

Convention Address, 2018

By my count this represents the sixteenth time I have stood before you to deliver the bishop's address. This also represents the last time I will address you as bishop diocesan. Given that fact, I wish to comment on where we have been together over the past years, and where I think we need to go in the years to come.

First, let's consider where we have traveled together over these years. My first five-to-seven years were spent largely in listening to you. Because of the injuries of the past I had many stories to hear. I tried to listen with sympathy and patience. After a time it became clear to me that the boil had been lanced and healing was in process. This was a painful process for both you and me; it was not a happy or fun time for any of us. Now listen carefully to what I am about to say. There is simply no need to revisit the past, no need to unpack it again. What you need to learn to do is this: let the past be the past. Remember we are talking about events almost a generation ago, events which I have rehearsed with you again and again. My reading is that you are healed if you choose to believe that. And most of the time you have been acting like healed people. Please rejoice in that. I have been pleased to be one of the agents of that, always remembering that healing is not so much something we do as it is a gift of our Lord.

I think we can look around and find lots of signs that we are an increasingly resurrectional community. I point to the high quality of the clergy of the diocese. I have said it many time, and I gladly say it again: they are among the very best in the church. They work hard and faithfully to be servants of Jesus among us. And I can say the same for the staff of the

diocese. They are small, but mighty. I am enormously proud of them and of the dedicated and gentle ways they work. Beside that, we have lots of fun together. We work hard at communication, at transparency, at maintaining a high standard of professional practice, and at being good representatives of Christ.

I am proud of the way the diaconal community has developed. Please be aware that some dioceses have no vocational deacons at all, and many others do not seem to value or use them in the way they are intended. Our deacons are active in their work among the forgotten, the abused, the fringe people of our state, and they clearly do that in the name of Jesus. A good partner in this work over all this time has been the archdeacon Roxy Klingensmith. Please celebrate the work of these people.

I can also point to the work among Native Americans that we have begun. I am delighted that Bishop Gallagher has been able to be here, and she has planted seeds that I believe will continue to grow. The Rev. Deacon Marcia Lauzon will continue this work as the coordinator of native work. This is slow, relational ministry, the goal of which is to raise up native leadership and communities. Bishop Gallagher has been a delight to work with, a breath of fresh air in the diocese, and a wonderful support to me. She has brought many skills, insights, and a fine sense of humor. Thank you, Carol. I wish many blessings to you and Mark in the next chapter in Massachusetts.

And you can guess that I will hold up Camp Marshall. This is the wonderful ministry of our diocese that helps young people meet Jesus in a welcoming and kind community. We now have a remodeled Brewer Lodge, that will serve you well in many decades to come. Other improvements may well be on the way. I thank all of you who participated in our Capital Campaign, and I note especially the enormous gift of the Bishop Fox Company in Billings.

I thank the Rev. Canon Wren Blessing and Sue LaRose who have served as directors, and I could not fail to mention the many years of good work by the site manager, Julie Sisler. Sue will have some more good news to share with you in her report.

We have fewer churches than when I arrived here, but we are working with more members. The large majority of our churches are in pretty good to excellent shape. Nearly every congregation has at least one outreach ministry, many have several. Most of our vestries are seriously engaged in helping lead vital congregations. My sense is that we do not have a clear sense of how well we are doing. For many it seems easier to focus on the problems, but we have many good things going for us. We need to celebrate that.

And we have made progress at developing a sense of diocese. For Episcopalians, and indeed for all catholic churches, the diocese is the basic unit of the church. We are in this together. The truth is that you cannot be the church in either a theological or practical sense without the diocese. I serve for the moment as the face of the diocese, but look around you. See those other faces? They are diocese. We support each other by prayer, by joint work (such as Camp Marshall), and by our apportionment, which we really need to think of mission funding for work around this great state. I think we work well together, and in the work of the various boards and committees as well as in our conventions, I have been very pleased with the calm, rational, prayerful way that we go about our work. Thank you for being such a good diocese.

Finally, I think I leave a firmly Christocentric diocese that is learning to live more into the resurrection. This is for me the bottom line. Our life, our joy, our hope, our strength is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

But where might you go in the future? I have a fairly firm sense of what that needs to be.

In surveys and discussion groups you have had a chance to express your thoughts. But now it is my turn, and I ask for the gift of your careful attention.

First, I know we face some issues for which there are no clear answers. This is a geographically huge state; few people know that as well as I do. And one of the resultant problems can be isolation from each other. I can tell you with certainty that Montana is not going to get smaller. Both clergy and congregations need to be committed to building face-to-face meetings and events. I have worked hard on that, and have had to deal with a certain unwillingness to make the effort to be together. Email is great, and video conferences help (and we make good use of both), but nothing can match face-to-face time. It's up to you really. Remember that you can't be a Christian alone, and your congregation is not complete without other congregations.

Second, we have to talk about the decline of small towns all over the country and about the effects on churches. No one is doing research or writing about this, I'm sorry to say. I do know by my own observation that churches tend to reflect the attitudes and emotional life of the towns in which they exist. I also know that churches can be resurrectional even in declining situations, but you have to pedal real fast to do that. I have no quick or simple solutions, except to say that the Lord calls us to ministry wherever we find ourselves, always trusting in the paschal mystery. I do not have much confidence in programs and techniques. Remember that I have been at this for about forty-five years, and I have lived through management by objective, transactional analysis, family systems, Alpha, public narrative, appreciative inquiry, etc. I have learned from all these, as I suspect at least of you have, too. They are aids, but not THE answer. As we say, this is not rocket science. Proclaim the Good News. Treat each other well. Pray often and long, Care for the community around you, especially the outcasts and the overlooked. Trust

that the sacraments work. Be grateful and generous. And then Jesus will use all these things which we offer, and will make resurrection out of them.

I am convinced that the next bishop needs to work with you in the area that no one wants to talk about, namely, evangelism. The days when we could open the doors of the church on Sunday and expect people to show up and be good members are over. That is a change that has happened in the lifetime of some of us here, and it continues to confuse some. Our churches need to be inviting communities where people can be encountered by the living Lord and can work out their faith in a supportive church. Our slogan “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You” is not enough; we need to learn to seek and invite. And that, in turn, is based on our ability to know our God stories, how God is active in our lives and churches and how to share parts of that. We have talked about this in convention after convention, and I once gave over my address time to an exercise in telling your God story. As a side note one of the things I have learned over these past years is that nothing stunts and shrivels churches faster than internal conflict as well as grouching and complaining. But evangelism must become part of who we are: inviting, sharing, reaching out.

And why would we want to go to all this effort? Because God has sought us out and invited us to live within the trinitarian community of love and mercy. I am committed to this. I know that Jesus saved me. By that I am aware of who I am and the forces that inform my actions, and I know what I miss I could have become without Jesus. I have close family members that have gone down that sad path. I might have lived a wasted, selfish, brutish life. While I am not perfect (just ask my wife and daughters) I do believe that at least on some occasions I reflect the light of Christ. In short, I love Jesus because he first loved me. And I want others to share in that.

I believe The Episcopal Church has a unique way to live as disciples of Jesus, and it is a way our culture simply desperately needs now. We have the joy and the opportunity to share this with our society, and I hope you and your new bishop will pick up this ministry with joy and hope.

And then there's the other word that no one wants to speak, namely, stewardship. In my very first convention address I had to take on the issue of money and ministry. And I suspect I have mentioned it in most addresses since then. It remains in my mind a persistent problem. It usually takes this form: we don't have enough whatever, you fill in the blank. It is, of course, a scarcity mind-set with fear lurking in the background. We just can't do it. We don't have enough. We will fail.

In a material sense I am convinced that it is simply not true. And over the years I have marshalled all sorts of facts and figures that suggest we have enough resources to do what Christ calls us to do. But the minds of some have not been swayed. And in a spiritual sense I know it is not true. Jesus will give us what we need to do what we are called to do. I have lived it my whole adult life and know it to be true.

My prayer is that you can begin to explore the truth of this under the leadership of your new bishop. I can point to some churches that are living this and some others that are beginning to live into it. There is no reason why our giving of money and time can't be more generous if we want it to be---note "if we want it to be." What would it take for you to increase your giving by one percent for each of the next five years? The life of our diocese would be utterly transformed if we adopted that little challenge. With Jesus it is not about scarcity and fear, but about generosity and gratitude.

But now we are living in the meantime. The search for the tenth bishop has begun. I will be leaving soon, and there will be about a thirteen month gap until a new bishop is ordained and consecrated. Let me remind you that transitions are times of stress, even craziness. There will be dark forces that will leap into action. But do not fear. If you do your work---and that mostly means prayer---and treat each other with gentleness, it will be OK. Remember that Christ has promised to be with us always, and that certainly includes the next year. Expect that things will not always run smoothly and that mistakes will be made; that's just part of any transition. Say your prayers and trust the Lord.

I do, however, want to make a special warning about power and politics. Avoid persons seeking or practicing these. Ministry is about mercy and service. Wheeling and dealing are not in order, caucuses and coalitions can be very dangerous, and if you see it, call it out. The task of finding a new bishop is discernment, seeking God's guidance. The work of being a diocese requires more listening than talking, and power and politics are seldom part of the equation.

Finally, let me ask that you practice trusting your new bishop. Begin to develop the mindset that the new bishop is God's gift to you, that he/she will be seeking to serve Jesus, and that he/she is not up to something. That person will not know how to be a bishop at first, so be patient and pray for him/her. Be both respectful and affectionate. That would be a huge gift to that person.

As I end this address, I want to remind you again of my love and commitment to you. It's been a trip, hasn't it? It has been one of the great honors of my life is serve as Bishop of Montana, and I am grateful for the kindness and support you have shown to me over these years. Not many bishops make it to sixteen years anymore, and that is a sign of your patience and consideration. Thank you, and thank God for the call extended to me through you.

After a good deal of conversation and prayer it is clear to me that I cannot stay in Montana. That had been my original intent, but I am keenly aware that my presence might be a problem in the future and that I might not be able to keep my mouth shut. So, my wife and I have purchased a new home in the Culver City section of Los Angeles, and we will be moving there in about five weeks. That will place us in close proximity to our grandson Rowan and to our daughter and daughter-in-law.

I depart with sadness but also with much gratitude for my time among you. You will remain in my prayers and my affection.

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