

Sunday, September 13, 2026
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Welcome Home Sunday and Patronal Feast Day
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Servants of the Servants of God”

Today we are trying something new. At least, new for us. At least, new for us in the time that I have been here as Rector. We are celebrating our Patronal Feast Day—commemorating our patron, St. Gregory the Great. While many, if not most, Episcopal congregations celebrate their patron saint on a Sunday near the feast day for said saint, we have not traditionally done that. Not because we are ashamed of St. Gregory or feel he is not worthy of celebrating. As we shall see, he most certainly is worthy. But rather, our lack of celebration was not so much an oversight as it was an unfortunate circumstance of calendar. The traditional feast day for Gregory the Great is March 12, the anniversary of his death in 604. Which always falls during Lent. And the *Book of Common Prayer* explicitly states, “The feast of the Dedication of a Church, and the feast of its patron or title, may be observed on, or be transferred to, a Sunday, except in the seasons of Advent, Lent, and Easter” (BCP, 16). Which kind of leaves us out of luck.

But! Fortunately for us, Gregory has an alternative feast day. September 3, which is the anniversary of the beginning of his papacy in 590. Established by Pope Paul VI precisely because Gregory’s feast day falls in Lent. While we really should have celebrated last Sunday, we chose to move our celebration to today to avoid the Labor Day weekend.

While a parish’s patronal feast day by and large focuses on the life and example of the saint for which the parish is named, I think, to the extent possible, the celebration should also focus on the parish itself. And, as we shall see, this is particularly appropriate for St. Gregory’s—the patron saint and our particular parish.

By way of a brief history lesson, our congregation was founded on June 12, 1955, with an initial worship service attended by 31 people, held at Minnie Gant Elementary School on Atherton. The Rev. Michael J. Francis was appointed vicar of the new mission congregation. Three days later, a congregational meeting was held and the name St. Gregory’s was chosen. I have not seen any explanation for why St. Gregory’s was selected as the name. Sometimes a saint is selected because the founding fell on that saint’s day. Sometimes, it is based on location—my last parish in Santa Paula was named St. Paul’s. But none of these apply here. And the interesting thing is that St. Gregory’s is not a very common name for Episcopal congregations. In fact, consulting the Episcopal Church’s Asset Map indicates that there are only seven Episcopal congregations in the United States named after St. Gregory the Great (out of approximately 6,700 congregations). And the only St. Gregory’s in the Diocese of Los Angeles. Which makes us pretty unique.

Certainly, that initial meeting in 1955 could not have known what the future would hold, or who we would become as a parish. Although, I cannot help but wonder if the choice of name was aspirational. A hope and a vision of who we might become. Now, whether the example of St. Gregory the Great actually influenced the development of our parish over the last 71 years or whether our development just happened to mirror some of the key accomplishments of

Gregory the Great is impossible to say. But it is, at least to me, amazing how the culture, the priorities, and the ministries of this place, are consistent with the priorities and ministries of the saint whose name we bear.

Undeniably, St. Gregory was a phenomenal man. Only serving as pope for 14 years during the first millennia of the Church, by all accounts he had an extraordinary and significant impact on the development of the Church. Impacts which continue over 1,400 years later. You can find a brief write-up of Gregory the Great on page 25 of the bulletin, taken from *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, the official calendar of saints for The Episcopal Church. I won't go through the whole thing—you can read it for yourself—but I will highlight some of Gregory's more prominent and significant contributions to the Church. And how these are reflected in who we are and what we do here at St. Gregory's Parish.

Gregory's entire life was shaped by his Christian faith. To the point that when his father passed away, Gregory promptly converted the family villa into a monastery, dedicated to the contemplative life. It was this contemplative approach that would influence much of what he did in his life and ministry, particularly once he was elevated to the papacy. For it was through his contemplative life of prayer and meditation that Gregory sought and was able to discern God's will for life and ministry. Seeking how to live most fully into who and what God was calling him to be and do. A practice and a focus that would serve him well, particularly once elevated to the papacy during a difficult period of history that included plague and ongoing threats of invasion from hostile forces. While not necessarily obvious, I think this emphasis on the contemplative and continually seeking to discern God's will has been a foundation of St. Gregory's Parish. That our leadership—clergy and lay—has continually sought to act in ways that are faithful to God's will. Allowing us, through our history, to address difficult circumstances in ways that have allowed us to be faithful to who God is calling us to be.

One of the ways Gregory was able to address the many needs he saw around him, and which he discerned through his contemplative practices, was through faithful stewardship. Gregory firmly believed that the resources of the Church were not to be squandered, but were to be used for the ministry the Church was called to do. Most notably, in care of the poor and the homeless. To this end, Gregory did several related things. Being way ahead of his time, he established centralized systems of administration and accounting. Through these systems, he was better able to track resources and respond to needs as they arose. In our own parish, our leadership has continually sought to be faithful stewards of our resources, particularly the financial resources generously given by our members. Establishing policies and procedures that have allowed us to respond quickly but responsibly to needs as they arise.

A significant part of Gregory's administrative systems focused on alms. Or what we would call outreach. He established an extensive system for the administration and distribution of charitable relief for the poor and the homeless. Over time, Gregory expanded these systems to not only include the distribution of money, but also a system of production and distribution of food to the poor, as well as other relief efforts. In our own parish, we have similarly focused on systems of addressing the concerns of those in need. While our parish budget is not sufficient to fund all our outreach projects, we have found ways to continue to meet the needs of our community through our designated outreach projects. And, of course, the centerpiece of our own outreach ministry, as was Gregory's, is our feeding programs: our food bank, as well as

Feed My Lambs, in which we provide meals to the unhoused who attend the Shower Program at our sister parish of St. Luke's/San Lucas downtown.

For Gregory, his systems of administering alms and distributing food were not just a form of outreach. They were also a ministry of hospitality. Sharing God's love through the hospitality of the Church and its ministries. Gregory felt so passionately about hospitality, particularly to the less fortunate, that he made it a practice that when he dined, he used his family table from his childhood home, and included 12 indigent guests at each meal. He also made it a practice of sending meals he had cooked with his own hands to the needy living in wealthy homes so as to spare them the indignity of receiving charity. Gregory's personal practice of sharing food and hospitality as a way of demonstrating God's love in tangible ways is most definitely reflected in this place that bears his name. One of our key ministries and one of the things we do exceedingly well is our ministry of hospitality. What I quickly discovered after I came here is that hospitality is an inherent part of our parish culture, is part of the DNA of this place. Virtually everyone who is here has a story of first coming here and staying because of the hospitality and sense of community. In this, we certainly live up to the example set by our patron.

Another passion of Gregory's was good liturgy. He is well-known for his liturgical reforms. Making a number of revisions to liturgy that have continued to this day. Reforms that allowed worship to flow more smoothly and, hopefully, to better reflect what we are trying to convey about God through our worship experiences. In addition to his liturgical reforms, Gregory recognized that music was an integral part of worship. He particularly sought additional ways to include music so as to enhance the worship experience. To this end, he developed a form of chant for use in worship. The style that continues to bear his name, Gregorian chant. A form of chant that has been a mainstay of Western liturgy ever since. Here at St. Gregory's Parish, one of the things we do particularly well—something that we are known for—is good and proper liturgy and our excellent music. Our liturgy and music coming together to provide meaningful worship experiences for the faithful and for those seeking to know God and Christ more fully.

These are but a few of the attributes of our patron Gregory the Great and how they have come to be exemplified in tangible ways through this parish which bears his name. Of course, there is so much more to who Gregory was. He was also a prolific writer, with some of his works continuing to be classic texts on Christian ministry. And because of Gregory's passion for evangelism and sharing the love of God in as many ways as possible, we owe him a debt of gratitude for laying the foundation for our own Anglican tradition. After all, it was Pope Gregory that first sent Augustine on a mission to Canterbury to evangelize the pagan Anglo-Saxons. Establishing the first Christian community in Britain, which a thousand years later would become home of the Church of England which gave birth to our own Episcopal Church, and the center and symbol for the Anglican Communion, of which we are an integral part.

There is one other thing Gregory the Great is famous for, which I believe also characterizes who we are in this place that bears his name. Gregory was the first pope to use the term "Servant of the Servants of God" to describe how he viewed his role as pope. A term that has continued to this day as a descriptor used by most popes. But this term has broader applicability to those who seek to serve God through Christ, as we do in this place. A place, founded in the name of Gregory the Great. A place that has developed, intentionally or not, following Gregory's

example of faithfulness to God's work, as demonstrated by his commitment to mission and service, evangelism, liturgy and worship, music, spiritual discipline, education, and hospitality. All things that also speak to core values of this parish that bears his name. Values that when put into practice through our ministries, makes us Servants of the Servants of God.