

**St. Anne's Parish
Middletown, Delaware
June 14, 2009**

What a joy it has been to be here with you this weekend and celebrate with you the beginning of a new relationship between you and your new rector, Jo Ann Barker. We've known Jo Ann for a long time and have been involved with several parts of her journey toward this place and we can assure you that you've made a wise choice in your new rector.

Appropos of your choice of a new female rector, I want to speak today of women. I hope those of you who have come here to celebrate the 304th anniversary of St. Anne's parish will forgive me for focusing so specifically on one sex. You see, as an historian of women, I find myself frustrated by Episcopal Church histories that are so often written as a procession from rector to rector to rector—and that procession up until the last quarter of the 20th century was a procession of men. Where were the women? Indeed, in many of these church histories, where were the lay people? When I began working as an Episcopal historian, I searched through the index of the standard history of the Episcopal Church for women's names. I found two—Queen Elizabeth and the Virgin Mary! We really must do better than that!

To honor women in St. Anne's history, one must start with the obvious: Queen Anne, Queen of England, Scotland, and Ireland when the parish was founded in 1805. (Queen Anne—lived 1665 to 1714) After the Act of Union in 1707, she literally became the first ruler of the United Kingdom. I hope you know something of her story, about the complicated life she led, because that life, in a sense, mirrors the religious struggles that involved many of the early settlers of these parts.

Anne was the second daughter of King James II of England, a member of the Stuart dynasty that came to the throne of England after the death of Queen Elizabeth. 17th century England had been engulfed in religious warfare—the English Revolution in mid-century put the Puritans in charge for a while, then the royalists brought King Charles II back from Europe, establishing again the supremacy of the Anglican Church. Anne's father, James, was King Charles II's younger brother who became king when Charles died. But there was a problem. James had become a Roman Catholic and had married a Roman Catholic woman after Anne's mother died. All was fine for awhile. The noble lords accepted James II as king as long as he agreed to keep the Anglican Church as the Church of England. They knew that when he died, succession would pass to his two Protestant daughters, Mary and Anne. But unexpectedly, life intervened. James and his wife had a baby—a boy—and suddenly the male heir to the throne was a Roman Catholic. The Anglican cavaliers rose up in horror—opposed the king, drove him from England and invited his oldest daughter Mary to take the throne. She did so, bringing her husband, William of Orange, with her as co-monarch, and later, in 1696, Anne became Queen when William & Mary died without dependents.

I've detailed this complicated history to give you some sense of what Anne's life was like. Her mother died when she was six years old. Growing up, she was shuttled from palace to palace both in England and on the continent. She lived through a tumultuous

revolution in the accession of William & Mary to the throne. She saw her father disgraced, discredited and banished from the Kingdom. And later, when she became Queen, she constantly faced the threat that her brother, James, the Pretender, would return to England to claim the throne. Tough life. On top of all that, she had married Prince George of Denmark and they tried to raise a family. She was pregnant 18 times, gave birth to only five living children and only one of those, William, lived longer than 2 years. He died at age 11. What a hard life for a would-be mother!

This history may well have led to one crucial thing we do know about her as Queen—she took an active interest in the church both at home and in the American colonies. I'm told that your congregation has an altar linen that she herself is said to have embroidered. She probably did. You can see her waiting for one of those innumerable babies embroidering gifts for her churches in the colonies. Her gift of the Queen's farm on the Island of Manhattan to a small church there established the financial future of New York's Trinity Church. To this day, Trinity rectors bow automatically when they hear the words Queen Anne's farm! In 1710, she hosted a visit from four Iroquois delegates from the new world who implored her to send proper religious instruction for their children. She ordered a chapel constructed at New York's Fort Hunter and sent communion silver to be used there for the Iroquois mission. Similar chalices are found in about a dozen other American Churches. – St. Paul's in Wickford, RI. At home, she did something very inventive. She established Queen Anne's Bounty in 1704—a fund that took taxes the church paid to the crown and used them to augment the incomes of poorer clergy. That fund has grown today to over 4 billion pounds and continues to be the mainstay of British clergy salaries.

What I'm saying here is that one element of your heritage is tied to the life of an English queen who despite her difficulties, took important actions to nourish and sustain the community of faith in both England and America. Honor Queen Anne.

The other women I want to talk about is a group I discovered in reading the history of St. Anne's parish, the women who were the only communicants of this parish in 1832. Think about them for a moment. These are the names: Mary Derrickson; Ann, Hannah, Margaretta, and Louise Gibbs; Ann Mansfield, Mary Geritson, Sarah Suyter, Mary Nowland, Elener Hanson, Eliza Kanely, Lydia Reading, Margaret and Sarah Roberts, Susan Boyer and Mary Foard. In 1832, when the Reverend H. Lyon Davis came back to the parish, he said it did not have a single male communicant. What remained was “a body of faithful women who adorn the doctrine of God their Saviour in all things,” –and a Sunday school of 90 pupils!

This tidbit of history suggests several questions.

1. Who were these women? My guess is that in 1832, this was still an area made up primarily of small farms. The women probably lived on and worked the farms, yet still found time to maintain church membership. I traced the names of the women listed back to earlier lists of vestry members and wardens and pew renters. Four of the women were named Gibbs—Isaac Gibbs had been on the vestry in 1795 so these women were very likely his daughters or daughters-in-law. Lydia Reading may have been the daughter of the Rev. Philip Reading who served as Rector from 1745 to 1778. James Foard is listed

as owning a pew in the late 1790s, so Mary Foard may well have been his daughter. But the other ten women may have been from families new to the area. Sixteen women, the nucleus of the parish.

2. Where were the men? There were no wars in the 1830s that would have taken large numbers of men away, so we can probably assume that men—fathers and husbands of some of these women—were around but simply had not taken the time to establish themselves as communicants of the church.

The point I want to make here is simply this: This church might well have disappeared were it not for this group of faithful women. A group of women who not only continued to gather and pray together but went one step further, organized a Sunday School and found 90 young people to teach. Think of it. If you have 16 women, each of them must have had at least six children to bring to the Sunday School (not impossible in those days but unlikely) – or else they were out rounding up possible converts. That’s energetic in any time period!

This is the piece of church history that is so often missed. Time and again, when you read about the founding of churches all across the US frontier, the impetus came from women, women who wanted religious education for their children. Of course, the second historical fact that is so often overlooked is, What is the first thing that happens to enable a new church to be built? A bakesale!

I’m sure many of you have noticed that thus far I have been meandering through church history with no reference whatsoever to today’s Bible readings. Let me assure you that much of what I have said has been informed by the scriptures. In the Old Testament lesson, we have the intriguing story of God searching for a proper King for his people and sending Samuel out to anoint his choice. And Samuel discovers that God has chosen one with probably the fewest kingly attributes, a mere shepherd boy, to do his work. Can’t we find a similar tale in the experience of Queen Anne? A woman with enormous personal problems whom God yet used to extend God’s kingdom in a new world. Though an extensive kingdom was set before her, she continued to be faithful in small things, an embroidered altar cloth, a silver chalice—symbols that God’s work must continue.

And so with the Gospel. “The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed.” One small effort, one tiny seed can become a great tree. A few faithful women enabled the survival of St. Anne’s parish at one point in its history. And myriad small actions of men and women year after year in this place have enabled this parish to grow and flourish. God’s Church is continually made up of and perpetuated by the most unlikely candidates, ordinary men and women like you and me who often feel we have no talents at all to bring to the mix. But we can be faithful. We can sit and embroider one more cross on an altar hanging or we can seek out one more child to bring to Sunday school. We, like the mustard seeds, can be faithful in small ways and God will manage the increase.

May God bless you on your 304th birthday and sustain us all for the next 304 years.