



St. Andrew's
BY-THE-SEA
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
EST. 1928

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 13, 2020

A Charge to the Parish by the Reverend James J. Popham and Homily on the occasion of the Baptism of Oliver Matthew Amitrano

It's a big day here. In a few minutes we will formally welcome Matthew Oliver Amitrano into God's one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and the Episcopal Church and parish of St. Andrew's By-the-Sea, in particular. And after the service, we will remain gathered for our annual parish meeting. With so much crammed into one Sunday, we should expect a short sermon. And I have no intention of dashing those hopes. But first, grown-ups, tune out, while I talk to Oliver for a few minutes. Oliver, welcome to the club. Let me tell you a little about us:

We are not very exclusive. In fact, we strive to be totally inclusive. Jesus hung out with some pretty shady dudes. And we are called to imitate Christ.

We know that we all are sinners. That means we always are hesitant to judge others. We leave that to God.

We understand, as our ever eloquent presiding bishop says, that if it's not about love, it's not about God.

Jesus was very clear when he said that all the precepts of the law and all the exhortations of the prophets derive from and hang on the great commandments to love God and love our neighbors.

We accept that everyone is our neighbor. Jesus left no doubt that the people we look down on are our neighbors. In fact, Jesus said we should love even our enemies. And in a few minutes, your parents and sponsors will promise on your behalf that you will respect the dignity of every human being. No exceptions.

We know that all we need to know about God is found in a big book called the Bible. Now the Bible is not really a history book, or a rule book, or a science book. It is a story book that tells the greatest story ever told, the creation and ongoing relationship of God with creation and humanity, in particular.

We know that we find our identity as Episcopalians in the Book of Common Prayer. More than anything, it is how we worship that binds us together.

And 80 million members of the Worldwide Anglican Communion worship from essentially the same book.

We know that we have been blessed with memory, reason, and skill, and that we will come to understand God far more fully by asking hard questions rather than swallowing easy answers.

But more than anything, we know that God love us. God created us. God redeemed us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And God continues to support and inspire and empower and encourage us with God's Holy Spirit.

Most often in your early life you will experience God's love in the love of your parents, God parents, and family.

Finally, once you are in the club, you are in. You will be marked as Christ's own forever. And you will be reminded often that nothing can separate you from the love of God.

Got it? Any questions? You will, but that's one reason you have a mom and dad...and an entire Church community that will promise in a few moments to do all in their power to support you in your life in Christ.

Now I need to wake up the grown-ups, and you can chill for a few more minutes before we get on with the formalities.

It is our duty as rectors to issue a "charge" to the parish in anticipation of the parish meeting and recognition of the new church year that began two weeks ago.

What is a charge? Words like command, order, demand, direct, instruct, exhort, and enjoin come to mind. But they have a harsh edge to them. A better understanding comes from the eleventh edition of the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines charge as "entrust with a task or responsibility."¹ And our charge this morning is simple: Let us be the people, let us live as the people, let us act as the people, let us love as the people entrusted by God with the task of doing God's work.

Now St. Andrew's By-the-Sea became a prominent blip on our radar screen now 35 years ago. We know it has had its good times of great vitality and glory - and has had bad times of decline and despair.

But if we have learned anything about St. Andrew's it is that hope has never left the building. And, today, we stand only eight years away from our 100th anniversary. We are convinced that St. Andrew's not only will survive, but thrive. The foundation is there:

¹ *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2004) 238.

We strive for excellence in liturgy. David is an accomplished musical director and presence. Jo and I take our preaching very seriously. And we are well supported by a corps of able lay ministers. Yes, we are hamstrung by precautions necessitated by the pandemic, but we know that 2021 promises the possibility of gathering again as we once did.

We have an inviting and – happily in the midst of the current pandemic – spacious sanctuary. And improving the quality our internet streaming is at the top of our to-do list.

We are a spiritually mature congregation that understands that the Church’s work includes taking God’s love and presence to the community and the world. St. Andrew’s is one of only 600 recognized Jubilee Ministries among the over 7000 Episcopal parishes. Our Blue Door and Bike Shop ministries are well-established and well-known in our community. They offer the just the sort of community service with visible impact that millennials find appealing. And we care for the pastoral needs of our parish family as well.

Our administration is sound, and we have money in the bank. Not as much as we might like, and wild spending sprees are out of the question.

But we still have the ability to make some judicious investments in our ministries and visibility. And we may need to take some risks.

The Episcopal Church has been called the best kept secret in the country and in many communities – a title we need to shed. We are called to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. We can share the good news authentically. No puffing or spinning is necessary.

Yes, our culture is disinterested in, if not outright hostile to organized religion. But we are told, too, that our culture also is spiritually hungry. And what we have to offer is Christ’s message of love, peace, compassion, justice, and mercy, to say nothing of our Episcopal tradition of open-mindedness and inclusion.

We could go on. But what is so very encouraging is everyone’s hunger for and commitment to the success God intends for St. Andrew’s among the parishioners we have met.

So, our charge to you this morning is to remember who we are. And to remember whose work we are about. When we see all that we do as God’s work, we see it differently. Human endeavors are prone to failure. God’s endeavors tend to succeed. God made us stewards of creation and blessed us with memory, reason, and skill. God offers us the unlimited resource of God’s abundance. God intends for us to succeed.