

Dear Friends,

**I**t is hard to believe that Christmas is upon us. It seems that we were battling the hurricane, the heat and humidity just the other day. As I look back upon the year I am filled with gratitude. God has blessed me and he has blessed our community. What a wonderful place Shepherd of the Hills is.

If we reflected the world in which we live, we should be rather grim. Threats of war in Korea and the Middle East, political turmoil in Washington, hurricanes coming ashore in Florida, Texas and Puerto Rico coupled with the shootings and terror attacks that blight our nation, have soured many. Yet, in the midst of all of this Shepherd of the Hills remains a beacon of light. We know that God is in charge in this world — and that we should not be afraid.

Susan and I have had some difficult times this year, caring for my parents in their illnesses and for our college-aged daughters. Hospitalizations and traffic accidents were almost routine at one point. Yet as I write my parents' health has stabilized and we could not be more proud of our two daughters. Claudia is set to graduate summa cum laude from the University of Florida this coming spring while Laura will receive her BSN degree from Emory University. She has already begun working as a neo-natal technician at the Atlanta Children's Hospital and upon graduation hopes to enter their residency program for neo-natal nurses. We are so very proud of them.

True, there are some things that remain unfinished in my life. Susan reminds me that the a/c unit for the station wagon is still in pieces on the floor of our garage. But I promise I will get to it, once I put the transmission back together. But I am a man happy with my family, my work and filled with the joy of Jesus Christ.

And it is this joy that I see every day in the life of our parish. Yesterday I visited a woman at the hospice house, four people at Citrus Memorial and three at Citrus Rehab next door. Some have had good news, some have not. Yet I witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the hearts of each one of these people and their families. We pray together, we hope together, and we try not to worry. Friends — their is a joy to be found even in the crises of life — how blessed I am that I am able to witness this almost every day as I visit amongst our congregation.

I received a note yesterday from a former parishioner, Betty Z., who worshipped at the 5 p.m. service before she moved to Lakeland this summer. Her note aptly summarizes why Shepherd of the Hills is different. She wrote:

“This is best said in letter form rather than in person, as I would be crying. I'll try to keep it concise. I was raised Catholic — grade + high schools and even college. By my 20s, I started to stray from church, but not my faith, so much. We lost a pastor that I loved, his sermons touched me. His replacement left a lot to be desired, & I know that it shouldn't base my church attendance on the preachers, but the message they convey with the sermon is very important to me.

“Your sermons brought me back to a loving church service, and the warmth and caring members of Shepherd of the Hills taught me what a ‘church family’ meant. (Something I had never felt!) I guess I felt that I have found that the Episcopal service & pastors and church members have called me to feel ‘at home.’ ”

Friends — this is what it is all about. We gather to worship the risen Lord Jesus Christ and we gather to support and love each other. Words are easy to say. Churches can say “all are welcome” but they have to live out that welcome through kindness, love and acceptance. Shepherd of the Hills does this. God be praised!

