

Noonday Prayer Sermon Text from the 48th Annual Diocesan Convention of the Central Gulf Coast

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Good afternoon fellow Episcopalians. What a blessing it is to be able to say those words to you today, to be able to feel like I belong to a diverse and loving Christ driven community. I am a member at St. Andrews Episcopal Church. My fiancée was recently baptized there and we were confirmed by Bishop Kendrick just a few months ago. The journey to get here wasn't straight shot. I started off on the right track, got disillusioned and disheartened, left church altogether and then came back later in life. I never thought I'd find a church community where I was fully accepted and embraced, but St Andrews and especially the people in our EFM class, loved us; just loved us. The day I looked in Margaret's Shephard's eyes and she said, "You aren't going to hell. You can come to church. You are a child of God." I believed it, for the first time in my life, I really believed it. Even as sure as I was, I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I was introduced to the people of St. Andrew's by my pastor at Abundant Life Community Church, who passed away 2 years ago. She told me if I wanted to learn the bible, I needed to enroll in this E.F.M. class. She kept encouraging me and I kept brushing her off. I had excuses. I don't have time; it costs too much money. But this time she didn't leave me any wiggle room; she had gotten me a scholarship. So we enrolled and attended our first EFM class. We walked on eggshells and stayed quiet, but we began to like these people. We didn't want to like these people because remember, the shoe always drops eventually. It has been two years now and the shoe has yet to drop. And thank God it hasn't because this community has been a source of support through one of the most challenging times of our lives. God is so gracious and caring and He provides, God always provides. We lost our home in the hurricane, but we are blessed to have a camper. It's not convenient or comfortable to live in a camper, but we are grateful. More than anything though, I appreciate the love and support that came from people of our church, other churches in our community, churches from other communities, and all other Episcopalians.

Being in public service, teaching and law enforcement, it is in our nature to help others. We often asked that help be given to those who are in greater need. Right after the hurricane, when we returned home bringing our Uhaul full of supplies, our dear friend and fellow EFM-er, Louise Crawford showed us the Christ-like love that Paul talks about in Romans 15: 1-7. By offering to help pay for a uhaul to store our things and bringing us food and ice, she shared our burden and built us up, giving us hope to endure what was to come. A few weeks later, she came to our camper, invited our neighbors over and we ate, prayed and fellowshiped. After everyone left she said, "Girls, if no one has told you this, it IS that bad. There are people worse, but you have it tough." That validation was as powerful as the day that Margaret Shephard looked into my eyes. For people like us to be accepted this way into a loving Christian community is extraordinary. It demonstrated to me that the people of St. Andrews were bringing praise to God by accepting one another, and even me, just as they were accepted by Christ.

I originally thought that our church was just special, but I found through the hurricane, that what I thought was special at St. Andrews is special in all our church families. It is a true sense of

community, mutual love and caring for one another. People came to Panama City from other Episcopal communities close by such as St. Christopher's and Holy Cross in Pensacola and we had support all the way to the presiding bishop himself. So I know that God is with us, in this world, in the people of this world. In you, in me, in us. I believe it is God's dream that we recognize Him in each other and find communion in each other just as we do in Him. So I ask you, how can we make God's dream come true?

My fiance, being a teacher, is always looking at children's books so it isn't surprising that I would be referencing a children's book this afternoon. What may be a little surprising is that the book was written by Desmond Tutu, the Nobel Peace Prize winner is also an author of children's books. I did a little research and found out that his theology speaks of deep connections between us as people and between us and God. His children's book is called God's Dream. This sweet little book tells us that God dreams about people sharing, people caring, people reaching out and holding one another's hands, playing one another's games, and laughing with one another's hearts. And just as we heard in Colossians 3:12-14, He dreams of people who forgive one another with love that binds them in perfect unity. The most moving part of this book was when he says that each of us carries a piece of God within us and when we love one another the pieces of God's heart are made whole. So I ask you, as the book does, dear children of God, do you know how to make God's dream come true? I know that you do for I have witnessed it first hand through your sharing, your loving, your caring, your sense of family and community, your acceptance and recognition that we are all God's children. For as it states in Galatians 5:14, the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command, love your neighbor as yourself.

I'd like to leave you with a blessing from a book by John O' Donahue:

May you be blessed with good friends,
and learn to be a good friend yourself,
Journeying in the place in your soul where
There is love, warmth, and feeling.
May this change you.
May it transfigure what is negative, distant,
Or cold within your heart.
May you be brought into real passion, kindness,
And belonging.
May you treasure your friends.
May you be good to them, be there for them
And receive all the challenges, truth, and light you
Need.
May you never be isolated but know the embrace
Of your *anam cara*.