



Bishop's Address to the 116th Diocesan Convention

It is the custom in the House of Bishops, when a bishop goes to the microphone to speak, he or she says their first name and then the diocese they represent. Like "Provenzano, Long Island", "Beckwith, Newark." I deviate from that a little bit. I say "Fisher, Western Massachusetts, Home of the Basketball Hall of Fame."

Now, after experiencing life with you for over five years, I'm tempted to say this the next time I speak at the House of Bishops: "Fisher, Western Massachusetts, home of fearless followers of Jesus, who know grace is amazing, the Holy Spirit is wild and free, life is abundant, all creation is holy, and we are defined by Jesus' mission of Mercy, Compassion and Hope." I think that is who we are. Am I right?

This summer the bishops of Province I, New England, sponsored a pilgrimage down the Connecticut River - from the source near Canada to Long Island Sound. I was blessed to be on the Pilgrimage for six days - from Turners Falls to Middletown, Connecticut. I was especially blessed to have my son Geoff with me the whole time. Each day started in silence - everyone quietly getting their canoe or kayak loaded up, pushing off into the river. And we stayed in silence until 11 am. Just paddling, taking in the sights and sounds of God's creation. At 11 am every day, Lisa, one of our chaplains would sing this song:

"The River is flowing, flowing and growing.
The River is flowing
Down to the Sea.
Holy Spirit carry me.
Your child I will always be.
Holy Spirit carry me.
Down to the sea.

"Holy Spirit carry me. Your child I will always be." That is the deep truth, the truth of the soul, that grounds everything we do – here at this Convention and when we leave here to bring the gospel to a world that desperately needs it.

Remember last year when my friend, Rob Wright, the Bishop of Atlanta, spoke to us. He rocked the house, didn't he? Last month in his blog, he wrote this about working for the mission of the church. So what Rob wrote also applies to us – to the Church in Western Massachusetts.

"The imagination of the true laborers belongs to God. They have seen God do infinitely more than they can ask or imagine. And so they trust. They trust that God, as the still point in the circle, is drawing the circle of harvest wider and wider. The rejected, sold out and taunted want in."

St. Paul said this so clearly in that famous passage from Romans Chapter 8. "If God is for us, who is against us? What can separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? As it is written 'For your sake we are being killed all day long. We are counted as sheep to be slaughtered.' No in all these things we are conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, not Angels, nor rulers, no things present, nor things to come, nor powers, not height, not depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This passage gets read often at funerals. It certainly was at my former parish, Grace Church in Millbrook, New York. But we decided to edit St. Paul. We felt that reading "As it is written 'for your sake we are being killed all day long. We are counted as sheep to be slaughtered'" would be a bit of a downer in the midst of a funeral for a loved one with the certain hope of Resurrection. So, I took the bible we used at funerals and put brackets around those lines. I would tell whomever the reader was to leave out the bracketed lines. Go right from "or peril or sword?" to "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors."

Dozens of funerals went along just fine with our edited version of Romans. Until one day, the family member who was designated to do the reading, got to church late and was clearly harried and somewhat distraught. I tried my pastoral best to comfort her. When she was calmer I showed her the Romans 8 passage she was to read and explained about leaving out the bracketed part. She said she understood and took her seat.

When the time came in the liturgy for her reading, she calmly got up, went to the lectern and read "A reading from Romans. As it is written, 'for your sake we are being killed all day long. We are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' The Word of the Lord." And went back to her seat.

I took that to be a sign from God that I should look up where that verse comes from. "Where it is written." So I googled it and found it in Psalm 44. That line about being killed and slaughtered is not out of place in Psalm 44. Psalm 44 is one long complaint against God. Lots of being rejected and sold out and taunted. God is even accused of being asleep. "Rouse yourself" the psalmist cries. 25 long verses of misery... But there is one more line. "Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love."

You can ask our rabbi in residence, Mark Shapiro, about this; but I'm pretty sure the Hebrew word for "steadfast love" is *chesed*. It is one of those words that does not have a direct translation into English. Sometimes we translate it as "loving kindness." No word or phrase adequately sums it up. We just know it is way deeper than "being nice." This isn't very poetic but I like to translate it as "a no matter what kind of love." And that seems to fit with what Paul intends in Romans 8.

"Holy Spirit carry me. Your child I will always be." That's true. We are that. But Paul and Psalm 44 remind us that we live in a world where people are rejected and sold out and taunted. And we can't bracket them out. They are part of the story and they deserve our attention.

"Rejected, sold out, taunted." Who do you think of when you hear that?

- Refugees?
- Dreamers - those immigrant children who were brought here brought here by their parents and were given rights through DACA which has now been repealed.
- Victims of the Hurricanes?

- Veterans who served our country and now live in poverty?
- Those killed by gun violence?
- Those who suffer from America's original sin of racism?
- LGBTQ people who experience prejudice?

I have not covered it all. Who do you think of? Remember the words of Rob Wright:

“We trust that God, as the still point in the circle, is drawing the circle of the harvest wider and wider. The rejected, sold out and taunted want in.”

Let's go back to the River Pilgrimage for a moment. After many days on the river for some and a few for others, we stopped paddling and pulled the boats up on the bank. We sat there taking in the beauty of God's creation. And then Lisa, the chaplain who sang so beautifully, read this passage written by Drew Dillinger.

"It's 3:23 in the morning. And I'm awake. Because my great, great, great grandchildren won't let me sleep. My great, great, great grandchildren ask me in dreams: what did you do while the planet was plundered? What did you do when the earth was unraveling? Surely you did something when the seasons started failing? As mammals, reptiles and birds were dying? Did you fill the streets in protest when democracy was stolen? What did you do once you knew? What did you do...once...you knew?"

Perhaps we could put the earth herself in that category of rejected, sold out, taunted.

Back to Rob Wright. (I quote him and Michael Curry like Jesus quoted Isaiah and Jeremiah.) Recently Rob wrote this: "Jesus was a man of prayer and action. Prayer is a prelude to action."

I love that line. Prayer is essential and at the core of our lives. It is our life line to the Living God. It shapes our lives. As I quoted from Thomas Merton last convention: "If we dare to descend to our depths, there we realize we are in continuous and constant contact with God." But let's remember that prayer is prelude to action. As Zen teaches "we are not in charge and everything we do matters."

Where is prayer leading us to now? How can we participate with our God who keeps widening the circle?

I'll end with three stories of people who widen the circle.

It is the story of William Guerry, born in South Carolina in 1861. He was ordained an Episcopal priest and then elected bishop of the Diocese of South Carolina in 1907. At a time where many of those statues of Robert E. Lee were being erected throughout the south, Guerry boldly spoke out for equal rights for black people within society and within the church. He wrote:

"We should strive for unity, not uniformity. Uniformity is mechanical, barren, and unfruitful. Unity is organic, living, and capable of endless growth. If we are to be truly catholic, as Christ himself is catholic, then we must have a church broad enough to embrace every living human soul."

When the Diocese of South Carolina gathered for Convention in 1914, he made the case for the election of a black Suffragan Bishop. The Convention voted no.

Guerry continued to fight segregation. In 1925 a priest, angry at what the bishop was saying about white supremacy, came to Guerry's office, and shot him. Guerry died of his wounds five days later but not before he forgave his killer with the words "Forgive him Father. He knew not what he did."

Another story I saw a couple of weeks ago on CBS THIS MORNING - but don't tell my daughter who works for GOOD MORNING AMERICA. It is about a seventeen year old boy in California named Dillon Eisman who became inspired to take the clothes in thrift stores for the homeless and redesign them into free trendy clothes for the homeless. He says "what you wear makes a difference in how you feel inside. People who get second hand clothes should not feel second rate." He says by upcycling, we can uplift. And then he gives those clothes away.

And the third story of people taking Romans 8 and Psalm 44 to heart is you - the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement in Western Massachusetts. As I have gone from parish to parish in these five years, I have heard countless stories of people who say "I'm in this church because when I was going through a tough time, this church welcomed me." Each and every parish has several stories like that. Your holy hospitality, your pastoral care widens the circle. And then there is the thriving ministry to veterans, our many street ministries like Church Without Walls, Cathedral in the Night, Cathedral of the Beloved, Walking Together, Worcester Fellowship. And now we have a full time Missioner for Hispanic/Latino Ministry and a Missioner to the African Community in Worcester. And there is the sober house at Reconciliation, Webster. We have so many places that offer "Laundry Love. Thank you for standing up for Dreamers. Thank you for caring for God's Creation. This is not an exhaustive list. It goes on and on.

When the House of Bishop's met in Alaska, we worked together on a statement about the sacredness of creation and the blessing of cultural diversity. Bishop Mariann Budde of Washington, DC, added something to our work that has reframed by thinking. She said that we have to stop "encouraging" justice, peace, climate action, racial reconciliation, etc. as if they are not happening. She said we must "join with" those who are already engaging in these important works. We here in Western Massachusetts "join with" many good people engaged in the critical issues of our time. We join with them and we do what we can do to further God's dream for the world.

I look forward to where God leads us next. I look forward to acting on our prayers with you and taking Romans 8 and Psalm 44 to heart. In Western Massachusetts, home of fearless followers of Jesus, who know grace is amazing, the Holy Spirit is wild and free, life is abundant. A people defined by Jesus' Mission of Mercy, Compassion and Hope.