

Rector's Annual Address
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson
Holy Nativity, Plano
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When I began preparing this address, I had a particular goal in mind. I knew that the Senior Warden would be speaking to you about our crisis of faithfulness. And I thought that I would try to paint a picture for you of what we could do if we were all faithful. If he gave you the bad news, I was going to give you the good news. I thought that perhaps a vision of a positive future might encourage and motivate you all to respond positively.

For instance, if we were all faithful in giving a tithe, what could we accomplish with the additional funds? One thing we could do would be to hire adequate staff and provide programs. We might hire someone to oversee discipleship and Christian formation. And that person could work at building robust programs for Sunday School, Youth group, additional Bible studies, and that sort of thing. If we still had money enough for another salary, we might be able to hire someone else to organize our outreach, mission, and evangelism. In order to grow into a program-size parish, we need to staff programs like that to coordinate the efforts of larger groups of people. Right now, all of that is being done by very valiant volunteers, who simply cannot give it the constant and consistent energy that a larger parish population requires. On the other hand, with the right kind of faithfulness and giving, we might be able to offer such programs.

That was the message that I sat down to write. And it's still true. But another thought occurred to me as I was shaping those thoughts in my mind. And the thought begins with a memory. Early on in my priestly vocation, I was affronted by a woman who claimed that, as a priest, I was in "sales" for the church. I have never thought of myself as a salesman. I still don't. In business, I think I would make a lousy salesman.

But as I was preparing my remarks for today, I realized that, in a way, I am trying to sell you all something. I'm trying to convince you that giving more of your time, and money, and energy to God through Holy Nativity would create a better future for you. That's what salesmen do. They try to convince people that certain investments will create a better future. I'm simply selling an investment in a relationship with God Almighty. And it's a very uncomfortable position for me to be in.

But then I realized that there are two different kinds of selling. The first kind is when the salesman tries to manipulate you into buying something that you don't really need or want, all for his own profit. That's despicable. But the second kind is when you already need and want something, and the salesman comes alongside you and tries to help you figure out what the something is and just how to get it. That, at its best, can be a great act of charity and kindness.

Now the trouble here is that what I'm selling is something that everyone needs. But not very many people seem to want it. And I don't seem to have the gifts or skill required to convince people that they should. It is patently obvious and self-evident to me that a loving, positive relationship with the living Master of the Universe is a good thing to have. And I cannot really comprehend why so many people do not seem to want one. This is my failing.

But what I can do is be honest with you. I suspect that complete and costly faithfulness in worship and prayer and giving would result in a much better and brighter future for Holy Nativity Church as an institution. But I cannot promise you that it will. What I know is that complete and costly faithfulness in worship and prayer and giving will result in a much better and brighter future for Holy Nativity Church as a communion of believers, either in this world or in the next.

We would all love to see God work through Holy Nativity and do visible and exciting things here and now. But if I'm a salesman, that's not the product I'm selling. The product is this: You can live as a loving, intimate child of God, the creator of all that is. That's it. Here's the price tag: pray every day, join your brothers and sisters in worship at least every week, give at least ten percent of all your income to God through your church, study the scripture to know God better, and bring every aspect of your life into obedience to Jesus Christ. That's the price, and I cannot give you a discount.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.” I present this exquisite pearl to you every Sunday. You've found the pearl. You're standing in the shop, admiring it. I want you to have it. The only question is whether you want the product that I'm selling. It's worth everything you have. But if you refuse to buy it, I'm not sure there is anything I can say to convince you.