

Convention Address

There is a story, probably apocryphal, about a country man who heard that the circus was coming to town. His best boyhood memory had been a visit to the circus and now that he had a son, he wanted his son to experience what had given him such joy. So he got his son a ticket to the circus, bought a bus ticket to the county seat town and sent him off on what he hoped would be a great adventure.

That evening his son returned from the day trip and his father anxiously awaited news of his experience. The boy told about the circus parade, how he enjoyed seeing the lions and tigers in their wagon cages moving down the street. . There was a woman riding down the street standing on the back of two white horses one foot on each horse's back—it was amazing! Clowns threw candy towards all the children, acrobats performed amazing stunts in the street, it was the best thing he had ever seen.

The father asked, “What about the big top. Was there a woman on a flying trapeze? Did you see a man leading a tiger through his tricks? What about those elephants... did one perch on a stool?”

“What big tent Dad? I didn't see a man with tigers or an elephant on a stool.”

It was with wistful sadness that the boys rather realized that his son had seen the parade but missed the circus!

This parable can be heard as a parable about the life of the church. In our context the parade might be the Sunday morning liturgy, a good choir with a well rendered anthem, the rector's fine and engaging sermon or even a diocesan convention! The 'circus' involves more. At the very least the main event for the Christian Church would be the

proclamation of the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ in such a vital way that people would claim Him as Savior and follow Him as Lord in the fellowship of the church. The second big event would be what I like to call living the Incarnational trajectory. If we believe that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son" if we truly believe that this world is the object of God's adoring, then serving the world especially serving hurting humankind continues this trajectory of compassion.

At the reorganizing convention last February, a resolution on transparency was drafted that called for a committee to survey the diocese and determine the priorities that the diocese had for its ongoing life and witness. In depth surveys of a vast sample of our communicants revealed the glorious news that the two highest priorities of this diocese are in fact evangelism and ministry to the poor and homeless. Other equally important concerns are communication and the development of leadership both lay and ordained.

As your bishop over these past ten months what has truly astounded me, delighted me, humbled me and moved me is how very quickly you have been about these priorities! Not only have our intact parishes been conducting medical mission trips, providing hundreds of Thanksgiving baskets, community vacation church schools, excellent evangelistic efforts that have resulted in large numbers of baptisms and confirmations but our "faith communities", locked out of their church buildings, have moved rapidly from a quickly put together strategy of survival to intentional ministry of evangelism and ministries of compassion. One faith community, a parish in exile, leads in habitat for humanity work while another moved by a Sunday gospel reading has determined to raise \$5000 to respond to Him who fed 5000 people. The sacrifice of this faith community is

feeding folks in their local community and through ERD feeding those in our larger Anglican family.

And through the ministry of intentional hospitality and welcome to all, and well rendered seeker friendly preaching of the saving gospel' the work of evangelism has resulted in the flowing waters of Holy Baptism and many Confirmations and receptions. In some of these communities the numbers of baptisms and confirmations have set parish records. One man who had battled many issues from post traumatic distress to addiction issues came to a vital faith in one of our communities and then had a family to be with him as he unexpectedly died of his many complications. The divine trajectory of compassion for this ever so loved world has been the primary method of evangelism and it is bearing so much more fruit than many of us would have ever dreamed possible in this first year of our recovery!

I was moved deeply by the outpouring of generosity from this very newly reorganized diocese that responded to our horrific ice storm crisis in Kentucky last winter. The first moments of the renewed diocese were moments of outreach sharing and mission. Thanks be to the God of compassion and love whose trajectory of care for this fragile world is so mirrored in the life of our diocese.

In the very early moments of the reorganization of our life, it became clear that we had to revise the canons of our diocese to be sure that they were in agreement with the constitution and canons of The Episcopal Church. This work is made necessary as a result of the sacred trust and covenant that brought us into being as a diocese in 1982. At that moment, we became a diocese by we as a diocese by acceding to the constitution and canons of The Episcopal Church as a condition of our admission as a diocese. Our

faithful committee has been studying all of our canons first to be sure that all comply with the Canons of the Episcopal Church. They have done excellent work and I trust that you will honor their work and make the immediate modifications that they have suggested in resolutions that you will consider later today. Ongoing work during the next year will involve the study of our canons to be sure that they not only comply by the letter to the Episcopal Church's canons but that they represent the best understandings of , and values of, a church committed to the full inclusion of all of God's baptized folk, that they celebrate the ministry of the laity and clergy in the leading and governing of the church, and that they are nimble enough and flexible enough to allow best practices to emerge.

Towards the end of the first phase of their work, in the early fall, the committee's attention turned to Canon 43 of our diocesan canons. Recently introduced into the diocesan canons, this canon declared that marriage was held in this church to be between a man and a woman. This canon reflects the rubrics of the BCP and the canon law of The Episcopal Church where in both places such understandings are clearly stated. The second section of the canon forbids the blessing in any circumstance of same gendered unions. These canons do not contradict the canons of the Episcopal Church and therefore the committee felt that to bring them before you for deletion would have gone beyond the task for the first phase of the committee's work.

It must be noted that several on the committee found the first section of the canon to be redundant and the second section to trespass unduly on the conscience of clergy. It is clear that the Episcopal Church, at the present time, has no rites for the blessing of same gendered unions and it is also clear that this topic is very much in discussion in our

church and The Anglican Communion. However, I would say, that this specific prohibition tends to go further in defining the boundaries of what might be done in private pastoral care than any canon I have encountered in my years as an Episcopal clergy person.

For the committee to have recommended its deletion at this time would have gone beyond their initial mandate and would have necessitated a debate on issues of human sexuality in the midst of a canonical revision process. Since this diocese has failed to act on the requests of thirty years of General Convention Resolutions to discuss issues of human sexuality and has ignored resolutions of the last four Lambeth conferences requesting dialog and a listening and learning processes, the canons committee thought it unwise to have a debate on this canon without having had a careful, well planned and careful listening and education process on the issues involved. What they have recommended instead is that this listening and educational process begin. Such a process might and should include issues of scriptural authority and interpretation, the historical understandings of the sacrament of Holy Baptism and the rite of matrimony with the Christian anthropology that is foundational for such understandings, the various General Convention resolutions and Lambeth resolutions on this subject, and recent insights and conclusions from the psychiatric and medical communities. Most importantly, in order for a listening process to have any integrity testimony from gay and lesbian Episcopalians and their families needs to be included. . It was felt that well planned engagement of this issue could be accomplished on the deanery level and several teachers and theologians who have different perspectives and understandings could resource this work.

As you might imagine, as it became known that canon 43 was under consideration and since we operate out of a commitment of transparency, countless e-mails messages have been exchanged through cyber space on this matter! I have been so impressed by the civility of the tone of these communications, the depth of thinking, the respect and the honoring of various perspectives, and the intelligence of responses on both sides of this concern. The conversation concluded when it was pointed out that Article 18 of our articles requires 100% of the voters present at convention to accede to a canonical change that has not been recommended by the committee. That article itself might require further reflection; however, given its reality, the suggestion for a process of study, reflection, listening and discernment is clearly the way to proceed. Having read the e-mails, I am so sorry that I will not be here to be a part of this process. I think that this diocese is on the very cusp of doing the best dialog on this issue that has been done in our church. With all humility I ask the privilege of suggesting a way to begin every session on this topic. Please take out your prayer books and turn to page 298. I want us to read together the first rubric and to say it as a kind of creed. "Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's body the church. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble."

When baptized folks come together as sisters and brothers to discern, they should be relaxed and non anxious because despite differences of understanding, interpretation, and emphasis they will begin and end conversation as sisters and brothers because of the action of the Living God who adopts each of us as beloved and cherished daughters and sons. If your conversations begin and end with such clarity, the fruit of those

conversations can only build up the body of Christ. I wish you well in this work and will certainly track you in my heart.

The budget you are about to adopt is also good news. Most parishes and faith communities have been able to increase their giving to the mission of the diocese and the balanced budget and a substantial reserve of over \$200,000 will allow the next Bishop to build a staff, and working with the executive committee develop programs that will advance the mission of the diocese in its next season of new life. It is worth celebrating that this budget will accomplish all of that without a subsidy from the church wide budget of The Episcopal Church. We thank God for the generous support we received this first year and we thank God that we will be only partner contributors and not recipients in the upcoming year.

Last January I was writing a sermon on the text "And God said to Jonah go to Nineveh". The phone rang and it was Bishop Mathews making a call on behalf of Bishop Jefferts-Schori asking if I would consider being the Provisional Bishop of Fort Worth. The last ten months have been the rest of the story. Please know that this season of service has been perhaps the most profound of my ministry. I am in awe of you.... The steering committee that preserved the Episcopal Church, the mostly retired clergy that stepped up to lead our faith communities, the women and men who assumed leadership on our various newly constituted commissions and committees, our chancellors, treasurer, corporation and standing committee members all have done tremendous service and have accomplished tremendous things in such a short ten months! I could not have assumed this trust and responsibility without the support of my small but mighty staff. Canon Moore has been a tremendous source of advice, support, transportation, and not

only has he told me where the bodies are buried, he buried most of them! Joan McCauley learned the job of Bishop's administrative assistant in ten short months becoming in the process one of the best staff members with which I have served. Katie Sherrod is unsurpassed as a communicator in the Episcopal Church and that she belongs to us is a gift. Eleanor Normand has given tremendous service as our Web master communicating late breaking news and important information. Her well crafted web page has been the glue holding us together. Our chancellor gives most days of her life to this diocese and the management of our litigation is her consuming passion because and only because she loves her Lord and she loves and believes in This Episcopal Church. Thank God Richard Henderson accepted the position of vice chancellor. His keen mind and steady shoulder have been a blessing to both the chancellor and to me.

The Rev. Fred Barber thought he would be in retirement this year. Chairing the standing committee instead he has helped steer the ship during my absences and has been a steady guide and friend to me.

Platt Allen took on the tremendous responsibility of managing our finances and in a season of personal struggle he has maintained careful records of our first budget. He too has been a trusted advisor.

Despite trying to fulfill his duties as Chaplain at All Saints School in a year of staff resignations, David Madison assumed the additional responsibility of managing the arrangements for this convention. Although he had a wonderful committee, this man also is one of those who has stepped up to the plate and offered truly sacrificial service.



You are all awesome icons of an awesome God “whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to him from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesus. Amen