

The Heart of Christianity

by Rev. Anne Derse, Deacon and Minister of Community Engagement

Twelve years ago, St. John's intentionally engaged a new rector to lead us in the work of becoming a greater force for good in our community. The Vision Process led by Rev. Sari and our exceptional lay leaders unleashed the creativity and the passion of our congregation for service and nourished flourishing new ministries. The political divisions and social upheaval of recent years in America and in our world fueled this spirit, while the pandemic nakedly exposed unimaginable need and inequity throughout our society - injustice that we could not ignore.

And St. John's responded. Time and again, St. John's parishioners opened their hearts, hands and pocketbooks to provide hands-on direct assistance to those in need - through traditional ministries like cooking for Shepherd's Table and the Interfaith Works Women's Shelter, and supporting those experiencing homelessness and need through Samaritan Ministries and Bethesda Cares. Through new ministries like our Refugee Ministry, our Books to Prisons effort, our Clothing Ministry and our Environmental Justice ministries. Through international ministries, like AFEDJ, supporting schools, hospitals and clinics in the Holy Land.

But we did not stop with direct philanthropy. We took the next step, of reform: creating an organization to address food insecurity on a large scale through Nourishing Bethesda. We started feeding about 100 families in August 2020, with a budget of \$1,200.00 a week. Today, Nourishing Bethesda is a 501c3 serving 3,000 people a month with a budget of \$350,00.00, over half from the County, and hundreds of volunteers, from all over our broader community.

And we have also embarked on the all-important work of justice, advocating and working for reform of inequitable systems that repress the most vulnerable, our siblings and children of God just as we are. We work to end the scourge of gun violence, to advance racial justice and equity, to protect the rights of children in the Holy Land, to aid prisoners - all through a Vestry-approved process conducted by our Faith in Action Coordinating Committee, our Social Justice Advocacy Committee, and our Justice and Outreach Coordinating Committee.

Why do we, as a community of Christians, do this work?

Jesus said, *“For the son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.”* (Mark 10:45) *“I have set you an example, that you also, should do as I have done to you.”* (John 13:15) *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength (and) you should love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Mark 12:30-31). *“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”* (Matthew 7:12)

We need look no further than the words and example of Jesus to discover what theologian Marcus Borg calls “the heart of Christianity:” the *practice* of compassion and justice in service to others. The purest expression of our love of God and of our faith lies in following the example of Jesus through loving, committed and unstinting work to achieve God’s intention for the world: justice and shalom, *abundant thriving*, for all.

St. John’s has long done this great work - right here in our own congregation, in our broader community and in the world. But in recent years, the Holy Spirit has been at work in our hearts at St. John’s in a new way, harnessing the gifts and energy we have been blessed with, and inspiring us to employ them in new action to love and serve God and our neighbors.

Jesus said: *“...where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* (Matthew 6:21) Every penny of your pledge to St. John’s that supports our justice and outreach work contributes directly to making a difference in people’s lives and loving our neighbors as ourselves - as Jesus did, and as Jesus asks us to do. Thank you, St. John’s, for being such a loving, generous, compassionate community, committed to serving others! With your support, who knows where will the Holy Spirit take us?

