

As I was getting ready to preach this morning, I stumbled on an old spreadsheet, the one Becca and I used to plan our wedding. It was fun to relive the guest list and reception menu, but what stuck out was the huge pile of work that went into that day. I guess I'd forgotten what it took. People gathered from all over the country, some from even farther. We organized the right number of beds for the right number of guests. We even made sure no previously married couples got rooms next to their exes.

But my favorite story about preparing for that wedding came from my own Bachelor of Arts brain. I decided to fold 1,000 paper cranes to hang all around the venue. My sister found a frayed old dictionary with 1,400 tea stained pages. I figured one crane per page. At that rate, I could mess up a few times and still end up with plenty. So, I started folding months ahead of time. Sometimes I tossed out a square when a dictionary word wouldn't make the cut, like philanderer or divorcee or, since I knew I was marrying up, to settle. Once censored and folded, each delicate beauty landed in a giant Hefty bag. I finished about five days before the wedding, but I had this sneaking suspicion that something wasn't adding up. So I dumped out all those cranes and counted. I figure by now y'all with Bachelor of Science brains know where this is going. You see, a 1,400-page dictionary does not have 1,400 pieces of paper. It's only got half that 'cause they're numbered on both sides. I did not have 1,000 paper cranes give or take a few mistakes. I had 700. I was so sure I had it right, and not just right but right with some wiggle room!

Most of y'all know that I like to plan and organize well ahead of time. I figure, if I can plan diligently, then when Murphy's Law shows up and something goes wonky, I'm ready. Everything else can run itself while I focus on the doorknob that fell off, or at least find Ed so he can take care of it. Y'all, we've been planning diligently every week since the Parish Picnic back in August. Dianne, I don't have a clue how many hours you've poured into rehearsals and music selection and conversations with families. And choir, y'all are doing an amazing job filling this place to the rafters. Altar Guild, your work's among the most visible on display at the focal point of our service, but you do your work invisibly. I wish more folks knew how much you do. Flower Children, this church is beautiful, but I'm amazed every time a new arrangement embellishes the space. Who knew it could get even prettier in here? Y'all did, of course, and you've made sure the rest of us get to enjoy it, too. Readers and Eucharistic Ministers and Ushers; Zoom workers and Sunday Schoolers and Fiddlers; Susan, and Ed, and Leah, and Barb, our services couldn't happen without you showing up and all the prep you do before you arrive.

And Parish Life, my god, you folks have gotta be beat. Millie, Linda, Joan, Gina, and all the folks whose work I never see (and the ones I do and regrettably have slipped my mind), you've kept us fed and happy and magnified joy every time we gather here. Since the end of August, Parish Life has put on our outdoor Parish Picnic, the Annual Meeting feast, the Jazz Eucharist Special Coffee Hour, and no fewer than four funeral receptions. On top of that, they served hundreds of meals at Friendship Inn and made sure we had refreshments after church every single Sunday. Every one of those events required hours of prep work, more cooking than an Army canteen, an Olympic event's worth of chair stacking, and so many gallons of coffee, it'd give a horse the shakes. I know there are folks I'm forgetting who've put in extra work this year. I apologize. Vestryfolk've stepped up, Buildings folks, and all the rest of y'all, too. Even just getting here on a Sunday can be work. The wrestling match to get the kids ready, the debate when the alarm goes off on the one day you might could sleep in, the internet wrangling when Zoom is the better option, it's all taxing, and yet y'all keep showing up. There's always something funky to make the day harder than it should be. But that's what all this preparation's for. It

smoothes the way in places we anticipate need smoothin', and it leaves room to focus on the places we can't. And yet, you keep coming. Thank you.

Now, I gotta admit, looking at that "Kingdom of Heaven is like" story from Jesus, I see a lot of St. Thomas' in the first half. The folks that Jesus says have got the right of it, that's us. On our best days, we are what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. But I don't love the second bit, the part where there's folks that didn't do their job of preparing so they're out of luck. I mean, sure, I shouldn't suffer because you forgot to bring extra lamp oil, but it still makes me sit funny. Because there's a whole lot of St. Thomas' that would rather give up their seat or split the last donut with you. Shoot, we even keep reading glasses at the back in case you forgot yours. I told you we're prepared. The truth is, I wish Jesus's parable was about helping each other so none of us miss the bridegroom's arrival. But it's not. It's about being prepared or not being prepared at your own peril. At St. Thomas', you can rely on the kindness of the stranger, but that's not the case everywhere. Here, yes, you can find a whole lot of kind people, and we'll make space for you to come back and get it right next week. But when the Kingdom of Heaven comes, we all need to be ready regardless of where we are. And what does ready look like? I don't know. I mean, if I think of yesterday and the many ways this church honored her former priest, we sure were ready. Along with the hundred people filling the pews, I'm pretty sure Jesus showed up, too. And when he did, I'm pretty sure he got the welcome he deserved. Even on that sad occasion, the Kingdom of Heaven was well-prepared. I don't know if that's it. I don't know if that's enough. And "enough" is a mighty scary word. I already mentioned the enormous amount of work y'all've been doing. I think we have done enough, at least for now. And we've all earned some rest. It might even be time to turn out our lamps for a minute, or at least sneak in a nap!

Today, our Stewardship Drive comes to a close. We've heard some beautiful appeals, we've sent out letters, we've collected a few returned cards already. Even if you have sent in your cards, though, I'd like to ask y'all to do something. Take some time today and over the next few days, weeks, or months -- however long it takes -- take some time and see if you can't find a place to step into St. Thomas' a little closer. The seen and unseen volunteers' lamps are still burning bright, but even if they wouldn't admit it themselves, they could use someone fresh to tag in. Maybe you can help in the kitchen, the sacristy, the choir loft. If you're like me and are mostly devoid of marketable skills, maybe you can help stack chairs and fold bulletins. And if you're swamped right now preparing for your own obligations, that's ok. But remember us, and when your life opens some space maybe step in closer then. And if you just need to ride the pews for a while, that's fine. We're prepared for that, too.

Back when I was getting ready for my wedding and making basic mathematical errors, I was in a difficult spot. I had five days to fold 300 cranes, and I was fresh out of dictionary pages. I didn't know what to do, but my friends stepped up. They didn't know how they needed to be ready for the wedding, but they knew to be ready. So I sat, surrounded by people I loved, and we folded for days. One of 'em found my crossword puzzles and made cranes from those. One found colorful paper at a craft store. Another pilfered through recycling bins for discarded newspapers. We folded until our joints locked up, but you know what? We got 'em finished. And the day was gorgeous, and the cranes looked perfect, and nobody knew.

I still have some paper cranes at the house. They remind me of the marriage I entered that day, but they also bring back images of helping hands, of preparations gone wrong, and of the joy of working with people I love. I don't have any cranes from St. Thomas', but I do have you. And I have the many, many works we've done together and the beauty of preparation behind each one. Y'all, I don't know what we're preparing for, but with your faithful diligence I do know, whatever it is, when Christ shows up, he's gonna get the greeting he longs for and the love he wants for us. He's also gonna get a red welcome folder, an invitation to come back next week, and a take-home box of sandwiches and cookies. It's no oil for a lamp, but it'll do.