

JOANNE TOLD ME
"MY FRIEND LOVES HER CHURCH"

Rev. Robert Close

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

We are an open and inclusive spiritual community seeking to practice the radical hospitality of Jesus. We welcome all people regardless of age, race, ability, sexual orientation, marital status, social class or religious affiliation. Together, we are exploring how to be in true communion with God and true community with others. (These are powerful words from your web site. I love them. This is such a unique and compassionate community of faith.)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be of you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

First, I would like to ask everyone in the congregation to stand, except for Ethel. During these months of transition Ethel has been the center tent pole for this church covering so many bases. Let's express our love and appreciation. She is hard worker, inspiring, and she is fun to be with.

Secondly, I would like to try something new. This is a "*beholding exercise*." I invite you to stand and to turn to your neighbor in the pew, maybe join hands, look one another in the eye, and prayerfully say "*How wonderfully you manifest the spirit of life*." And do it with maybe two or three other people. As noted in the morning bulletin: "*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*"

Now about the sermon title. Yes! It is quite a unique sermon title. Didn't learn this in seminary. But it is true. It explains how Nina and I came to visit your church. You see, it was last November and we were at a birthday party for our good friend Mary Eggers and the woman sitting across the table from us, Joanne, said: "*My friend loves her church... SPC*." I have been a Presbyterian minister for almost 49 years and it is rare to hear someone saying such a positive thing about their church.

Think about it, how often have you heard someone say "*I love my church?*" When you break it down, a member of this church said something to Joanne that was so powerful that she then passed on the word about SPC to Nina and myself. And that's how we got here to find this wonderful church of yours.

Presbyterians are a little shy about the E word -- evangelism. There's a story... "*Knock Knock! Who's there?*" You open the door, and the person says nothing. That might be a Presbyterian. I invite you to think about your love for this community of faith. In what ways might you reach out and say a good word about the life and mission of this community of faith?

I think there are many people looking for a community of faith that is such a free and open and safe space. Nina and I are happy to have found this church, and it all started with that one person who wishes to remain anonymous.

So, this morning I want to talk about why Nina and I have come to love this church. One of the first things we noticed was this message of *WELCOME*. This sign is prominent. Everyone is welcomed here, No exceptions. Look at your powerful mission statement.

The power of welcome. This church has it!! Often visitors are timid about going to church these days. They inwardly ask: *Is this a safe place for me?* SPC is more than a safe place. It is a welcoming place. There is something special about this sanctuary that welcomes and embraces and that something special is in the hearts of each one of you.

Moving on from the WELCOME message, I draw your attention to the cross. Think about it -- the vertical beam runs from heaven to earth for each one of us letting us know individually that we are loved. The horizontal beam connects us to all other beings on the planet whom we are to love as we love ourselves. I have no trouble making the sign of the cross. Catholics and Episcopalians have no franchise on the sign of the cross. When you make the sign of the cross you are telling yourself that the mystery we call God loves you, and that God loves everyone. No exceptions.

We are acknowledging that we are blessed, and that we want to live our lives so as to be a blessing to others. These words come to mind. You are not the giant of your dreams, nor the dwarf of your fears. You are a part of the whole, with a share in its purpose.

Moving on to the pulpit, one notes the symbol for the Presbyterian Church. We see the dove representing the spirit, the open Bible, flames of fire, and all of this is next to the table where all are welcome. Everyone is invited. **Luke 13:29** *People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.* Behold how pleasant it is when people dwell in peace and unity. And here we celebrate communion. We celebrate our at/one/ment, our *come union* with God, with one another, with all creation.

And then I draw your attention to the choir and especially to Kari. The music of the church is meant to heal, comfort, inspire, and empower us to go out into the world. To love and to serve others. This is a place of prayer, a school of love. Often we are given homework. We are to take something of which we receive here and take it out into the world with us.

I notice that at the end of the service a candle is lit, a symbol of our taking the light and the love of God out into the world with us. We come to worship - we leave to serve.

Finally, I draw your attention to the words of Marcus Borg: *"The Christian life is not about pleasing God the finger-shaker and judge. It is not about believing now or being good now for the sake of heaven later. It is about entering a relationship in the present that begins to change everything now. Spirituality is about this process: the opening of the heart to the God who is already here."*

About the opening of the heart. John Calvin's symbol for the church was a heart on fire with love for God, for all others, and for all creation.

Let us pray: *Give me a candle of the spirit, O God, as I go down into the depths of my own being. Show me the hidden things. Take me down to the spring of my life, and tell me my nature and my name. Give me the freedom to grow so that I may become my true self – the fulfillment of the seed which you planted in me at my making. Amen.*