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BISHOP'S ADDRESS THE 48th CONVENTION

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF THE CENTRAL GULF COAST

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The first word of this address is the most essential word. Thank you. Thank you to the people of St. James for their amazing generosity and radical hospitality. Do you feel the life in this place and people? I am reminded of the quote I have heard attributed to several different people. When asked "Do you believe in the resurrection?" The person replied. "Believe in it, why I have seen it." I've seen it too and it's all around us in their way of welcome and service. St. James is an outward and visible sign of the unifying redeeming life-giving power of Easter.

Thank you for being here; for who you are as a beloved child of God and for who you are striving to be for God in this world. Thank you for your trust in me as your Bishop and for your trust in the staff at the Duvall Center who work so gracefully and carefully for you and for our church. I am grateful for, and to, each of them. Thank you for the good news you will hear tomorrow. There is much to celebrate. I will not spend much time in this address reciting all the work accomplished. This work is possible because of your giving. While we still have room to grow up to our goal of 10% pledge to the diocese by all churches, we are getting closer.

Thank you to the leadership of our diocese---to our clergy whose 90% of work goes unnoticed by 90% of the people in their churches. Thank you to Sr. Wardens who are the unsung heroes in our churches. And thank you to all the clergy spouses and families, for your support and for your patience of your spouse or parents' vocation.

Finally, thank you for the ministry you are about as the Episcopal Church. 2018 will go down as the year when a Bishop named Michael took the world by storm with a wedding sermon and a storm by the same name changed the landscape and lives of many in our diocese. Between and beyond those seminal stories, are many stories of God's presence in our life together. God's spirit is alive and well in our congregations, large & small, rural & coastal, Florida & Alabama. God's work is being accomplished through you in so many ways. Thank you.

I have a confession to make. Earlier this month I was listening to Dr. Catherine Meeks, Executive Director of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing in Atlanta. She said something that resonated deeply in my soul. You need to know that Dr. Meeks does not mince words. She talked about how she was tired of sermons. She was tired of folks trying to come up with clever ways to say the same thing, or folks trying to say something more eloquent than it needed to be said. And she said this: "The day has come to get down to the core and to figure out what we really care about and what we have the courage to do."

So in the words that follow I want to talk about what I really care about, and what I am hoping we will have the courage to do. And what I care about is our life together.

I settled on this theme back in late September which is much earlier than I usually settle on a theme for convention. I was thinking about the challenges we face as those who call Jesus our Lord and Savior. We live in a time when confessing a living loving, life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ is no longer the norm in our society, and the church finds herself at the margins of culture rather than in the mainstream. We live in a time of increasing siloed existence.

So said researcher Brene Brown in a sermon we watched at last year's convention. Brown argued that we live in a time of a crisis of connection. In her words, "we have sorted ourselves into bunkers and factions. We now live with, worship with, hangout with, people like us. And we have very little interest in people who don't believe like us. We have sorted ourselves into siloes." But she goes on with a word of hope. "No matter what, we are connected to one another---you, me, the Syrian refugee, a mother in Congo. It is a connection that cannot be severed, but it can be forgotten. We have severed our memory around that. What is needed is greater connection with people we do not know."

Just what does life together look like for us? How do we remember and foster that deep connection between us? I suspect that is a much larger conversation, but for tonight I want to offer a few ideas that I have teased out of our readings for you to ponder and possibly take back to your churches for further conversation.

In our first reading, things are not going well for Moses. The people are moaning and groaning about a lot of things. And Moses has had about all he can take. So God tells Moses what to do, Moses does it, and the first diocesan convention is convened. Everything is going just fine until word reaches the convention floor that Medad and Eldad apparently missed the email about the canons and rules of order. Rather than preaching in the tent, Medad and Eldad are out in the camp. They are out on the street corner---the very first Pentecostals in the Bible.

Well that does not sit too well with other folks, like Joshua, the first Episcopalian in the Bible, who says, "Stop them! That's not how we do things in here. Get that spirit back in this building where it belongs." I'm always amazed how the most religious people in the Bible are the ones who often have the hardest time accepting that God does not always play by our rules. Before things get out of hand, Moses chimes in, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"

Never mind the tent, how about the church. This is my first point about our life together. We might do well to be seized by that wild, untamed, curious spirit that seized Eldad and Medad. Being seized by that same spirit means being curious about new expressions of our life together.

Initiatives like the one in Panama City Beach and the just completed West Florida cluster will continue to be vital to our future life together. Verbs like sharing, clustering, relocating, merging, closing & restarting must become a part of our vocabulary. For example, there are over 10 churches in our diocese currently served by a full-time priest who is at least 65 years old. When their priest leaves, those churches will no longer be able to afford a full-time priest. This is not just an issue for our small churches. This is not just a quandary for me. This involves and impacts all of us

Such a reality is why we have devoted resources to the development of our diocesan School for Ministry. And to welcome the spirit of Medad and Eldad into our tent of meeting, our four preachers during this convention are usually found in the pews of a church, not in a pulpit. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets."

"Would that all the Lord's people were prophets." I know. This is scary talk. This is not how we do things, and I don't know many of us who want the title of prophet. After all, their success rate in the Bible is relatively low, not to mention their life expectancy.

What may be even scarier is what I think such a title involves---speaking about God in public ways, or to put it in more modern language---would that all the Lord's people were evangelists. We have been talking about evangelism over the last year. I have been fascinated by reactions to the mere mention of the word. There is flat out denial, like when in a forum I spoke of doing evangelism and a man blurted out, "No way!" as if I had asked them to consider donating a body part. In addition to denial, there is the way of redirection which is when someone responds: "Oh you mean outreach." Then too are those who are in our church because they are recovering from a painful past from such words like evangelism, witnessing, testifying. So we conclude that talking about Jesus is for those other Christians, not us Episcopalians, and that the promise we make is by word or example. And we settle on the latter.

If that is how you feel, then I have bad news and good news. The bad news is that Episcopalians are called to proclaim that good news. In fact you will make that promise once I finish this address. The good news is that evangelism may not be all that you think it is. And that is what I hope we can learn together over the next year.

I have learned in our work with evangelism that there are two significant obstacles to our efforts. First, folks are not confident in their story. Even if they are confident, they lack the courage to be vulnerable. Learning our stories---from the Bible and our tradition---involves discipleship. It has inspired our work to publish video-based curriculum on prayer, as well as our association with the Good Book Club and Sharing Faith Dinners. In this year's budget you will notice that calling a part-time missionary for discipleship is the one substantial programmatic increase in our 2019 budget.

"Would that all God's people were prophets." We live in a time that all of us, priests, deacons, and lay people are called to learn and give voice to the language of God in the world, a language that is desperately needed. I am not alone in my thinking. In a New York Times article entitled "It's Getting Harder to Talk about God" Jonathan Merritt puts it this way: *" Many people now avoid spiritual language because they don't like the way its been used, misused, and abused by others...but when people stop speaking God...those who are causing the problem get to hog the microphone. The televangelist using spiritual language to call for donations to buy a 2nd jet. The politician using God talk to push unjust legislation. The street preacher peddling the fear of a fiery hell. Christians in 21st-century America now face our own serious "rhetorical problem." We must work together to revive sacred speech and rekindle confidence in the vocabulary of faith. If we cannot rise to this occasion, sacred speech will continue its rapid decline —and the worst among us will continue to define what the word "Christian" means."*

The sacred speech of God is not as much about the intricacies of religious dogma and doctrine. I'm speaking of that deeper language of heaven that has come to us in Christ Jesus, which brings us to our second reading.

While we do not know all the particular issues going on in the church of Ephesus, as it was for Moses, once again things are not going well in their life together. At the very least, folks are bickering about who belongs and who does not. *"Therefore, I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* .

It should not come as a surprise that the language of our life together is rooted in the way of love. We have heard much about this way from our Presiding Bishop. "Bear with one another in love." Given what I read from the letters written to me by candidates for confirmation and reception into our church, you all are doing a mighty fine job at this. From these sacred notes, it is evident to me that our church may never be a megachurch, but we are a place for those who are looking for something real and relevant, something that I call sanctuary---people who are bearing with one another in love. I have read about it. And I have witnessed it.

I am thinking of a visit I made to Apalachicola a couple of years ago. I showed up for my visit and the priest asked if I would pay a visit to a parishioner who was too sick to get to church "last year you confirmed him" she explained. "Since then he was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. They've done all that they can do." So after church we made our way to his house. He was sitting on the sofa, the effect of chemo was evident. He tried to stand; I told him to please sit. One of the things I love about Apalachicola, it's a place where people still maintain a certain level of southern hospitality that seems lost on much of the world. "Would you like something to drink?" "No thanks." "How about a cookie?" "No I'm fine." "How was church?" "Seemed to go quite well." The mood changed as he leaned into the reality of his life. "Well, I did not expect this." The silence crept in. "Bishop, I never knew how much I am loved. I am surrounded by love." Again there was silence, broken by a few snuffles. "It does not make sense does it?" I asked.

"No" he went on. "Amidst so much pain....only to discover so much love." So I laid my hands on his head just as I had done a year ago, only it was a different type of journey for which I was praying for him, "May you continue to know you are surrounded by love."

This story is not just about a man who was surprised by the reality of love. Its a story of a collective community who chose to bear this painful path with him in love. This is the power of collective love that makes our life together unique and even peculiar to the world. To stand at the grave and make our song. Friends, please do not underestimate the power of that song to bear up people in this helpless, frantic world. In other words, relationships built on the bonds of peace and love matter far more than maintaining the tenets of religion. And people are seeking such life together.

David Brooks who writes for the New York Times interviewed young adults asking them about their fears and hopes. The article closes with these words. "I was struck by the pervasive but subtle hunger for change in the emotional tenor of life. 'We're more connected but we're more apart,' one student lamented. Again and again, students expressed a hunger for social and emotional bonding, for a shift from guilt and accusation towards empathy. 'How do you create relationship?' one student asked. That may be the longing that undergirds all others."

How do you create relationship? Would our life together look differently, if that all we did---worship, discipleship, outreach---focused on answering that question. How do we create relationships?

Let me be clear, creating relationships is not meant for just within the walls of our buildings, but it involves being more engaged in our neighborhoods---especially with those who do not look like us, worship like us, believe like us---as Brene Brown puts it. Creating relationships involves an inquiring and discerning heart, the

courage to will and persevere, and listening intensely to the needs of the neighbors around you.

Such relationships can be created in the rubble of life. I am thinking of the man in Panama City who talked about his neighbor with whom he had feuded for years. They had argued about petty things, like dogs messing in the yard, children crossing property lines. So in order to avoid each other, a big fence was built. Each planted trees and shrubs to further block their view to each other's property. Then, in a powerful wind called Hurricane Michael, the fence was gone and so too the trees. The man said: "When the fence was gone, we had to learn to live together. It was that same neighbor who let me plug an electrical cord into his generator. He gave me a pallet of bottled water. When the fence came down, we learned to become friends."

Creating such relationships undergirds the work of our commission on racial justice and reconciliation. I want to encourage you to attend a workshop or even better, get involved with a pilgrimage our commission is co-hosting with folks who are not Episcopalians. Such relationships lead us to see a far greater mission for our life together, a mission stated so clearly in our BCP: "To restore all people to unity with God and each other," which brings us to this mysterious and mystical Gospel .

It's the night before Jesus died. By the time of this reading, Jesus has washed their feet and given them a meal. He then launches into a very long sermon, preaching to them about what is most important. He promises to never leave them. He tells them to stay together and he gives them the most important charge of all---to love. This is how the world will know that you belong to me. Love one another. No matter the risk or cost. Love.

Then almost in mid-sentence, Jesus stops preaching to them and goes to praying for them, a portion of which we heard tonight. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." This prayer holds the deepest yearning in the heart of Jesus for his followers, then and now. That we all be one and that our life together is meant as a gift for the entire world. Talk about a big prayer, not to mention a big dream! But it does happen.

Did you hear about the 96 day worship service in a church in the Netherlands? Nearly 1,000 priests, pastors, and preachers from many denominations from across Europe and beyond, took turns playing a kind of ritual relay that lasted non-stop for over 2,300 hours. It was not a publicity stunt; it was not a way to proselytize people. It was done in order to protect a family of five Armenian refugees from being deported. Talk about being one!

On a more humble level and much closer to home is what I witnessed at last year's convention. I am speaking of when we spent Friday afternoon packing 20,000 meals. There was a moment when I was up on the stage and I looked out at all the activity. Some were packing, some were loading, some were singing, some were dancing badly; but we were all one. I could not tell who was a priest or a lay person, liberal or conservative, old or young, Alabamian or Floridian. All I saw was a sea of silly plastic hats. I saw the kingdom of God, held together by the love of God which is far more powerful than all the ways we are separated, sorted, or siloed.

I believe that such stories are about the sacred reality that is all around us all the time. I yearn to do all that I can to see more of this reality in our world. What then would it look like for us to cast a bigger narrative for our life together? How might we work more intentionally to restore the unity between us in this tent of meeting?

How might we discover a broader, fuller mission that speaks to all of us and for all of us. Would we look differently if we gave ourselves to the question: what is God's mission for us?

Next year is our diocese's 50th anniversary. It is my fervent prayer that it will be a time for us to remember, reorient, and renew ourselves to God's narrative, God's prayer, God's dream for our life together. To make a right start, we will do some of that tomorrow afternoon with Dr. Greg Garrett.

This then is what I care about---our life together. It is a life together that is rooted in love, dedicated to relationships, and forged by a curious, creative, courageous spirit. And it is a life that is far bigger than we often realize from the pews of our buildings.

We began this address in the wilderness with Medad and Eldad. They may seem so distant and different than us. And yet! In Hebrew their names mean Loved by God and Beloved.

In other words, they are each of us and all of us. Loved by God. Beloved. Maybe Medad and Eldad were simply seized by their birthright. Maybe that is how God's spirit is always set loose in people's lives. So beloved, let us be seized by our namesake. Be whom God wants you to be. Nothing more. Nothing less. Do not let our fear and worries get the best of us.

For the best of us is held within eternal embrace of God's love for us. Forever.

Or as Catherine Meeks put it: "Open yourself to the biggest dreams. Open your heart to the best message and let yourself see where God takes you. Dream. Dream big. Dream well. Pay attention. Be faithful. And be half a shade braver."