

The following is a transcript of the Very Rev. Richard T. Lawson III, Bishop-Elect's sermon delivered at the celebration eucharist at the 195th Diocesan Convention at Camp McDowell.

I am just so humbled and happy to be with all of you. It's amazing to be here, especially just five days after the election. Thank you so much for having me. Catherine, my wife, and I are going to be here throughout the whole convention, so there's going to be plenty of time to talk. Bishop G and I'll do a Q&A tomorrow night. I look forward to getting to know all of you over the next three days.

But for tonight, what I want to do is focus on this gospel story (Matthew 9:35-38). We have a gospel story that is short, and dramatic, and vivid. The dramatic part is Jesus doing what he's been doing the whole time. In Matthew's gospel, right after his baptism, he started doing just this, proclaiming the kingdom of God, this mysterious reality associated with God's presence and healing people, curing the sick, curing the diseased. It's so dramatic, and I think just in a nutshell, how we should think about healing here is that it includes everything from Jesus being able to restore people from physical illness to physical health. That includes everything from Jesus being able to restore people who are socially isolated because of leprosy or loneliness, or you name it back to the community. So healing here should be imagined as being very, very broad and very, very dramatic. The vivid part of this gospel story is the way that Matthew paints a picture of Jesus with words.

This is one of the most vivid moments in the four gospels where the Holy Spirit inspires Matthew to look into the heart of Jesus, to look below the surface of all these things Jesus is doing, like healing and teaching about the kingdom, to look within the heart of Jesus. And so Matthew puts it this way: when Jesus looked at the crowds, when Jesus looked, I haven't looked at the clergy yet, and this is kind of intimidating. I am really distracted for a moment, and you're on both sides. Okay, back to Jesus, which is the most important thing.

When Jesus looked on the crowds, he had compassion on them for them, for they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. The image here is incredible. The King James version is probably a little bit better. When he looked on the crowds, he was moved with compassion in the original language. It means in his gut he felt something deep down in his bones. He was moved with love for all of the people in those crowds. You know how sometimes when you're trying to figure out what to do in life, someone will say or you'll say, I have a thought maybe we should

consider. That's not what is going on here. Jesus is not thinking about loving people. He's not coming up with a plan. He feels something deep within himself as he gazes upon these crowds. This is an incredible moment. What Matthew is giving us is essentially what is the heart of Jesus. What is the foundation of his ministry in our ministry? What is below the surface? Every single time he speaks and acts, it is from the heart of love, and it is from his very gut. And when you step back from that just a moment and think about this being God's son and the mystery of the incarnation, Matthew is implying that at the very heart of Almighty God, even this kind of gut-wrenching love for people. For God so loved the world.

I'm told that Bishop Stough, the eighth bishop of Alabama, God rest his soul, loved to say that the longest journey a person will make is 18 inches. Did you hear him say that was 18 inches from here to here, from the mind to the heart? And so I want to tell another story that has to do with making that journey a story that I think really resonates with this gospel reading and a story that's all about feeling for the love of God, especially in a moment when the defense mechanisms fail in life in those moments when we really need God to do something for us that we can't do for ourselves.

At the cathedral where I serve, the preacher on Sunday pointed out that this election occurred in the 25th anniversary of my priesthood. I've been ordained for 25 years this year. And you know how sometimes when a preacher tells you something and they're intense for you to think about one thing and you think about something else, what I thought about and had been thinking about since she said that was not at all my anniversary, but that means this is the 25th anniversary of 9/11, and this fall will be powerful for our country. What a solemn occasion for us that's approaching. And that got me thinking about what happened on 9/11. I had just graduated from the General Seminary and came home. Catherine and I had a baby, and Catherine had worked at Trinity Wall Street right downtown. And so that whole area was very vivid, and we know all of that area really well.

A friend of mine, Stuart Hoke, who's a priest and an Arkansan, was the vicar of Trinity Wall Street at that time. And he tells an incredible, moving story; it's his story, and I have his permission to share some of it with you. When 9/11 happened after the second tower had been hit, Stuart and the organist walked into Trinity Church, Wall Street, and if you haven't been there, it's a stone's throw literally from what were the towers. It's right there. Stuart and the organist walk into Trinity Wall Street,

and after the second tower hits, there are hundreds of people in Trinity Wall Street, hundreds of people, and they've come seeking shelter. They've come for prayer, they've come for safety. They come not to be alone. They've come for God knows what, and they're all there. And at this point, they don't know exactly what all is going on.

And so, Stuart, there's no service for this in the Book of Common Prayer. So, he gets up into the chance, and he quiets everybody, and the first thing he thinks of is he says a prayer from memory because he couldn't get to a prayer book. There were so many people. And so he prays a prayer called the Prayer for Quiet Confidence from the Book of Common Prayer: *Oh God of peace, who has taught us who has in returning and rest we will be saved, in quietness and peace will be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God.*

And then he rift a little bit: *Where we may know that your spirit is closer to us than the air we breathe and that you are always even now doing greater things for us than we could ever ask or imagine.* And before he could do the little concluding in Jesus' name, before anybody could say Amen, somebody leapt out of their prayer, out of their pew and yell, "do it again".

Now, in one sense, there's nothing funny about the story, but I will say to the clergy, when was the last time you were waltzing through the Collect of the day and somebody leapt up and said, "Do it again"? Stuart then read from Romans 8, "*For we are convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers nor heights, nor depths, you know it nor anything else in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ*". I don't know if he intended to pick what is probably the most popular epistle at funerals, but he did. That's what he read in that moment.

He says that the tower collapsed. It registered 4.8 on the Richter scale, and once that went down, he and the organist decided it was time to sing a hymn. So they sang, "Oh God, our help in ages past". And Stuart says there was an audible gut-wrenching God sigh when they said those lines, a shelter from the storm. Shortly after the hymn, he says, and it was one of the only people he recognized in the church, an Episcopalian, a professional woman started yelling, bellowing Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. When Jesus saw the crowds, he was moved with compassion. He was moved with compassion.

The invitation of this gospel reading is for us to feel God's love, to feel the power of the gospel, even the power of the Christian faith and not to overthink it, not to over intellectualize it. Now I'm not saying dumb down the gospel, I'm not saying don't use your brain. We're Episcopalians for a reason, but there are times in this life and in the life to come where reason alone will not get you very far. The mind and the heart need one another, and that too may be yet one more type of healing that Jesus sometimes offers, that reunion of mind and heart, that Bishop Stough so loved to talk about. So, Diocese of Alabama, as we hear this gospel, let us feel it. And as Jesus sends us forth and Jesus always sends us forth, may we do all that we can in any way we can to help other people feel the love of Jesus Christ, especially when the defense mechanisms fail.