

**ST. TIMOTHY'S HISTORY DAY
ST. TIMOTHY'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI
John C. Danforth
May 6, 2018**

It's a great honor to preach on the 50th anniversary of St. Timothy's becoming a parish. Since Marvin invited me, I've thought a lot about what I might say. It seemed to me that recounting the past wouldn't quite do it, and that it would be better for us to reflect on who we are today and how we might be a ministry to the broader community going forward.

We just read the Great Commission that the risen Lord gave a particular people at a particular time. He said nothing to them about tending their own souls. He told them to go into the world as it then existed, and to change that world.

On this 50th anniversary of our parish, I'd like to think with you about St. Timothy's and the time and place in which we live. Let's think about how we at St. Tim's might change the troubled world of 21st Century America, and let's create a plan to do that.

First, who are we? What makes St. Tim's special? What do we have to offer the world beyond our own walls?

St. Timothy's started as a mission church in 1961 when 30 people met here in a converted farm house. I arrived in the summer of 1966 as supply clergy between the vicarages of Bill Thomas and Ernie Hunt. The surrounding area was largely farm land. The building then bore no resemblance to what we have today. Our sanctuary and parish hall didn't exist. The layout of the worship space then can best be described as weird. It was a rectangular room, bisected by a center aisle, with the congregation horizontally arranged on each side of the aisle. The pulpit was immediately behind the altar. Looking straight ahead, the preacher saw the aisle,

so making eye contact with the horizontally arranged congregation was like watching a tennis match.

No one would have come here for our architecture. They came here for our warmth. We were upbeat, enthusiastic, and we cared about one another. Worshipping here was more about the collective us than about each individual me.

Physically, St. Timothy's has changed dramatically and for the better. What remains constant is our warmth. As then, we are a community of people who care about each other and want to be with each other.

Here's evidence of who we are. When we at St. Tim's exchange the peace, we really exchange the peace. It's a hubbub, a mini-coffee hour in the middle of the service. And it's great! Sometimes Marvin tries to call us to order. That's his job. Eventually, we have to get on with the service. But, the way we exchange the peace is who we are.

I think that the peace can be more than the way we relate to one another within the confines of our sanctuary. Exchanging the peace can be our way to change the world. It can be our gift to a broken nation that needs us.

Why does America need us?

Here's a small fact that points to a big problem. After the 2016 presidential election, 33 percent of college students blocked or unfriended on social media people with whom they disagreed. In effect, they said, "Because we don't agree, I'm not your friend." Post-election, some families couldn't share Thanksgiving. Recently, two couples I know had dinner at a restaurant. When the subject of abortion came up, one couple stormed from the table. Spurred on by 24 hour news channels, Twitter and blogs, America is in a perpetual state of rage. Now

suppose that in the midst of this all out political warfare, we at St. Tim's make it our ministry to exchange the peace.

We wouldn't do in the outside world exactly what we do in church. We wouldn't say, "The peace of the Lord be always with you." In a secular setting, we might simply say to a political opponent, "I am your friend." What a difference we would make in changing the tone of politics.

Let's try an experiment. Picture someone you can't stand. It might be a hot tempered neighbor, or an obnoxious personality on Fox News or CNN. Now go up to that person, put out your hand, and say, "I am your friend." What have you done? You have changed the culture.

There's a word that's recently gained a lot of currency: tribal. You see it all the time. Amy Chua has written a new book called Political Tribes. Here in a nutshell is her point.

Everyone in America today feels threatened. African Americans fear that their children will be shot by police. Mexicans are threatened with deportation. Muslims are told their religion should be barred from the country. Women are abused by workplace predators. Poor whites feel left behind by a country that calls them "trash." Religious conservatives are threatened by popular culture.

Amy Chua notes that when people feel threatened, they retreat into tribalism. They identify passionately with their group, and they see outsiders as the enemy. Not long ago, inclusivity was a great liberal value. In 2004, Barack Obama expressed this well: "There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America." That lofty principle has given way to identity politics. The claim is that if you aren't one of us, you don't understand what it is to be us. In current parlance, you're not "woke." Even worse, you are complicit in a rigged, oppressive system.

On college campuses, boycotts and violence greet speakers. The rationale is, “If I don’t agree with you, I don’t have to listen to you.” Some assert that controversial words are violent, and justify physical violence against speakers.

Left wing tribalism leads to Newton’s third law, equal and opposite reaction, in the form of right wing tribalism. People who have been berated as bigots respond in kind. A lot of them are Trump voters.

That is where we are in America today. We are tribal, divided and enraged. The media stirs up this rage. It grows ratings. So do politicians. It wins elections.

But we need not be stuck where we are. We don’t have to be permanently tribal. The great genius of America has been to hold together all kinds of ethnicities and beliefs in one country. E Pluribus Unum. We are many people, and we are one.

Amy Chua concludes her book with a message of hope. She notes that, “All over the country there are signs of people trying to cross divides and break out of their political tribes.” She tells of Unitarians and Bosnian Muslims who watched the Super Bowl together in Utica, New York. In Hackettstown, New Jersey, after the last election people on both sides came together just to be with each other. They adopted a slogan, “Make America Relate Again.”

If people in Utica, New York and Hackettstown, New Jersey can find creative ways to overcome tribalism, why can’t we the people of St. Timothy’s make it our ministry to overcome tribalism in St. Louis? It’s simply a matter of us being to our neighbors who we are among ourselves: people who exchange the peace.

How, then might we translate who we are into a ministry that changes the world? Here are some ideas that you may think are good or not so good. My reason for offering them is to get us thinking, and hopefully to move us forward toward a more transformative ministry.

First, we could explicitly define ourselves as people who exchange the peace. We could make it our motto. We could announce it on our website and in print. The ministry of exchanging the peace would be more than an occasional thought and more than the work of a few interested members. It would be the mission of the entire parish, and it would always be consciously before us.

Second, we could better understand the world in which we minister and hope to change. We've already had an all parish read. We could have a book club. There are a lot of good books about the current state of America. I've already mentioned Amy Chua's Political Tribes. Another recent book is Yuval Levin's The Fractured Republic. Then there's J.D. Vance's Hillbilly Elegy and Bill Bishop's The Big Sort.

And, of course, there's our regular adult forum where presenters could help us understand America today.

Third, we could create and execute an action plan for exchanging the peace. A clergy friend once told me that he had never attended a clergy conference that didn't end with resolutions to write members of Congress. That's fine, but more than asking someone else to do something, what are we going to do?

We're off to a good start in this regard. We have an active ministry of racial reconciliation. Marvin belongs to an interfaith group that builds relationships among faith communities. But if we define ourselves as a people who exchange the peace, there will always be more work for us to do. If Muslims in our community feel that they don't belong, what are we going to do about it? If gays and conservative Christians fear one another, what are we going to do about it? If African Americans are afraid of the police, what are we going to do about it?

If poor whites think that the culture treats them like rubes, what are we going to do about it? If evangelicals think there is a war against their religion, what are we going to do about it?

I don't know the answers to these questions. But surely, we can do something. As people who exchange the peace, we should do something. As people commissioned by the risen Lord to change the world, we must do something.

It's up to us to figure out what that something is, and then to do it. What an exciting time to be the people of St. Timothy's!

I'm going to close by asking you to pick up the prayer books in your pews, and turn to page 833, and find the prayer attributed to St. Francis. Let's read it silently, and let it sink in. Then, let's say it together.

Lord, make us, St. Timothy's, the instrument of your peace. Amen.