

Advent 3B, December 11, 2011, St. John's Sharon  
Isaiah 61; John 1:6-8,19ff.  
The Rev Adam Trambley

In the gospel today, we hear John the Baptist say that he is not worthy to untie the thongs of Jesus' sandals. Now, let me tell you, that's pretty unworthy. Think about the state of our feet after a long day walking around and sweating in our socks. Or have you even been in the car and smelled when someone took their shoes off on a long trip? Now imagine what somebody's feet would be like after walking around all day in ancient Palestine, on dusty roads that animals used long before pooper-scooper laws were enacted. According to Hebrew custom, even slaves didn't untie their master's sandals. So John is putting a pretty good sized gap between himself and the coming Messiah, and, it's worth noting, that gap is not due to low self-esteem. John had huge crowds coming to him, and he had no problem telling kings how to live their lives. John just knew how incredible Jesus was.

Now we can't say we're more worthy than John the Baptist was to untie Jesus sandals. But that's OK, because Jesus has other things for us to do that to wait for him to get off of the cloud he is riding on at the last day to take his shoes off for him. But we need to recognize the importance of who Jesus is and to follow the instructions he does give us.

Over the last few weeks we have been talking about specific ways we can follow Jesus, especially paying attention to the ways that we do unto Jesus what we do to the least of our brothers and sisters. Not only have we looked at individual ways of serving our divine master, but we've also talked about what we are doing as a parish to recognize his worthy claim on our lives.

Last week we talked about our parish's guiding principles. These principles describe who we are at our best. They tell us how we go about our work. Today I'd like to focus on our parish's strategic directions, which can be found in your bulletin. The strategic directions guide us in the work we are called to do.

These directions are not arbitrary. They came out of discussions within the parish, interviews with people outside the parish, and a prayerful listening to where God is calling us to be. They are all things that we have been doing for most of our history, that we are good at doing, and that have been areas of fruitful ministry for St. John's in the past. They all also indicate needs that we are uniquely able to meet at this time and place.

I want to mention that these are both internal and external directions. In almost every case, the directions point us to work that allows us to serve those inside and outside our parish family. They are also broad directions that do not lay out a top down plan, but challenge us to develop a variety of effective ministries that address different areas of these directions. Our hope is that these directions spark new energy and ideas. We don't want to restrict ministries, but promote new ones in areas where we believe God had gifted us to bear good fruit.

The first strategic direction is to worship God in creative, passionate and beautiful ways that inspire a wide variety of people. We know that what we do in this sanctuary is a core piece of

who we are, and our worship life is a significant way we can touch lives. By offering worship where we expect God to show up, and taking that work seriously, we bless ourselves and others who join us. A recent example of was the funeral we had yesterday for Kenny Anderson. Most of the people present were not from St. John's, but the care and attention put into the service was noticed and people left feeling deeply inspired. Perhaps one of the musical solos, anthems or hymns touched them. Maybe the beauty of the way the altar was set up. Maybe something in the readings or sermon. Maybe the Eucharistic liturgy. Maybe times of silence. Probably different aspects inspired various people with different personalities who are in different places in their lives. But all sorts of people here cared enough to use their best gifts to create something that allowed people to come closer to God. The worship was creative, passionate and beautiful. Our first strategic directions tells us that we believe God wants us to continue to worship in ways that allow us all to enter into the throne room of the Most High, and to put our whole selves into that effort.

Our second strategic direction is to build authentic, loving relationship. This direction is very close to a guiding principle that also talks about loving relationships. Everything we do should help develop loving relationships, but we will also do some things with the explicit goal of building loving relationships. We know in our home families that we sometimes need to set aside time to just be together and connect with each other. Our church family is no different. Sometimes the relationships to be built will be with other parishioners, or even specifically with those that we are sharing some ministry with. Other times, we will be reaching out to care for those outside the parish. One area we have been intentionally working on this direction is to develop loving relationships with those who are sick or shut-in. We have a variety of people that regularly take communion to them, as well as altar flowers or other gifts from the parish. We know that our shut-ins may not have the same opportunity to build relationships, so the same teams visit them regularly to develop those bonds of love. The St. John's Family kitchen is serving lunch next Saturday in part to feed people, but also to build loving relationship with people who might especially need to feel God's love through the companionship of other people.

The third strategic direction is to strengthen and transform youth and families in our congregations and wider community. This parish has always known how important children are, both ours and others. Whether through Sunday School, support of West Hill Ministries, or other programs, our work with children has also generally borne good fruit. We decided to hire a Youth and Family Minister this year because we felt that this work is key to our congregational future. The most recent addition to this area is going to be a parenting group that will start in January. Friday night, Jane and I went out and saw a movie called Courageous that highlights the importance of parenting. But since it's probably not ideal to leave your children to go see a movie about being good parents, we'll be offering that opportunity here between services while the children are in Sunday School.

The fourth strategic direction is to meet people's basic needs. ECS is a great example of how we meet people's needs, and not just for food. In addition to occasional toys and books, ECS has gotten a few clothing racks, offered flu shots last week, and will be offering blood pressure screenings. Various other groups and ministries share similar concerns in different ways. Our parish is a down-to-earth kind of place, and we take care of people, so we try to meet people's

basic needs. Jesus says: “What you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me.” So we do.

Finally, our fifth strategic direction is to support and participate in efforts to revitalize the moral, spiritual, civic, economic, artistic, and social life of our wider community. OK, that one’s a mouthful and probably not as easily memorized as worship God, care for people and grow as Christians. But we know what we are talking about. What is happening in our community matters, and we believe everybody around us should have a full life, so we are going to support organizations and groups and efforts that help provide one. We understand what God meant when he said through Jeremiah to seek the welfare of the city to which I have sent you. As Episcopalians we know we can have an important presence in the wider community that shapes how we all live. We have made that kind of difference, whether it’s Lloyd Gressel helping settle a Westinghouse strike, Nick Baron helping the City of Sharon develop a strategic plan, Barb Sochor serving on the board of West Middlesex, or providing a place for people to learn to play piano, organ, and guitar. We also found out as we talked to people that wider community actually hopes that we will be providing a real moral and spiritual presence to our common life, sometimes as a conscience and sometimes as bearer of blessings. The wider community needs us for it to thrive, and we will not thrive apart from God’s people all around us.

What I’ve talked about under each strategic direction are just examples and starting points. The opportunities to love and serve God and neighbor through worship, building loving relationships, strengthening youth and families, meeting people’s basic needs and revitalizing our communities are limited only by the ways God can use us, which are always more than we can ask or imagine. As we offer our loving service to God by living into these directions, we will see even more miraculous things happening in our lives and the lives of the community than we do now.

Take a look at the Isaiah reading. Really sit with his image of the Kingdom of God where the poor are cared for, the sorrowful are consoled, the captives are freed, the ancient ruins are rebuilt, our descendants are blessed, and righteousness springs up like weeds. That image is one way of thinking about the results as we do the work that God has given us to do in the way God has given us to do it, as we live into our strategic directions with the qualities our guiding principles describe. They provide the roadmap for us to worship God, care for people and grow as Christians. In doing so, we will be servants of Jesus Christ, whose sandals we are not worthy to untie, but who has made us his adopted brothers and sisters, and give us the privilege of carrying out the work he has given us to do.