Sermon for the 56th Diocesan Convention

Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota
October 23-24, 2026 | Minot, North Dakota
The Rt. Rev. Shay Craig, XII Bishop Diocesan

When I was growing up, every August, after I came back from summer camp in Colorado, I would be sent to my grandparents' farm near Carthage, Missouri. And then one summer, we packed up a ton of food, I mean coolers and coolers and coolers of food, and we went into town, where there was a gathering at the Catholic Church of refugees from Vietnam.

These were families that had been separated during the fall of Saigon and subsequent evacuations from Vietnam. There were kiosks set up all over the church grounds, with photographs of babies waving in the summer breeze. The idea was to help these refugees reconnect with family members with whom they lost touch, in the frenzied Exodus from their war-torn country.

This gathering – this refugee meet-up – which began in the 1970s, still happens every August in Carthage, to this day.

It came as such a shock to me at the time, to imagine that there were people fleeing their country in boats, who literally just handed their children – their infants and their toddlers and their young children - just handed them to perfect strangers in the hope that their children would survive.

Of course, the Vietnamese boat people are not the only example of desperate parents handing their children over to the fates and placing all their hope on the goodwill, good character, and basic human decency of perfect strangers.

The children's classic The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe begins with Operation Pied Piper, during which somewhere between 800,000 and 1.5 million children and young families were evacuated into the homes and lives of perfect strangers during the London Blitz in 1939.

Before that, in 1937, there was the *Kindertransport*, where 10,000 Jewish children were evacuated from Nazi occupied Germany into the arms of waiting strangers in other areas of Europe.

Even today there is something called the Train of Hope that evacuates sick children from war-torn Ukraine into Poland.

It is easy to love a baby that way. They are innocent victims of their circumstances. Somehow, in our hearts, that makes it easier to extend our hands, to help them. In fact, it

almost seems compulsory. If someone holds up their child in desperation, we are duty bound to take them.

So, when does that change? When they are school age, and first to learn to share, and then don't? When they are high schoolers, whose words are like knives, and they roll their eyes so forcefully that it is almost audible?

When they are old enough to know better?
When they ought to bear the consequences of their actions?
When they ought to have made better decisions?
When they ought to know where to go to get those services?

At some point, the immediate, wholehearted, unconditional response of grabbing hold of that desperate baby with both hands…. fades away… And we look with suspicion at the panhandler, or the person in the car line at the food bank.

St. Paul responds, from our Romans text, that it isn't the desperate person who changes, it is us. Say what you will about St. Paul, but he knows something about being human.

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul says, *who shall separate us from the love of Christ?* And then describes things that might…

Getting crossways with the people at work, getting an official warning, or a notice of being laid off. Or may Getting in trouble with the administration at school, detention, suspension, expelled. St. Paul calls these things **"trouble."**

Or maybe it is just because we are who we are…being picked on because we are short or fat, because we have a certain skin color, because we believe in something other people don't like. St. Paul calls that **"persecution."**

Maybe, St. Paul says, we think we can be separated from the love of God because we are hungry. Maybe hungry for food, maybe hungry for love. Maybe it has been a long time since we knew how we were going to put food on the table, if we were going to be sleeping inside or not. Maybe it has been a long time since someone called us by our name. St. Paul calls that **"famine."**

Maybe it is being unable to hide the truth about our sinfulness from the world. Maybe it is when people can see us struggling with mental illness or addiction disease. When we are wrestling with pervasive sadness or fear of the future. When the people around us (if they even see us) can see that we are just not alright. St. Paul calls that **"nakedness."**

Or maybe what will keep God from loving us is violence. Violence that was optional when we struck out from a place of rage or fear or hurt. Or violence that is not optional in defense of

ourselves or something we love or because it is our livelihood. St. Paul calls this **"the sword."**

When we look at that list, the list of things that St. Paul thinks we might be thinking would be **TOO MUCH** for God to put up with…

We realize that those are the very people Jesus states over and over again, are the people he came to save.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us: *On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

So when the desperate person holds out their hands to us and we withhold mercy or compassion or justice, is the love of Jesus conditional because of Jesus or because of us?

Never one to say something one time, or to say it in simple terms, St. Paul gives it to us again **AND** it's another list…

Being offered kindness, receiving alms, staying in a shelter, accepting a free meal or a few dollars in the parking lot, that will not keep us from the love of God, St. Paul tells us.

Being angry and abusing our helpers, yelling at the nurse in the free clinic, calling the volunteer a name, sneering at the food in the soup kitchen, being our worst selves, will not keep us from the love of God.

Nor can anyone in authority: not the city leaders, not the head of the church, not scientists, or millionaires, or influencers, tell us who God loves.

No matter how great, how powerful, how elevated, how apparently virtuous…no living person in all creation can tell us who God loves.

No matter how much hatred they spew, no matter how much they seem to have "won" in this world, no matter how obvious it seems, that they are the boss of things; they do not determine who among us deserves to be shown the love of God.

St. Paul says: *Neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

The love of God is unconditional. We cannot work harder and get more. We cannot screw up so badly that we lose it.

Nothing. Nothing. NOTHING can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Period.

This is the truth.

When the helpless baby is held out to us from the heartbroken arms of the desperate parent, we grab that baby without thinking, without judging, without even feeling. Because we are made in the image and likeness of God. We instinctively love unconditionally.

Unless, as St. Paul describes here, we let the powers of this earth get in the way. Unless we let ourselves believe there is a hierarchy among humans (a **"height nor depth"**). Unless we let ourselves be polluted by the fear of a **"present or future"** in which we should hoard that love. Unless we believe that the Creator of all things thinks we should value something greater than the Creatures He made in love.

St. Paul is telling us that none of the conditions he just listed, nothing he could think of in his vast long litany is, in the mind of Jesus, a reason not to love us completely.

All of that love is flowing into us, no matter what we do.

So, why are people still going hungry? Why are people still suffering? Why is there shame and fear and self-loathing in the world around us? Why doesn't every person benefit from that love?

You see, we don't have a supply problem, we have a distribution problem.

There is enough love in the world for everyone to feel it. We are just not spreading it around enough.

This is the calling of the church; our church, all churches. We don't have to produce the love of Christ, we don't have to determine who should get it, or what measure of love they should get. Thank God! We just have to figure out a better way to distribute it.

Hopefully it goes without saying, that the letters from St. Paul to the various communities he helped to church-plant are NOT the actual Gospels; they are instructions.

This – the second half of the New Testament – is a MANUAL for what to DO with the LOVE that Jesus gives us. Not in the past tense, either, but continuously. From then to now, we don't have a supply problem, we have a distribution problem.

This world is THIRSTY for grace without judgment, for kindness without consequences, for mercy that isn't a trap. We are ALL thirsty for a world where the babies held out to us, infants, toddlers, adults, no matter their country of origin, no matter their appearance, no matter what they call the Creator, where all who are offered into our care: are safe, are fed, are warm, are healthy, are loved.

Because there is more than enough food to feed the world. There is more than enough fresh water. There is an unlimited supply of LOVE.

But what are we supposed to do? We three thousand Episcopalians in the vast world that seems to have forgotten how to take that baby into their arms?

Well, for good or evil, this is not the first time we have found ourselves in this state. The world comes and goes, from times of relative suffering. It seems as though the supply chain breaks pretty regularly through history.

It is from one such time that Jeremiah writes to us, from a time of displacement:

- Of relocation
- Of warfare
- Of sectarianism
- Of bigotry, cruelty, and hatred

Sound familiar? Year, Jeremiah was writing to us in 2026 from 500 BCE: *The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. I will build you up again"*

We are not in it alone. St. Paul affirms this: *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.*

God points to the desperate child being held out to us. Every single day. God places the suffering in our midst so that we will see and care for and, yes, love them.

Even if they are the most challenging and difficult and seemingly unworthy people we can imagine. It is our job, it is our privilege to reach out and grab that suffering soul, to gather in that child.

Because you know what? The desperate parent holding that baby out to us is God.

There is a reason we have had an ingathering of our outreach efforts and placed them on this table today. There is a purpose to our elevating these gifts, as well as the bread and the wine.

It is because THIS is what we are being asked to give. THIS is how WE are broken open. THIS is how WE are poured out, in service of one another, who was broken open and poured out for us.

Please don't misunderstand me. Our buildings, our liturgies, our numbers, they matter. We love them and we love one another in them.

But we cannot measure our vitality by how many gather on a Sunday. *Wherever tow or more are gathered Christ is with us*.

And it is the presence of Christ that makes us a Church – anywhere.

Jesus never walked into a village and said, “Where is your church and how many pledging units do you have?” He walked into town and said, “Who is suffering?”

If he walked in here today, he would ask, “How are you opening the floodgates of the love I have been giving you for millennia? He said, *"I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit for the Kingdom."*

Look, there are so many babies being held out to us. So many of God’s children are NOT feeling the love. So many institutions and preconditions, biases, prejudices, and unexamined beliefs are damming up the flow.

It is without a doubt overwhelming. But we all get at least one bite at the apple.

As a diocese, we have decided to reach out for the babies. In some ways, really, really babies, by prioritizing youth and young adult ministry. You know – goodness I hope you know – that we are planning a series of youth retreats next summer based on exactly this Good News: that nothing can *separate us from the love of God in Christ*.

And in the coming months, we are working to make Godly Play and other resources readily available, easily tailored and adapted, and present to children of all ages in all our congregations. Archdeacon Jessica Krzewina, whom God has called to service of God’s children, has accepted that call as well in our diocese.

Suicide and self-harm rates among children and youth in this country are at an all-time high and reported rates absolutely do not reflect the real numbers. I have no evidence but faith to go on, but I believe that making our babies aware that someone is always there to grab them, and bring them in, can save their lives.

Another channel of this love in our diocese is in the area of reconciliation. We don’t need to look to Asia or Ukraine or the Middle East to see how love has been warped by systems of oppression and violence.

The Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota is uniquely called and capable of addressing historical and ongoing injustice with our indigenous siblings, our Sudanese siblings, and those marginalized by the damming of the flow.

Father Peter Akicmeir has agreed to be our Diocesan Reconciliation Officer, to make it his business to see that we see and serve those particular neighbors.

Those are two examples of how we are committed to letting the water of life turn the turbines of our diocese and build up energy for the Kingdom.

What is in your heart? Where is the Spirit pushing you? Tell me. Tell your priest or deacon, or call a member of Diocesan Council. Don't be the person holding back the tide. Because there is a wave building here…

Look, stand up in your seats, pause when you come forward for communion, linger here after the service. Come and See. Look at all the diverse ways that we open the floodgates of the unconditional love of God.

Be surprised
Be humbled
Be grateful
Be inspired…

And then let us all go back to our communities renewed, refreshed, recommitted to being the reason someone knows that there is nothing that can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.