

I want to begin a bit differently than we normally do. I invite you to take a deep breath, and close your eyes, or if that doesn't feel comfortable, to soften your gaze, and imagine the vine we just heard about in the gospel reading. What does it look like? Where is it planted? Consider the trunk and the branches, connecting. Are there leaves? Is there fruit? What color are they? How is the vine nourished, the branches, the fruit? What is its source of life? Take a minute and abide there, breathing deeply. And when you are ready, come back to the room, and open your eyes.

I am the true vine, says Jesus in the gospel of John, another in a long series of "I am" statements in this gospel that provoked the crowd, and still stir us today. I am the bread of life, the door, the gate, the good shepherd, the way, the vine... I am source of life, fount of being, access to all that is and will be... The way through when times are tough, the way in when you feel locked out, the way to strength and solidarity and love. The "I am" statements are a portal, from us to God and back again.

Good morning church! The pundits tell us that across every demographic in the United States, organized religion is shrinking—Black, White, Brown, Red... wealthy, middle class, working class, poor... women, men, city, rural, suburban... Catholic, Protestant, non-denominational... The pandemic is some of it, but the trends have been there for five decades or so. And yet we are growing. Sure, there are weekends when there is a bit more space in the pews between us, and we have buried a lot of people over the last decade. But we also baptize and confirm scores of folks, welcome newcomers every week, have increased our small group offerings, gather midweek for conversation, contemplation, study, community organizing, advocacy, recovery, rehearsals, service... here, in people's homes, and across the city. We started House Meetings this year, welcomed performers and speakers, worked alongside neighbors and strangers, and invested \$172,000 in community partnerships, combining operating budget and the Covenant Fund. There are certainly ways we can grow in commitment and consistency, but why does our vibrancy belie the trends? It's a good question.

I'd like to use my annual report to thank the people who make Redeemer thrive.

First of all, thanks to all of you. Thank you for your open hearts and open minds, for seeking the Spirit and the best in the people you encounter, for believing that the Holy One lives and is always running towards us, and that following the teachings of Jesus makes good sense in 2024. Thanks especially for hearing the call to build one Baltimore and to seek the good of the city.

Thank you to Keri Frisch for your service of six years as Senior Warden. With your leadership, the parish shouldered the work of anti-racism, first through the experience of Sacred Ground, and then the formation of the parish history committee. With gentle strength, you have helped us to know our story more fully, modelling honesty and courage. You're a gadfly and a healer and a friend. And let's welcome Lucy Duke as our new senior warden, and thank Steve Sutor, Doug Riley, and Fern Riley who continue as officers. Barbara Hart has served this parish for almost 30 years, as rector's secretary, parish secretary, and administrative assistant. Whatever we call her, Barb has ably and thoughtfully supported every aspect of our liturgical and pastoral offerings. She (kind of) knows everything about everyone, and we will miss her when she retires in October. Chu An has served Redeemer for even more years than Barb, joining us as an immigrant from Viet Nam, and assisting with our Buildings and Grounds for a generation. Chu An has worked behind the scenes—with set-ups and clean-ups and fix-ups—responding to every call for help. We will mark the end of an era when Chu An retires in January. Thank you to Katrina Schisler who keeps our financial books in great shape, and to Mark Schroeder who ably maintains our ministry of Buildings and Grounds. Thank you to Ellen Chatard, who acts as an invaluable thought partner to me and directs the myriad programs that we present here each year.

Thank you to Thomasina Wharton for your profound presence as the director of the Center for Wellbeing. In your first year on staff, you've created a monthly gathering for 80-year-olds, hosted a women's healing circle, facilitated the Advent retreat, partnered with the Day School and confirmation class, and are working in an ongoing way with 20 individuals in Spiritual Direction. Thank you for showing us how to love in a radically inclusive way. Thank you to Robert Chrystal for your role in the growth of Faith @ Five, a portal to the Spirit's work at Redeemer. That stirring hour every Saturday afternoon truly sets a table of welcome. Thank you to Bert

Landman for your tireless commitment to the thriving of our musicians young and old, for coordinating concerts that delight and stretch us, and for thoughtfully guiding our liturgy week after week. How do you do it all? I am happy that Bert will take a deserved sabbatical after Easter 2025.

Thank you to dear Freda Marie, for holding the pastoral ministry of Redeemer with such soul and heart, for your gifts as teacher and prophet, and for consistently calling us to know ourselves and the Holy One, who is. Day by day, breath by breath, our souls and cells have shaped each other to such an extent that we wouldn't be who we are without having known you. We'll say good-bye for now to you in August. Thank you to Rebecca (in absentia... Rebecca is officiating at a wedding this weekend on Long Island, NY). You are an old soul, wise beyond your years, a pastor, coach, guide, and friend to children and their parents, teenagers and their parents, young adults and your colleagues. We will tie a string around your foot when we say thanks and so long in September. And thank you Cristina for all that you do, but especially for serving as parish leader while I was away on sabbatical this program year. Your steady hand and open heart held the center, and helped our system realize just how strong it is—how broadly we share and embody leadership, how deep the spirit of mission is in this place. Thank you for showing us what community engagement looks like, that love is access to respect, and that respecting the dignity of each person is how we transform ourselves and the city of Baltimore.

Thank you Mary Knott and the faculty of the Redeemer Parish Day School, where I invite you to pause for a few minutes. The Parish Day School is a central mission of the Church of the Redeemer, not a separate non-profit entity, but for 72 years an integral part of the Redeemer whole. Following the advice of former Maryland Superintendent of Schools Nancy Grasmick, we have become in the past three years the only Episcopal elementary school in the city of Baltimore with classes that span the ages of two-years through third grade, and we embody what Episcopal schools do so well: a balance of faith and intellectual rigor, within a community that is welcoming and inclusive, where each child is supported and individually valued. We offer an educational experience unique in Baltimore, growing with our students through the completion of early childhood. Our children develop gradually through play, experimentation, and imagination; they have time to discover their

strengths and particular learning styles; they have opportunities to lead and to learn from their mistakes. We have broadened the school day, with early drop off and extended day, to better accommodate working and single parents or caregivers; significantly increased our financial aid through the Redeemer Covenant Fund; and strengthened our partnership with Govans Elementary. And since our tuition is measurably more affordable than local independent and parochial schools, we fill an economic niche not otherwise served in our area. Weekly chapel is led by our clergy, and the children serve by raising money and awareness for Boots for Baltimore and cancer research through Pedal for Pediatrics. Our graduates matriculate each year in equal numbers to public and independent schools.

A thriving school of young families is what every church longs for, and boy do we have one. In fact, we've outgrown our current educational spaces—we hold classes in Mr. Vu's old house, a trailer on Charles Street, Hale auditorium, and the parish nursery. We're bursting at the seams: the current multipurpose room houses lunch, music, Values, extended day, rainy day play, early drop off, in house programming like zoo visits and yoga, and sometimes children eat lunch in hallways! Many of you completed a survey wondering about a possible campaign to enlarge our buildings. The response was overwhelmingly favorable, and I look forward to answering your questions about the case and our opportunities. Next month the Board of the School and Parish Vestry will digest a study analyzing demographics, financial capacity, and will, as they consider a way forward.

Shifting gears, the History Committee led important work on discovering Redeemer's relationship to the institutions of slavery and Jim Crow, facilitating learning sessions with parishioners, and developed an experiential walk that was part of our Good Friday observance.

And rounding out my annual report, we continue to financially support ReBuild Johnston Square and other community partners, and equip volunteers for Johnston Square elementary and Govans elementary, CARES food pantry and GEDCO support services, Helping Up Mission women's ministry and Turnaround Tuesday employment readiness, along with all the ways that you all serve on your own. We participated in three BUILD

actions joining over 1200 leaders to address the crisis of vacant and abandoned houses, and took that work on the road to Annapolis, winning Governor Moore's signature on legislation funding project C.O.R.E.

Finally another word about the Vine and the branches. The Gospel of John has Jesus say something fundamental about the Holy One and our connection to God within us, to God among us, and God beyond us. I am the Vine, says Jesus, the source of water and nutrition for the vineyard, literally the source of life for the branches. Our being is wrapped up in the life of others, you see, and to be connected is to live. Relationship, engagement, mutuality is our lifeblood. "The **unrelated human being lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and the soul cannot exist without its other,**" (Karl Jung) without the other. To be fully human, then, is to love. No wonder Jesus casts love as a commandment. Without it, without offering love and receiving love, we are not fully ourselves.

And I believe we have a taste of that reality day by day, breath by breath, at Redeemer—through the ways we serve, the ways we teach, the ways we listen... the ways we help and heal and hold one another... Love, like a Vine to its branches, calls us to be the ones we were created to be... to bear fruit, to be wine for a world often dying of thirst. Let us pray, using a poem by Maya Angelou:

We, unaccustomed to courage, exiles from delight, live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple and comes into our sight to liberate us into life.

Love arrives, and in its train come ecstasies, old memories of pleasure, ancient histories of pain. Yet if we are bold, love strikes away the chains of fear from our souls.

We are weaned from our timidity. In the flush of love's light, we dare be brave. And suddenly we see that love costs all we are and will ever be. Yet it is only love which sets us free.

"Touched by an Angel," Maya Angelou