**20 Pentecost, Oct. 26, 2014, Deut 34:1-12l Ps 90; 1 Thess 2:1-8; Matt 22:34-46; Rev. Mary S. Trainor**

The bench and I were good buddies back then. It was a hockey team I was a member of, there were lots of members. I loved hockey -- but I was not very good at it, and rarely actually played. This was the only team sport I ever played--it was before Title IX....so the team sport experience is only associated with bench sitting for me. I was more of a spectator than a player. Maybe you spent time on "the bench" and can relate.

What kind of member are you on the St. John's team? Pews are kind of like benches. When we come to church and sit in the pews, are we bench sitter spectators? Is it an experience like going to a game, the movies or a concert: sitting and watching --- or is it participatory? Today is a special day when we celebrate the church community here at St John's. What an amazing bunch of people assemble here to praise the Lord! Today's Scripture readings bring us to ponder about what church is to us.

What is church? Why do people come to church? Why are we here today? Church is not a building or a denomination, but rather is the local gathering of people who have put their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. Some people come to church because that is what they have always done on Sundays or because the mean voice of a parent emerges in their brains if they consider not going. But we are now entering a new time, like in the early church, when people go to church because they see the value, they **want** to go to church. Church is a place to experience and learn about God's love up close. Church is a refuge, as it says in Psalm 90 today: "...***you have been our refuge from one generation to another***." And, we are to have fun here, we are to experience the "***joy of the Lord***" (Nehemiah 8:10). Bishop Matt emphasized the importance of joy in his annual address to us yesterday -- you can watch it on the Diocesan website.

Church is like a "holy huddle." A huddle is defined as "**a team gathering together, usually in a tight circle, to strategize, motivate, or celebrate**." In a huddle, the team captain inspires fellow team members, and here in this "holy huddle" our team captain is Jesus, who gives us life, joy, hope, redemption. He is our teacher, redeemer, sanctifier, friend.

There has been some bad news lately, on the local level and on the national and international levels; news that is hard to take. After listening to it, we can have a sense of lack of control, of discouragement. People are craving good news. Church is about good news in the midst of reality; the word Gospel means "good news." In spite of the bad news in the world, Jesus is here giving us good news. Church is not just one more demand on our time or one more consumer commodity. This is THE place where our lives can find meaning. As others see us turn to God, they will ask questions and wonder, and come and see....and the church will be here as the guiding light. One of the sources of good news at church is that we are each valued players; "***you are God's chosen one, holy and beloved***" (Col 3:12). God's plan for you is not to sit on the bench--you were picked as a first string player without a try out, just because you are you! God puts in each church community the gifts needed to do the work we have been given to do (Romans 12:5-8; Eph 4:12-13). Whether it be worship or fellowship or potlucks or service or prayer, each of us is an essential player: that is God's plan. We just have to show up and serve, and together we form a community.

Church is THE place where we learn how to follow those two commandments Jesus talked about in today's Gospel: "***You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind....You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*** These two encompass all the commandments! They are big, and they are not easy to keep. We have much to distract us from God and we sometimes have difficulty loving each other. Community is not easy, yet God calls us to get along with one other, even if we don't agree. As we live by Jesus' commandments, we give up the need to get back at others, hold grudges. It's a process; and as time goes we will become more Christ-like, be transformed. As Paul said in our 1st Thessalonians reading this morning we are to be "***gentle...deeply car(ing)....share our own selves.***" Sister Joan Chittister writes that through the church: “**we can become more than we can even begin to imagine for ourselves**.”

We need help in learning how to do this, and church does that for us! Martin Luther said, "**Apart from the church, salvation is impossible,"** meaning that we can't fulfill what it means to be a Christian apart from being part of a church. Oh church does not provide salvation, God does; but church is the mechanism/the community that helps us connect to Jesus, and in the process God equips us. And, it is not boring! In fact, it is really exciting - as well as full of joy. Author Annie Dillard said, " **churches are *(like)* children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets....Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’  straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."** In other words, what we do here is significant, surprising, transforming; the power of the Lord is really here!

Church is like a "**holy huddle**" we are all invited to be part of, and Jesus is the quarterback and coach, strengthening us to live out our faith. No one is on the bench, we are all part of this -- and it is not a game, it is real, it is wonderful, it is eternal. God's love is transforming. Church is our anchor for the storms of life. Through church we are led to lives of purpose way more meaningful than we could imagine! Oh yes, we are all invited into this personal relationship with Jesus Christ, we are all vital members of the team!

Let us close by praying together 3 prayers: Prayer # 8, 10,11 for the Mission of the Church, the Diocese, and the Parish on page 816+817 in the BCP.

8. For the Church's mission: Everliving God, whose will it is that all should come to you through your Son Jesus Christ: Inspire our witness to him, that all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hop of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

*10. For the Diocese:* O God, by your grace you have called us in this Diocese to a goodly fellowship of faith. Bless our Bishops Matt and other clergy, and all our people. Grant that your Word may be truly preached and truly heard, your Sacraments faithfully administered and faithfully received. By your Spirit, fashion our lives according to the example of your Son, and grant that we may show the power of your love to all among whom we live; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

*11. For the Parish* Almighty and everliving God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Strengthen
the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*