Both of my sons played a lot of soccer while they were growing up. I recall sitting at one of their games on a Saturday afternoon and noticing a little two-year-old boy who was the younger brother of one of my son’s teammates. This little two-year-old was running around on the sidelines kicking a soccer ball with amazing agility, ready to take on the middle-school boys who were playing out on the field. He seemed to me to be a natural athlete. I wondered if he might end up playing professional soccer one day. What's your story on noticing an innate ability in a young person...the child who readily picks up a musical instrument, or who has an amazing vocabulary at a young age, or who seems to think in numbers...the child who has a beautiful smile, or an infectious laugh, or an instinctive concern for others...the child who wants to play teacher, or doctor, or perhaps even priest? Right from our conception, we are created into a unique combination of traits. Recall Psalm 139 (vs. 12): “Lord...you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” God creates in the womb. And, a most wonderful aspect of Creation is that God at our birth does not say, “All done.” We grow into ourselves, exploring and developing our skills, understanding our likes and dislikes, navigating relationships, coping with challenges along the way...we grow into ourselves through God’s ongoing love and inspiration and compassion.

We begin in God. We thrive through God. We are saved by God. Our faith always draws us back to the cross, reminding us that Jesus lived so we would know God’s abundant love...and Christ returned so we would know that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Jesus died on the cross and all that is being asked of us is to acknowledge that we are dependent on God.
Jesus said to the chief priests and elders, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” Why? Because the tax collectors and the prostitutes recognize their humanity, their own ability to err, their need for inspiration, their desire to be loved. Being dependent on God is not about being controlled by God. Our dependence is about the gift of life, of being created and loved and nurtured. Acknowledging that we are dependent is not a demand. Rather, it is the key which opens our heart to the gift of God’s love within us and all around us. “God is at work in you.”

Today we kick-off our Annual Campaign. Looking back at a Parish Notes, our monthly newsletter, from two years ago, I was reminded of an article on stewardship by the Rev. Dr. Daniel Matthews, former Rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in New York City – well-known as Trinity Wall Street. Matthews differentiates four types of giving: charity, philanthropy, fund-raising and stewardship. **Charity** “is a response to a crisis or an immediate need.” This type of gift-giving is exactly what the current humanitarian efforts are to care for the victims of the hurricanes in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the other Caribbean islands. **Philanthropy** “is like an investment. It is the act of giving money with the intention of improving the welfare of a community or organization over the long-term.” **Fund-raising** “asks us to give to a project such as a building or a capital investment. It is a necessary procedure for developing hospitals, schools, and the arts.” Charity, philanthropy and fund-raising have something in common... “all treat the individual as the owner of the money.” The fourth type of giving, **stewardship**, is different. In stewardship, “God is the owner and the giver is simply returning a portion of what God has given.”

God gives life and love and sustenance and inspiration. We come together in community to seek God, to experience God’s love, to be inspired to live in God’s love. In thanksgiving, we
love God by loving one another, building bonds of friendship, caring for one another and this world. Stewardship calls upon us to reflect on the role of our faith community in our life – how we are loved, how we are blessed, how we are inspired, how we are connected to one another. We reflect on the role of our faith community in our life and in gratitude give back a fitting portion of what God has given us, so we can sustain and nurture the ministries which draw us closer to God and into the ongoing care for one another and all of God’s Creation.

Every day, the ministries of St. Paul’s are shaping lives. Reviews of St. Paul’s on Facebook include, “A wonderful place to worship and renew the spirit,” and “A loving community of authentic people trying to make the world a better place.” In the September Parish Notes, one of our youth shared her thoughts about the mission trip to Harlan, Kentucky this summer. She wrote: “The best thing about the Harlan trip was the people we met. It was really eye opening how people in bad situations make the best of them. You never really know how it’s like to struggle in life until you have witnessed or lived it. It truly was an amazing experience that has forever changed my views on the world.” In the October Parish Notes, one of our parishioners shared her thoughts about our collaboration with EDWINS. She wrote: “It’s inspiring to serve and celebrate alongside the students. Our EDWINS neighbors show me God’s love, compassion, hope and forgiveness. I participate in this ministry because, at the heart of EDWINS and our faith, redemption matters.”

What is the role of your faith in your life? How have you been welcomed, comforted, inspired, or transformed by St. Paul’s? Together, let us continue to develop our ministries, so all parishioners, seekers, visitors and neighbors have a story to share about being welcomed, comforted, inspired or transformed. Let us give back a fitting portion of what God has given us, so we can sustain and nurture these ministries. We begin in God. We are saved by God. We
thrive through God. Let us give thanks. Amen.