

February 21, 2010

Dear People of Grace,

For twelve and a half years this parish has fed my soul. You have given me hope and shared the precious moments of your lives with me. You have trusted me to speak to you of God, of love, of brokenness, of joy, of suffering, of fear and of hope. You have trusted me to hold your newborn children, to teach your children, advise your sons and daughters as they planned to marry and to bury your husbands, wives, your parents, your children and your dearest friends. You have come to me when your marriages were breaking up, when you found out about that diagnosis you dreaded and when you lost your job. Serving as your priest has been an extraordinary privilege. And you sang and rejoiced with Jim and with me at our wedding. You cared for me when my loved ones have died. You celebrated when I was nominated to be Bishop of Virginia and more touching, you celebrated even more when I was not elected.

When the Vestry called me to be Priest in Charge in 1997, and then Rector in 2000, their vision was to grow the church in numbers, especially young families with children; in depth of spirituality and in outreach to the community. Their belief was that God had begun a good thing here at Grace and their hope was to continue the good work and expand it.

Grace Church is blessed with talented, committed and faithful leaders. Together we have worked hard to fulfill that call. As I reread the issues of the Gracevine, the Sunday Announcements and the Annual Reports, I am thrilled by the health of the parish that is obvious in the Annual Report. I am thrilled by the children who have been formed and shaped in their relationship with God as they gather around the altar and certainly by Little Graces Preschool that will begin its 10th year in September. We have been intentional about opening the Vestry elections to the whole parish membership and about maintaining transparency through the Gracevine, Sunday Forums, regular financial reports and the Annual Report. We have been blessed by the generosity of those who have provided funds necessary to build our almost ten-year-old office and class room wing and the clergy and music staff to build programs and worship opportunities. We are debt free and have pledged to continue the restoration of our beautiful sanctuary. Throughout these years my door has been open to all. I am deeply grateful for everything we have accomplished but know well that there is so much more for this parish to do, more people to welcome and care for, more children to support in their life in Christ, more prayers to pray, more hymns to sing, more understanding and wisdom to be gained, more relations to build.

All of that being said, I do not believe that any organization should be under the leadership of any individual for an unlimited period of time. My commitment to myself twelve and a half years ago was to stay at least nine years. We passed that several years ago and now it is time for me to retire from full time parish ministry, though not being rector of this wonderful parish will be a profound loss in my life. Retirement calls not because I am burned out or have any particular health issues and certainly I am not bored. As I have said to so many of you, from my heart, I love what I do. I love who you and God have invited me to be here. I deeply love this parish family and this diocese. But I will be 67 this year. I have been at Grace for twelve and a half very significant years and ordained since 1986. The timing is right for Jim and me and I believe the time is right for you to begin the process that will lead you to call the next rector to lead you into the next phase of life at Grace Church – to meet the challenges and the joys you will face in the coming years.

May 30th of this year will be my last Sunday at Grace Church.

My prayer is that during these transition months we will remain good stewards of the Grace we have been given and honor the commitments we have made to one another. We will keep Lent faithfully and celebrate the Great 50 days of Easter with the joy that comes with the promise of new life. During that time we can also be intentional about telling each other what we have appreciated and what could have been better. When the time comes to say good bye – and this is not that day – I want our parting to celebrate our life together, knowing that you have become a precious part of my life and you will always be in my heart and prayers. I will always be a part of the story of Grace Church, The Plains, and you will always be part of my story. I am deeply grateful for that. Because of that affection, I want us to say farewell gracefully, thoughtfully and with intentionality. Intentionality about saying farewell allows us to move ahead into the next phase of our lives in a healthy way, so that you can welcome your new rector with grace and so that Jim and I can move into the next phase of our lives together also with grace.

When the time comes, I know I will be leaving you in good hands with Matt serving as Associate Rector; Eric as Organist and Choir Director; and Alan as Senior Warden, a strong Vestry in place and most importantly, a loving God whose spirit fills this community. Please understand that during these next three months, I will work as hard as I can, and continue to serve you as you and God have called me to serve. Meanwhile, the Wardens and Vestry will be working with the Reverend Canon Susan Goff, Diocesan Canon to the Ordinary, on the process of calling a new rector to lead what I believe is one of the finest parishes in the diocese. For Grace Church it is a time to continue on this journey, moving forward, deepening your relationship with God and with one another and engaging in the mission God has called this parish to do as faithful followers of Christ our Lord.

My prayer is that we will all continue to be open to new hopes, new dreams, new possibilities as we continue to allow God to work in each of us and through this wonderful community in which we have experienced God's abundant grace and yet again.

Faithfully and with my love.

The Reverend Caroline Smith Parkinson, *Rector*