

Bishop's Address for the 46th Annual Convention
Episcopal Diocese of Western Louisiana
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The Main Thing

The central character of the series *Lucifer* was, well, Lucifer: Lucifer Morningstar to be exact. Still, he was Old Scratch, the Dark Lord, Beelzebub, Satan. Lucifer did his devilish work by looking people in the eye and asking them, “What is it you truly desire?”

The Great Tempter does use our desires to lead us away from God. But that is not because desire is bad or wrong. On the contrary, God created humans as desiring beings. Desire is what animates us as spiritual beings.

We have many, many desires. But within each of us there is one central desire: our desire for God. As Augustine famously put it, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Pursuing our desire for God is the main thing of our lives. We are meant to order all of our other desires according to how they lead us closer to or distance us from God. Our challenge is to remember to keep the main thing the main thing. In other words, we have the tendency to make something else the main thing of our lives.

Lucifer’s game is to play on our lesser desires. Initially, he doesn’t urge us to pursue some obvious evil. Instead, he amplifies our desire for some lesser good. His aim is to nudge us toward making a lesser good into our main thing.

To put this a different way, Lucifer tempts us to make something less than God into our god. Into our life-guiding, life-defining desire. That’s what the Bible means by idolatry: to devote our lives to something that isn’t truly the main thing.

The Tempter’s work can be especially effective among us Jesus followers because it is so subtle. That’s why Jesus said the following:

‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?” Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.” (Matthew 7:22-23)

These disciples had devoted themselves to their various ministries. They were accomplished prophets and exorcists and healers. And yet, Jesus calls them evildoers.

The implication is that we can find ourselves in the same position. Our family, our political ideals, our social causes, and our works of mercy can become idols. Each of these can be good things, so long as we keep the main thing the main thing. Otherwise, we may end up making

Jesus an afterthought or even treating him as a means for reaching something else that we desire more.

Remember, Jesus once said: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26) Jarring, right? Well you see, the challenge is not *what* we’re doing but *why* we’re doing it. It’s all about keeping the main thing the main thing.

Let me explain.

Jesus is all about the kingdom of heaven. That’s not a place, by the way. It’s a kind of relationship with God beginning here and stretching into eternity. Entering the kingdom of heaven means to align our desires with God’s desires. To be connected and to stay connected to God on God’s terms. To allow our love for God to be the guiding force of our lives. That’s the main thing.

And how do we do we that? The clue lies in what Jesus says to those hapless disciple-wannabes: “I never knew you.” We enter the kingdom in our everyday lives through our personal relationship with the risen Jesus. Having a personal relationship with Jesus means that we regularly encounter a living person in a way that makes us who we are and shapes how we navigate the varied and complex circumstances of this life.

Think about Mary Magdalene’s experience at the empty tomb. Initially, she mistakes the risen Jesus for the gardener. She recognizes him when he speaks her name. Crucially, he says, “Don’t hold on to me.” In other words, “Don’t cling to your ideas of me. Open yourself to my living presence in your life. And our relationship will make you who you truly are.” That’s how Jesus keeps his promise at the Last Supper to be our friend. He shows up in our lives. He walks along with us through the mundane and the extraordinary. When we’re on a roll and when we’re down on our luck. For us, the key is to open ourselves to his influence.

I like to use Hartmut Rosa’s concept of *resonance* to illustrate what I mean. In physics the term “resonance” describes the transfer of energy between objects. A common example is the interaction between tuning forks. If you put two tuning forks of the same frequency next to each other and then strike one of them, the second tuning fork begins to vibrate.

On analogy, our relationship with Jesus shapes and guides our lives. Being near him moves us inwardly. It’s something like the experience of being transported by a piece of music or stopped in our tracks by a sunset. Our heart, our soul, our mind, even our body resonates with the person of the risen Christ.

However, the spiritual vibrations within us are not merely involuntary reactions. We are not billiard balls set in motion by a collision with the cue ball. We respond intentionally. It’s like having that vague sense that someone is looking at us. Instead of ducking our heads or looking away, we decide to return the gaze. I am not only seen. I see that I am being seen. And so too does the Other. Our interior lives are braided together with his.

Further, being braided together with Christ changes who we are. Who we are—our sense of self—evolves as a function of this relationship.

Finally, it's crucial to understand that resonance is not an achievement on our part. We can't chase it down and make it happen. It's not an achievement we could strive to attain. Jesus initiates it. We wait expectantly, prayerfully, faithfully and then respond to him breaking into our lives: like a thief in the night.

Our relationship with the risen Jesus is the main thing. When we remember to keep the main thing the main thing, we know ourselves as the Beloved. And so, the only way to be true to ourselves is to respond with love for each other as Jesus has loved us. As Frederick Buechner writes, "To be his friends ... we have to be each other's friends, conceivably even lay down our lives for each other. You never know.¹ It is a high price to pay, and Jesus does not pretend otherwise, but the implication is that it's worth every cent."²

Jesus never promised to give us a pain-free ride on planet earth. Life is not about being endlessly carefree. It's about being unguardedly, relentlessly caring. Love like this makes us vulnerable to and responsive to the need and the suffering of others. It animates us to lead a life of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls costly discipleship. That kind of discipleship is likely to bring with it bruises to body and soul. However, love like this is also how we participate in a life that cannot be contained by any grave.

It is this love that animates all of the Church's authentic ministries. And I am delighted to report that in the Diocese of Western Louisiana Jesus' love is breaking out all over. With each meeting of the Diocesan Council, I hear reports about feeding our neighbors, providing clothing, hosting recovery meetings, providing space for the broader community to walk and meditate, and supplying funds to pay for basic necessities.

Crucially, I know that these ministries are expressions of our relationship with Jesus. Among the evidence I see is the growth in the size and number of our Education for Ministry groups.

Spiritual Formation Challenge

In my address last year, I challenged each Convocation to have at least one EfM group. Our Diocesan EfM Coordinator Fr. Whit Stodghill reports that four of our Convocations have met the challenge.

Led by Fr. Whit, the Monroe Convocation group has 8 participants, two of whom will graduate this year (Leisa Geoghegan and Lida McGivern)

- Shreveport's group has 10 participants and is led by Subdean Thomas Nsubuga.
- In Lake Charles Mtr. Mitzi George leads a group with 7 participants.
- And last but not least, Nikki Snow leads the Alexandria group's 11 participants.

¹ John 15:12-15

² Frederick Buechner, from *Whistling in the Dark*, see <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/9/26/friends>

I'm renewing that challenge this year. And let's double down on studies that deepen our faith. I'm challenging each and every congregation to have at least one weekly Bible study. Abingdon Press provides excellent resources such as Adam Hamilton's *The Message of Jesus* and Amy-Jill Levine's *The Gospel of Mark*. For video courses check out a subscription to Amplify Media for the congregation or for the whole convocation.

If you do not yet subscribe to my Substack called *The Woodlands*, please do so. It's free and you will receive in your email a reflection on Scripture every Friday. On each table there's a QR code that can make that easier.

And while I'm at it, I cannot urge you strongly enough to pray daily. Use your Prayer Book. The Daily Offices are rich and definitive of Anglican spirituality. The Daily Devotions are abbreviated versions of the Offices. To make life simple, download the *Day by Day* app for your phone. It's all right there at your fingertips.

Racial Reconciliation

Let's turn now to the significant work we've been doing in the work of racial repair. Later today you'll see a video entitled *Connections* outlining that ministry. In the meantime, I'll share some specific examples:

In partnership with New Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Sonia Quarters we support ministries like an adult literacy program. Together with Colfax Baptist Church, Sewanee's Roberson Project, and the Yale Medical School's Child Study Center, we're launching an afterschool program to enhance learning for elementary-aged children. Finally, we've partnered with the UEMBA Mission Center and Rev. Floyd Kirts in their Christmas and Thanksgiving drives.

Announcements

And now for some important announcements and acknowledgements. Mark your calendars for a special called Convention on November 15 held entirely on Zoom. Our only work will be to approve the 2026 budget, so it will be short. We do this so that in 2026 our Diocesan Conventions will be held in the fall from then on.

This move is necessary because my canonically mandated resignation will occur on or shortly after October 30 of 2029. Moving the Annual Convention date will make space for us to elect my successor at an Electing Convention in the early spring of 2029. We can then consecrate them in November depending upon the Presiding Bishop's calendar.

Let me also give thanks to my staff both paid and volunteer: Fr. John Henson, Fr. Whit Stodghill, Thomas Stodghill, Mtr. Kris Paul, Canon Suzanne Wolfenbarger, Roy Rosenthal, Holly Davis, and Joy Owensby. Special thanks to our Treasurer Will Harp, our Chancellor Kyle McGinnis, and our Vice Chancellor Drew Texada.

I'll close by saying this. Being your Bishop is a tremendous honor. I am grateful to serve with you in the name of Jesus Christ, and I am excited to see what God will do through us in the next four and half years.

Know that I love you. And thank you for sharing your lives and your love with me. Now, together, let's keep remembering that the main thing is the main thing. God bless you and keep you.