

Third Sunday after The Epiphany, Year C  
and Rector's Report of 2024

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on January 26, 2025

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 / Psalm 19 / 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a / Luke 4:14-21

*May the words of my mouth,  
and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in Your sight,  
O God, our strength and our redeemer.*

If you are visiting today in the hopes of hearing the words of Mariann Budde, Bishop of Washington, you will be disappointed. Today's sermon will be in the form of the Rector's Report for the Annual Meeting.

*The body does not consist of one member but of many.*

Today's Epistle is perfect for the day of our Annual Meeting. You have all read the Annual Report of our ministries during 2024, and in that report you no doubt saw the many members of this one body we call St Stephen's SLO. And this one body is a small part of a bigger body, the Diocese of El Camino Real, which is a small part of the bigger body that is The Episcopal Church, which is a small part of the bigger body that is the Anglican Communion, which is a small part of the bigger body, which is the Christian Church, the Body of Christ. What we do here is interconnected with what other Christians do, not only down the street, but throughout the world and throughout time.

Paul's use of the human body as a metaphor for how we live together in our life in Christ is not only useful in encouraging the whole congregation to be involved in the life of St Stephen's, it is a useful reminder that no one person is more valuable or less valuable than any other person.

The first half of 1 Corinthians 12 puts this beautiful metaphor of the body and gifts into the context that is so helpful for congregations. So, a little background

on this chapter. The Christians in Corinth were on fire for the Lord; they were an enthusiastic congregation of the Early Church. They were enthusiastic about using their Gifts of the Spirit, which led to them believing that those who used their gifts more or “better” were better Christians. So, it became self-serving self-satisfaction rather than a use of gifts for the good of the whole or for praising God. They were also ranking their Gifts of the Spirit, and in particular, placing the Gift of Tongues fairly high.

What happens when a group of people start ranking their importance and being self-serving? The group starts to break down. So, in steps Paul with this beautiful metaphor. He reminds the Christians in Corinth that they do not *own* their Gifts of the Spirit, and neither are they *achieved*. They are precisely *gifts of grace*, and they are to be used for the good of the whole in the praise and worship of God. Furthermore, all Gifts of the Spirit are of equal value.

And as I reference the Gifts of the Spirit that you read about in the Report, there are some activities of this body that did not end up in the Report, however, they are of no lesser value.

Under *Welcoming*, I’m inclined to include:

- The Leadership Retreat with Bishop. Some members of the Vestry and others from around the parish sat in a very hot room and learned more about ourselves: From a faith perspective: *Where do you come from, how did you get here and what keeps you here?* We had a similar conversation as a whole parish at the Ingathering in November. And you will read in the next issue of *The Witness*, the Vestry will engage the whole congregation in similar small group discussions. This is how we strengthen the congregation, by getting to know one another better, and it is how we gain confidence in sharing our faith story, which is how a congregation grows. So, please be open to the invitation and the conversation.
- We also cleared out the Treasurer’s Office. We put about a decade’s worth of records into archive, rearranged records and files that needed to be together, and cleaned out a bunch of unnecessary stuff. That was the

primary purpose. The added benefit is that it has made room for a request from CAPSLO to base their Downtown Outreach Team in that office. You will hear more about that in the coming months.

- And the separate organization of SLO Episcopal Campus Ministry lost Rev Jen Crompton as Chaplain when they took a call in Monterey. But, the Campus Ministry Board called a new Chaplain for 2025: David Bartholomew.

In *Worshipping*, I would like to note two achievements of 2024.

- Trevor Kimball undertook the Diocesan Lay Preaching Course. He will be certified in April after a residential retreat. And he will be preaching a couple of times a year and sharing his Gift of the Spirit. Trevor brings to this pulpit 3 theology degrees, 2 of which are from that inferior, rival University of Oxford, but as a Cambridge grad, I won't hold that against him too much!
- We also finished the Library Chapel! This has been a 2-year-long pet project of mine to give our collection to someone who will use it, and then make the space more useable by us and by our user groups. The collection mostly went to St Patrick's RC Seminary in Menlo Park. Then there was still a lot of stuff to clear out! Mostly from the first 13yrs of Campus Ministry. Some unused and bulky furniture was sold. The Parkfield Altar was moved in, and we began worshipping in there on Wednesdays during the winter months. Thank you to Lee Hollister, his crew and 15 students from CSU East Bay who painted the Library Chapel, the hallway and the Boydston Room this past Monday.

And notable under *Working*,

- The Vestry modified the format of our meetings for 2024. Every other month has been a conversation meeting. The Rector and Wardens bring one to three topics that require more conversation and presentation of information. After a brief period of Officers' reports, we spend an hour discussing those topics, identifying pros and cons, what requires more information, and then we determine our next steps. One of those topics

was discussed several times, and is today being brought to the whole congregation at the Annual Meeting.

I want to add here what we should be focusing our *Working* on and bringing more of our Gifts of the Spirit to. This tenet of our Mission Statement asserts:

*We share our abundance, we strive for justice, and we accept our calling to protect God's creation.*

I have for a long time asserted that where the mission and ministry of the parish overlaps with the priorities and needs of the community should be the focus of our engagement with the wider community. For San Luis Obispo, the priorities that I have seen in my 9yrs here are

- 1) alleviating the suffering of persons who are unhoused;
- 2) addressing the housing crisis (both Major City Goals);
- 3) alleviating food insecurity; and
- 4) addressing the mental health crisis.

No doubt, all four of those issues overlap in a Venn diagram. We financially support the Food Bank, Hospice SLO County, People's Kitchen and Transitions Mental Health Association. I attend a monthly meeting on homelessness hosted by the City. Grass Roots II, the Alzheimer's Association and the local chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness rent space from us, and outreach workers from 40 Prado will soon occupy some office space. All of those organizations fall under the top priorities I see within the City. We should be doing more. The Social Outreach/Social Justice Committee is currently 2 people. Let's bring more of your Gifts of the Spirit to that group in 2025 and get more engaged to better live up to the *Working* part of our Mission Statement. Be inspired by today's Offertory Anthem that you will soon hear.

So, what did the Rector part of the Body get up to in 2024? Worship and pastoral care are my top priorities; keeping the business afloat is my second priority. These sound like mutually-exclusive priorities, and they feel like it most of the time.

After several years of turning down the invitation, in April, I attended a CREDO conference. CREDO stands for Clergy Reflection, Education, and Discernment Opportunity, but it is also Latin for “I Believe”, the first word of the Nicene Creed. CREDO is hosted by the Clergy Pension Group of The Episcopal Church and is

*a program to give clergy a chance to pause their busy, demanding lives and focus on health and well-being through a discernment and wellness conference.*

It was an enlightening and enriching time, and I have brought some of what I have learned I need to do for my health and well-being into my ministry here.

In May, I spoke at Board of Supervisors’ Meeting in favor of the Welcome Home Village, which will help people transition from homelessness to long-term housing. It will be on Bishop Street at Johnson Avenue, so just a couple of blocks from my house.

Some of the activities I’ve done among the wider community in 2024 included:

- Continued on the Truman State University Alumni Board.
- Finished a term on the Board of the GALA Pride & Diversity Center.
- Continued *Playing With Food*, my monthly radio show on KCBX.
- Continued on the Common Ground Advisory Task Force assembled by the Superintendent of SLO Coastal Unified School District.

And within the Church, I continue to serve as Clergy Convener for the Deanery of San Luis Obispo, which means that I am Chief Cat Herder.

For my own continuing education, I am continuing my Spanish course. I’ve now done four 5-day residentials since 2021, followed by online courses with my teacher. I have certainly improved, and I was even able to lead worship and preach in Spanish when the priest from Santa Maria and I did a pulpit swap.

I have said several times since emerging from the pandemic that we are at an inflection point at which we must ask ourselves and answer the question: *Do we want to put in the work to become a thriving parish, or do we want to simply manage decline?* Those are really our only 2 options. There isn't a spectrum of options. We need to be deliberate, focused and ongoing in our approach to moving toward and maintaining a thriving St Stephen's Family. This is not solely the work of the Rector. This is not solely the work of the Vestry. It's the work of the Body of Christ, The Church, and that means each and every one of you and your Gifts.

The beginning of this work is the conversation in which you share how you got here that you started at the Ingathering and which the Vestry will engage with you again. You each have a story and Gifts of the Spirit. Sharing those with other people is how you make more members of this one body...with people who are seeking something deeper than what our consumerist culture has to offer, people who are seeking the love that we have to offer, which is Jesus' unquenchable love. Is the work required challenging, uncomfortable and scary? Yes! Is it achievable by this group of people, which includes you? Yes! As we prayed in the Collect:

*Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of His salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of His marvelous works.*

Let us believe in the prayers we pray.

So, 2024 was filled with good things! When you read the Annual Report, you see Gifts of the Spirit that are offered in order for the St Stephen's Body of Christ to continue its *Welcoming, Worshiping and Working*. Let's readily answer the call of Jesus in 2025 and use our Gifts to proclaim to all, the Good New of His salvation.

Thank you!

And amen.