of the smallest seeds you can plant. The church started very small. It began with Jesus and his mother, then disciples who became apostles. Many others then joined them as followers. The church has grown to spread great branches across the whole earth. Little can become much if it comes from God We are blessed with disciples here, even as we envision becoming more.

A mustard seed grows larger than most garden plants, turning into a large bush or tree-like plants where birds can rest in their branches. Over time a smaller church can expand its reach to become a larger place of peace, spiritual rest and a program center where various needs of the community can be met.

Many of you already give of your time for service to the church, as a deacon, trustee, committee member or special event volunteer. We also have various task forces at work. Our church identity is also linked to efforts of the church to positively impact the broader community. In addition, our church space is utilized in creative ways as we collaborate with other community groupings.

An unofficial motto could be “Bringing church to life,” both figuratively and literally. This reflects our desire to be an active, open, and vibrant faith community and a bridge to the broader community. Bridges are part of the fabric of this community. Bridges are important connecting edifices. The Jamestown Verrazzano bridge and the Claiborne Pell Newport bridge extend east to west connecting us with the rest of Rhode Island. We understand the relevance of bridges, both as reality and metaphor.

Jeremiah 29 read today, “Seek the peace and prosperity of the community I have carried you into. Pray to God for it, because if it prospers, so you will prosper.” God’s peoples are meant to be connected to their neighborhood, communities and to the broader world. When we do so, both will prosper.

We have been a part of Jamestown for 185 continuous years. That is significant testimony to our perseverance, dedication, faith and willingness to work. Think of the many enterprises that have come and gone in that span. In Jamestown, much has changed and much remains the same. Each of these aspects are important in determining the quality of life here. It is important that we recognize and build upon our own relevance, to the Jamestown community. Like our creator, we too can aspire to be creative in our efforts to positively impact the lives of our residents.

I look to the bold past for inspiration here. Early churches opened hospitals, colleges, universities; they invented the YMCA, hospices, shelters and food

pantries; they supported the arts and were the first art galleries. They were ambitious, innovative, and with their tangible results, ensured that they were perceived as important; relevant. In the year ahead for us, we too can assess our own abilities, capabilities and willingness to take some initiatives and venture outside our own walls. It is a challenge all faith communities face; incubating ideas, addressing needs, making more human connections. We cannot survive being insular, simply meeting the needs of our existing members. We need to also be open to any of your individual ideas, that may percolate up as we move forward.

The gospel teaches us about the kingdom of God. It was Jesus' central teaching. It was not a location. It was not a "where" question. It was a "when." The kingdom of God is the state of the world, when people first acknowledge God's presence, power, and potential. Then we are meant to help build that kingdom. Mustard plants are resilient and tenacious, capable of spreading widely. Let it be our example.

Welcome back, welcome forward, to this exciting new year filled with hope and possibility.

Amen.