When people in greeting you ask, “how are you,” how do you answer? “I’m fine, thank you?” “Good, and you?” Some other formulaic way? Probably that works, because these are just social formalities anyway. But sometimes, I feel the urge to say something more. To express just what a gift life is; what a gift it is to know and to live in the love of God. Sometimes, I’ll respond by saying something like, “How could I not be doing great? Look what I get to do every day. Look where I get to live and work. I know not everyone gets the opportunity to do what they love for a living, and I count it a great privilege that I do.” This is absolutely true for me—far more true than, “Fine, thank you.” Or “Good, and you?” I love my life, and I love my family, and I love my work... and I love this parish.

I’m sure you love this parish too, right? Raise your hand if you love Bethesda.

I love our worship and music. Hal Pysher, our choir, Father Burl, Mother Margaret, our non-stipendiary clergy, and all those who serve in our worship ministries offer all of us a tremendous gift don’t they? This really is the core of our life, and, I, personally, couldn’t imagine it any other way.

I love our education ministries. Greg Knight, Jessica Hitchcock, and a dedicated group of teachers and youth leaders offer a program that guides our young people to know God’s love and to live a life of kindness and good character. And they have a lot of fun, at the same time. Our youth pilgrimage to Assisi last summer provided just such an opportunity to grow together, learn about our faith, and push ourselves physically and mentally in new ways.

And the same is true for our adult education programs. If you don’t normally attend the Adult Forum and/or the Middle Way, I highly recommend it. The breadth and depth of offerings nurture faith far more deeply than mere social time, and we all need that, whether we admit it or not.

And what about outreach? We have been moving toward an outreach program centered less on being a grant-giving foundation and more on facilitating hands-on service; less on being a prominent “mover and shaker” in the community and more on being a servant in the community. Through our work at the St. George’s Center, Holy Redeemer, Opportunity, Inc., and others, we are providing opportunities for meaningful service to those in need. Are you joining in on this life-changing opportunity? If not, now may be the time to start.
I love all the ways we are learning to care for one another in Jesus’ name. Father Burl has recruited and organized our Shepherds, who you had the opportunity to meet during the Adult Forum last Sunday, to assist the clergy in broadening the avenues for care of one another in difficult times. And Deacon Clay and our Eucharistic Visitors take the sacrament from our Sunday liturgies to those who cannot make it to church, thereby extending our community out from here and connecting us all in that sacred feast.

And let’s not forget fellowship. With such enjoyable gatherings as our International Potluck, our Mardi Gras Chili Cookoff, our Parish picnics, and other events, we have the opportunity to get to know our fellow parishioners and to strengthen this community. Sure, these events may seem less “important” than outreach or worship, but we need to build those bonds of fellowship if we are to be the strong community of service and worship we are called to be. I am so grateful to Fred Staley and all those who organize our fellowship opportunities.

I love our most recent significant ministry initiative: Evangelism. Yeah, I know, we don’t all love the word. But you know what? We are learning what it means to walk on the Way of Love. We are learning how to share the love of God and to tell others about our faith. We are learning how to be more welcoming and inclusive. In the last two years we have seen a tremendous increase in new members and have seen those members get involved beyond just attending services. I hope each of us looks around to seek out newer members and to introduce ourselves to them whenever we’re here.

To have these amazing buildings and grounds in which to worship fills me with joy and with gratitude. People express to me all the time how much this place means to them, how just walking in fills them with peace, how they can just sense the presence of God here, how Bethesda is a “thin place” where the distance between this world and the divine realm almost disappears. Do you feel that way here? Raise your hand if you feel that our buildings with their beauty and transcendence help you feel close to God or just fill you with joy.

Of course, I can’t talk about how much I love this parish without taking a moment to thank our leaders who make this parish function and thrive:

Zach Shipley
Connie Purcell
Officers/Executive Committee
Vestry
Associates: Hal Pysher, Fred Staley, Burl Salmon, Margaret McGhee
Clergy: Canon Elizabeth Geitz, Frisby Hendricks, Cecie Titcomb, Clay Waddell
Staff
Rector’s Committee Chairs and members
Vestry Subcommittee Chairs and members
Working Group Leaders and members
Eli and Hannah

Now I need to draw your attention to an exciting and transformative project we are launching today. It’s called RenewalWorks. You’ve heard me talk about it, I hope. I need everyone to take this simple but thoughtful survey. It will take you between 15 and 30 minutes to complete and, when everyone’s responses are combined anonymously, it will provide us with a clear and validated picture of where we are spiritually and how we can become a more vibrant and lively parish in the coming years. We’ve got a fantastic group of parishioners, led by Beth Cole, Becky Myers, and Canon Elizabeth Geitz who will work with the folks at RenewalWorks to learn from the survey results and then shape future ministries based on that. Please, please,
when you get the email this afternoon, just take some time to complete this for me and for us. It will be well worth our time.

And as we learn from this survey, using it to refine and develop our ministries, we will discover even more to love about our community of faith here at Bethesda.

Here’s the thing about love, though. For Christians, at least, we know love is not merely that warm fuzzy feeling, that affection. True love must also be acted upon selflessly for the good of the beloved. We know this intuitively, don’t we? We know that if we just wait around for that warm feeling in our heart, the likelihood of experiencing it actually goes down. We begin to lose what we love when we don’t express our love in concrete action. We cannot just sponge off someone or some place or some group to get our needs met. Everything good in life is a relationship, and that includes our life of faith. We have a relationship with God and a relationship with our faith community. And make no mistake, while God’s love for you and me is absolutely unconditional and Bethesda’s welcome to all unabashed, God and Bethesda also unequivocally ask something of us.

Now, we understand this in myriad ways. In fact, this summer the Vestry, Associates, and other parish leaders began serious work on plans to build our endowments to better enable us to care for this beautiful place and to provide needed funds for new ministries in the future. We don’t want the significant financial burden and privilege of maintaining this place to hold back our ministries to one another and to the world. We came to understand that God is asking something big of all of us here: to ensure that this beautiful place works well for us and for generations to come.

In undertaking this work over the summer, we discovered a deep gratitude for what God has given us in this community. We actually wrote a short statement about the role of generosity in our faith. You see, when we experience God’s love, when we experience the loving welcome of a community, we cannot help but respond with generosity. It’s inevitable. I want us to take a few minutes to read this statement together.

**God’s Initiative**
The whole of creation is infused with generosity. The very act of creation in the Book of Genesis reminds us that our existence results from God’s imaginative desire for relationship and that God created humankind in that image of generous relationship. Throughout scripture, stories abound of humanity turning away from God’s loving ways and God constantly restoring and healing in acts of generous love. God’s initiative in reaching us when we turn away culminates in God’s ultimate act of generosity: the Incarnation. God creates, loves, forgives, and heals freely without asking anything in return.

**Life More Abundant**
As we broaden our vision to see the enormity of God’s love and God’s abundant gifts of creation and life, we become aware that we have more than enough to share. We begin to see that God’s infinite grace and generosity inspire and incite our own generosity. We begin to see that giving generously deepens us; it fuels our faith and spiritual growth. By learning to give freely and out of a sense of abundance, we enhance our own lives, our own experience of fullness and joy multiplying beyond measure. Generosity is a dynamic force, a gift from God, joy building upon joy, a circle that feeds on itself, sowing the seeds and reaping the rewards. Giving begets giving, as rain feeds the clouds, and it rains again.

**Holy Courage**
True generosity requires us to examine what is meaningful in our lives: where we place our priorities and how we nurture those priorities. Throughout scripture God assures us over and over again that we are never alone...
and that we have no need to be afraid. With the confidence of faith, then, we can boldly respond to God's generosity with our own generosity. We can do so assured of abundance and the freedom that comes with giving and serving God. God’s grace sustains us with holy courage, the blessed comfort that allows us to live fully into God’s call for our lives.

**Bethesda and Beyond**

Generosity is infinite; it is not limited by geographic scope or time and transcends both. As our practice of generosity deepens our faith and joy, Bethesda bears witness to the past and simultaneously calls us into the future. We are all the custodians of this legacy, and in this, God calls us into that greater awareness of generosity, of abundance, and of selflessness in order to steward this holy place. It is our privilege to care for what is now and what is to be.

You see, our leadership and I believe this framework about generosity arising from God’s loving us, provides the very best way to approach our life if we really want to know the fullness of God’s peace and joy.

Having said that, Zach Shipley reminds me that there’s a large group of people who just don’t see the world that way, whose approach to life and faith is perhaps a bit more transactional. As much as I wish everyone felt the way I do about this place, Zach’s clearly right.

While I want us to learn generosity, we need also to get real about our finances. Because I love this parish; because you love this parish, we’re going to have a bit of honest conversation. We heard from Matt Lorentzen the seriousness of our financial situation, and we must address it courageously and hopefully. We need to talk about how we pay for the Bethesda that we all say we love. At our meeting on Wednesday, the Vestry decided they wish to come stand here alongside me for this, and I invite them to come up here now.

This is an expensive ministry: the buildings, the music and worship, the education and so on. As we saw in the finance report, it costs millions of dollars to do what we do, to be the parish that we all love. And the fact is, we collectively have the financial means to do three times the ministry we’re doing, and yet we’re not providing adequate funding to cover our basic costs, let alone take on the new ministries we feel called to. Let’s get down to some brass tacks, then. Can we do that?

So, one of the things we often hear from people, especially when they’re upset that they can’t get tickets for Christmas Eve or Easter Day is that they put money in the plate, and that should somehow suffice.

So, let’s do the math for that, shall we?

Let’s be optimistic and imagine that everyone in church every Sunday puts $20 in the plate. Now, our ushers will tell you that’s definitely not the case, but let’s go with it. Our average weekend attendance is around 450, but let’s round up and call it 500. There are 52 Sundays in the year, right? So, if putting money in the plate were all we had, our budget would be...

$520,000 each year. Just so we’re clear, that doesn’t even open the doors of the building every day.

But wait, you say, what about Christmas and Easter. We’ve got all these other people who come those days. Surely that adds a lot to the equation, right? Fred, how much money came in the offering plates in total for Christmas Eve and Easter Day last year? $18,421? So, add that to the $520,000, and that still isn’t even one quarter of our budget.
Another common objection goes something like this, “Well, I only come to worship. I don’t want to pay for all those other things you do.” Do you know how much it would cost us if all we did was Sunday worship? Mind you, we still have to maintain the building, and we still need clergy and musicians to have the worship that we love. That total is a bit over $1.2 million. Let’s say we have around 1,000 households participating. If we divide just that amount by the number of households we have, that alone comes out to $1,200 per year per household. And by the way, that’s just not viable, you know. There’s no way, just no way, to have the glorious worshipping community we love without the whole package. Show me a thriving church that only has Sunday worship. They don’t exist. And frankly, just coming to worship and hoping that will keep one spiritually vibrant is rather like only eating blueberries and thinking that that will keep one physically healthy. It won’t.

Others insist that they’ll only give to support specific activities like outreach. But again, the problem with that is, we can’t do any of this without administrative support, without buildings and grounds support, without clergy. So, the math works out similarly.

Of course, all the time, all the time, people will say, well Bethesda is a wealthy parish, we surely have all the money we need in endowments. But you saw the numbers. Our endowments provided $433,698 last year to support our ministries. And while we intend to grow those endowments over the coming years, we don’t ever expect endowment income to fund all or even a majority of our annual costs.

Finally, there’s the objection that there are such wealthy people here, they’ll give really large gifts, and so I won’t have to give; or my gift just won’t matter. You know what happens when one of our very generous people dies? It takes 40 or so new pledges to make up for it. We cannot, we should not, rely on the generosity of our largest supporters. We should show our gratitude for their unfailing generosity by being as generous ourselves, within our means, of course, but not taking them for granted. Let me show you how lopsided this is for us. You can see how greatly we rely on so few people, and most of us, commensurate with our means could be sharing more fully in the joy of meaningfully supporting our ministry.

Now, let’ look at how this can work. We’ll always have a range of pledge amounts. But imagine if every household made and fulfilled a meaningful pledge. Not a token pledge of $50 or $100. A real pledge that was actually reflective of their means. Of course, we recognize, right, that we have some beloved parishioners for whom a $100 pledge is really generous, and I am profoundly grateful for those gifts. But most of us spend more than that on a dinner out every week without giving it another thought.

So, what if everyone gave up one or two meals out? In rough terms that would mean that all those giving below $1,000 would pledge $1,200. Then those giving between that and $2,500 would pledge $2,600. Then those giving between that and $5,000 would pledge $7,500 and those giving between that and $10,000 would pledge an even $1,000 per month. Our major givers are already carrying the bulk of the financial burden for us—just look at that top bar: 39 households provide almost $920,000. So, for this hypothetical scenario, we’re not going to change what they give, even though many of those folks increase their gift each year. Watch what happens. Without any new pledges, without leaning on our major givers more, if everyone increased proportionally, we would not have this budget crisis.

So, a dinner out. Is that really worth more than a vibrant parish? Do we really want to continue to avert our gaze and look down at the floor every time the subject of finances comes up in our parish family and hope that others will just keep footing the bill? This has to change friends. It just has to. Not simply for the sake of the budget but for the sake of our spiritual health and our sense of peace.
Today is the day to start fresh. Maybe you’re one who has never made a pledge. There are pledge cards in the pews and here in the Parish Hall. You can take one and fill it out right now and place it in the basket as you come up for communion. Or maybe you’re one who has made the same minimal, token pledge for years, never changing it, even though our costs continue to rise. Now is the time to throw that old pledge card away and change your approach to giving. Now is the time to make a financial commitment that reflects both your financial means and your love of this place. Maybe you already filled out your pledge and now want to change it. That’s fine. Just get another card, fill it out and make a note that it is a new pledge for the year, and we’ll sort it out.

I hate to say this, but I find the alternative sad and discouraging. If we can’t all step up now, we are going to have to rethink what Bethesda is as a ministry. We are going to have to see this as a call to scale back significantly. It will mean that by the end of this year, we will only have two full-time clergy. One of the three of us will have to go. It will also mean scaling back other staff. And don’t think that nothing else will change when we decrease our staff size. Oh no. We will have to rethink whether or not we can support our hands-on outreach ministries, the Middle Way, our paid choir, some of our youth and children’s ministries and other life-giving programs that we love. We will have less pastoral support for people when they are sick or in crisis. In fact, every area of our ministry: worship, education, outreach, fellowship, pastoral care, and evangelism will all look very different.

Now, I think there will still be lots to love about this place. I’m not saying this as a threat. I’m saying this to be clear about expectations. The days are just gone when parishioners can sit back and expect others to foot the bill. We cannot live beyond our means, and we will not do so.

I have to confess, that facing this crisis here is a moment where love hurts. Loving this parish hurts right now because it’s clear something is disconnected or disordered in our common life. There’s something seriously wrong when Bethesda-by-the-Sea, a parish with probably the largest capacity for financial support of any parish in the Episcopal Church has, as best we can tell, a median annual pledge that’s far lower than the national average. How does that happen? It feels like offering love that isn’t reciprocated, and that, for me at this time, pushes hard against my basic disposition of hope. Mind you, it doesn’t overwhelm the hope, but it’s definitely pushing against it.

And to be even more honest, I feel I have failed this parish. If our worship and preaching and education and care and service aren’t leading to joyful generosity, then I am failing to lead this parish to serve as a means to know God’s grace and love.

Now, as serious as this all is, I have to tell you, I do stay hopeful. As I indicated, I’m stressed about all this. It’s keeping me up at night. But I know God is great and can do great things in and through us. And I know that whatever changes here, whether that’s increased giving to continue our ministry as planned or that’s significant programmatic and staffing reductions to match people’s giving, I love this parish. And even if we are called to scale back, I’m confident that what we learn through our RenewalWorks survey, that we will all take this afternoon, right?? will help us prioritize ministries that will enable our spiritual vitality no matter what size budget we have. More than that, I believe that working faithfully to become an even more spiritually vital community will help build up our stewardship.

Facing this critical moment, I have to remind myself and you all that being a priest doesn’t make someone superhuman, able to solve every problem, heal every hurt, reconcile every difference. No, the priest’s role is to call every Christian to more closely follow Jesus. Their role is to remind all of us that our very best, most abundant, most joyful life lies in fully committing ourselves to our faith. No matter what happens here, no
matter how deeply moments like this hurt, I count it a tremendous joy to be your priest and rector. I long to see every person who walks through those doors know Jesus more deeply. I’m not a magician or a miracle worker. I’m a human being and follower of Jesus just like you. And neither I nor anyone else, can do what we need to do here at Bethesda alone. But you know what, we can do this together. I am sure of that.

So, jump in with me. Jump in out of a sense of obligation. Jump in because you feel you owe it. Jump in because your delight in this place demands it. Jump in because you realize that what you’re deriving from this place is worth a substantial pledge. Whatever the motivation, I really hope everyone will jump in in response to this crisis recognizing God’s unending, amazing love.

So maybe you’re one of the generous people who makes a significant pledge already and who faithfully increases the amount each year. What I would love for you to do is to share with others what joy supporting Bethesda brings you and how important it is for each of us to do so. If you’re willing to talk to others, to help us spread the word beyond those attending this meeting, would you let Bill Cini or Turia know? And, for those in this group, who make a meaningful, generous pledge and increase it each year, thank you. Thank you for leading by example and being a tremendous source of strength and encouragement for me, for our clergy, and for our vestry. Your steadfastness and generosity mean more than you know and more than I can express in words. Thank you.

Do you know what I really want? I want everyone to meaningfully support this place for whatever reason motivates them. I want us to be free of the anxiety or discomfort we so often feel when the subject of giving comes up. I want us to have the resources to do great things for God. And above all that, I want each person here to know at the core of their being that God’s love is unfathomably great for us, regardless of how much we love ourselves. That love of God, while freely given, asks everything of us, and if we really think about it, even our giving everything doesn’t come close to what God gives us. That’s exactly what one of my favorite hymns says. Do you know the hymn, When I survey the wondrous cross?

As we close this meeting and head into worship, I want us to do so having sung and prayed these words. As we sing, and as Father Burl says a closing prayer, let’s each ask for the grace to truly mean these words and for the grace to act on them with courage, with gratitude, and with generosity, so that our priorities and choices actually reflect our love of God and our love of Bethesda. Thank you.

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my life, my soul, my all.