When has the ground shifted underneath you? That profound moment when your understanding of life, when the set of principles which shape your life is called into question. When you feel compelled to wonder what is life all about; how are we supposed to live in this world? That profound moment when life breaks open and the breadth of life becomes palpable, when we are no longer bound by our limited experience, but freed to acknowledge and integrate the expanse of perspectives that form a sacred world view? A parishioner told me about the time she heard God calling her name during worship as she walked forward for communion. To be known. A friend told me about standing next to the hospital bed where her daughter was recovering from transplant surgery and understanding, viscerally, that whether her daughter lived or died, God loved this little one, and so, all would be well. To be loved. A World War II vet shared with me his story about coming to know God in the trenches, amidst heavy combat. To be inspired. While a chaplain, I walked into a hospital room and was rebuffed by an angry, bitter patient. But, through the silence that followed, as I was praying for helpful words to come to me, he broke down in tears and shed his anguish and guilt he had been holding for years over the circumstances of his son’s death. To be held. When has the ground shifted underneath you? To be known and loved and inspired and held – God breaks through our coveted walls and life is never the same.

Luke tells us about the time when Jesus encountered ten lepers. At that time, leprosy was devastating, considered highly contagious, marked by sores and paralysis and blindness. Jesus healed all ten of the lepers, yet, only one of them praised God. Just to drive the point home, the
one who did praise God was a Samaritan, an outsider. God, in questioning the heedlessness of the other nine, is not saying, “Hey, you, I am omnipotent, give me my due.” God does not need our praise. Rather, when we offer our praise, we are recognizing for ourselves that God is working in the world for us and with us. God wants us to know this: our gratitude brings clarity to our actions and peace to our souls. This is why we come together in community…to understand what life is all about, to learn how to live in this world…to seek God, to experience God – to be known and loved and inspired and held – so that all of our relationships, even with the stranger, are lived in the light of Christ.

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” These are the words that conclude Mary Oliver’s poem, “The Summer Day.” Oliver’s award-winning poems explore the connection between nature and spirituality. Oliver loved taking long walks, a habit she developed when growing up in Maple Heights, Ohio. She challenges us in this poem to reflect on how we prioritize our life. After wondering about the grasshopper she observes on her walk one day, jumping, eating, “gazing with enormous and complicated eyes,” she writes, “I know how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, which is what I have been doing all day. Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” A great question, one we can explore together in community, inspired by our faith.

The Very Rev. Mark Richardson, President and Dean of Church Divinity School of the Pacific, more commonly known as CDSP, one of our ten Episcopal seminaries, wrote in a recent CDSP publication about a new partnership with Trinity Church Wall Street (CDSP, Crossings, “Letter from the Dean,” Spring 2019). He writes about what a seminary curriculum looks like that prepares leaders for today and tomorrow. He writes: “It looks like learning about economies
of justice at the heart of Jesus’ teaching. It looks like staring into the face of our most basic sin of racism at the founding of the United States. It looks like building strategies to change ways of life and dependencies that are taking our living planet to the brink. And it looks like initiating the necessary discourse to discover these as symptoms of a single spiritual alienation. This bucket list of cultural problems usually lands in op-ed columns, but if theological education touches our lives, our relationships, and our grounding in a material universe, then these things must be named.” I say, “Amen.” Let’s move these discussions from the seminaries to the parish. At St. Paul’s, we can grapple with the cultural problems we face today, without fear of partisanship, because the solutions to these problems are inherently faith-based; the solutions are informed by Jesus’s teachings.

At St. Paul’s, we learn – we ask questions and explore solutions - and then we continue to grow by putting our faith into action. We are a community, and so we care for one another. And, we create greater community, by going out into the world and addressing the needs of many, locally, nationally and abroad. We prepare, serve and share meals, we tutor students, we coach recent EDWINS’ graduates, we provide library books for schools in rural Honduras, and carefully tape these books to assure durability. Through serving, we build relationships, and grow evermore aware and grounded in our interconnectedness. We are all created by the one God; all created in the image of God.

At St. Paul’s, we worship, sing, learn, celebrate, serve, laugh, cry, listen, embrace and build community together. We are community for baptism, confirmation, marriage, burial, and every day in between. Through community, we find the courage to recognize God breaking through our coveted walls and allow ourselves to be inspired in our beliefs and actions, in our decision making, in how we live and love in this world.
As we kick-off our annual campaign and request financial pledges to support the ministries of this parish, I ask, “What is the role of your faith in your life?” The orchestra, the art museum, the theatre are all wonderful organizations to support. What gives meaning to the arts? God gives us the ability to create. The hospitals, the Cancer Society, the many, medical societies are all important organizations to support. What gives meaning to medicine? God gives us the ability to heal. Our high schools and colleges and universities are vital organizations to support. What gives meaning to education? God gives us the ability to think and analyze and reason and learn. Our faith isn’t one aspect of our life. It is our life.

So, stop and reflect. What percentage of your income do you pledge to supporting St. Paul’s ministries? Does that percentage reflect the role of your faith in your life? Remember, our financial resources come solely from our parishioners. We do not have decades of alumnae, or external patrons, or charitable foundations donating to St. Paul’s. What we have to sustain and nurture and grow this community comes from us. Let us live in gratitude for being known, loved, inspired and held, and so grow this loving community. Amen.