

BISHOP'S PASTORAL ADDRESS – 2007

(Address to the 133rd Annual Convention of the Diocese of Fond du Lac, October 20, 2007)

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to those gathered at the 133rd Annual Convention of the Diocese of Fond du Lac, and to members of the congregations of the Diocese who will be hearing or reading this as it is distributed.

At the Convention Banquet I was honored to present Bishop's Crosses to two faithful members of our Native American congregation, Holy Apostles' Church in Oneida. Deacon Edmund Powless and Blanche Powless have served this Diocese in numerous capacities for more years than I even like to consider, and we congratulate them on receiving this honor.

At the Banquet I also thanked all who assist with the varying ministries in and through the Diocese. This is an extensive list because a lot is happening. If you were not at the dinner but are involved in any way in diocesan life, please know you are appreciated, and we extend our thanks to you for your service to our Lord.

It is tradition that I include in my Pastoral Address some of the successes in the diocese during the past year. These include the completion and dedication of the new addition and remodeling of St. Matthias' parish in Minocqua; the acceptance into union with the Diocese as a parish the congregation of St. Luke's in Sister Bay; the development of the Latino Ministry Project by the congregations of the Greater Green Bay Episcopal Ministry Group (St. Paul's, Suamico; Blessed Sacrament; Green Bay, Holy Apostles', Oneida, and St. Anne's, DePere); the Celebration of New Ministry with the new clergy called to serve Our Lady of Grace Church, Sheboygan; St. Mary of the Snows, Eagle River, the congregation of Christ the King / Holy Nativity, Sturgeon Bay and Jacksonport, and St. Paul's, Plymouth. Many congregations continue their local ministry through food pantries, feeding programs, clothes closets and other forms of ministry to those in need.

I applaud you all for your continuing successes and the blessings these successes have brought to those who are members as well as those outside our congregations.

It is not my tradition in these pastoral addresses to mention the negative things that are happening – but I believe it is necessary to do that this year. The diocese is in a more fragile state than it has been in the past.

Part of this, I believe, has to do with the unrest and discord in the Episcopal Church, as well as the dissension within the Anglican Communion world-wide. This may not be specifically “of our making”, but the results of disharmony have sifted down to the grass roots – even to northeastern Wisconsin.

One of the problems with this conflict is that it distracts us from what we are to be as the Body of Christ, and the mission that we are called to in Jesus' name. We lose focus from proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ as we try to rationalize our position on a particular topic or issue.

Another result of this discord is our inability or unwillingness to work together as clergy and laity, and in some cases even a lack of desire to be together as the Body of Christ.

Paul wrote to the fledgling Christians in Corinth who were divided and arguing with one another. He said, "I appeal to you, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment." He also wrote, "Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you."

One of most devastating results of our division is that the church has lost credibility – credibility as the voice of Jesus Christ speaking to the lowly, the lonely and the lost. We are so distracted by issues that we are forgetting to proclaim Jesus as Lord of our lives, and savior of all.

When clergy have left congregations in the Diocese to answer a call elsewhere, our Diocesan Deployment Officer, the Rev. Bill Johnston, has used a new evaluation instrument to help the congregation determine who they are and what they need as they search for a priest to come and lead them into the future. Four surveys have been completed, and the results are embarrassing, if not downright pathetic. The dissension in some of these congregations is thwarting their growth; the lack of willingness to have a unified vision is causing deterioration.

Most of you will say, "Well, our congregation did not take the survey, so that's not us." I challenge every congregation to take the survey and work with Fr. Johnston, so you can see what the obstacles are to growth in your congregation.

This year on my visitations to the congregations I have been meeting with Vestries and Bishop's Committee to review the statistics of their congregation and look at what the future might hold. Very, very few congregations are growing; and if you factor in growth in your communities, most are not even holding their own. And is anyone asking "why?" or "what should we be doing about it?"

I think one of the things we forget is that Christ is expecting each of us – me and you – to carry on the work He began, which he entrusted to His followers. At the Convention Eucharist we observed the Feast of St. Luke the Evangelist. Yes, Luke was an evangelist, but as we know from Scripture, Luke was a physician. He was not one of the religious professionals of his time – he had secular work in the health field. But this did not excuse him from accepting the responsibility of following Christ's teaching, and taking his part in the proclamation of the Good News which is the responsibility of all of us.

Is there hope for the Church? I believe so – but the hope lies with us. If the Church is to succeed, it will be because we have taken seriously our responsibility as Jesus' followers. If the Church fails, it could be because we were not as attentive to proclaiming the Good News as we needed to be.

There is a story from a former century, in which a poet and his friend were traveling through Europe, visiting many of the grand cathedrals. As they went from one gorgeous facility to another, the friend of the poet mused on how cathedrals like the ones they were visiting could not be built in the current day. The poet responded, "In those days people had convictions, not just opinions."

Cathedrals, even simple congregations today can't be built on opinions – it takes convictions – and that's our hope – and my challenge to you. I don't want the people of this diocese just to have lots of opinions about their faith and this church – I want you to have -- in fact Jesus needs you to have "convictions" – if this diocese is going to continue and flourish.

I really think that the Anglican Communion, the Episcopal Church in the United States, and this Diocese of Fond du Lac, maybe even your congregation, are all at a watershed moment. Unless we start taking our faith more seriously than we have – with conviction – God will turn the responsibility of His mission over to others.

The Church cannot be a hobby for the pious, nor can it be a leisurely pursuit when we don't have something more important to do. It's sad to say that some in the diocese put activities like athletics or vacation or some other self-centered distraction before their commitment to Christ. Our faith needs to come before anything else in our lives – because this is not just something that impacts our lives here –it will impact our lives for eternity.

Can you understand there is urgency to this – especially in the diocese now – as several more congregations are looking at either moving to part-time clergy or closing their doors completely. I haven't heard one person say that this is what they want – but then I haven't heard anyone say they are willing to change their way of life so this won't happen. But we must – if Christ's work is going to continue through the congregations of the Episcopal Diocese of Fond du Lac, our lives need to change – our priorities need to change – our opinions need to change into convictions.

So let me suggest three convictions which I believe would help redirect us and could turn things around – and I challenge every member of the diocese to adopt these convictions.

In the Baptismal Covenant the first promise that we make is that we will continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship. In recent years I believe we have lost the desire to study God's word, and to share it with others. The first conviction we need to have is to renew our desire to increase our knowledge of God's Word and His will for us by studying and teaching scripture.

I challenge every congregation to add additional opportunities for Bible Study in your community. If you already have a group, start two more. If you don't have any, get a couple going. And they don't necessarily need to be led by the clergy – although we have studied scripture and make excellent leaders.

I fear our lack of the knowledge of scripture is one of the reasons the Church is in such a predicament – we don't take God's word any more seriously than what we read in a newspaper. A passion for knowing Jesus' teaching will bring us to an awareness of the importance of how we live our lives as Jesus' followers.

In addition to learning, we need to teach as the apostles' taught. The clergy need to preach the Good News of Jesus every Sunday; not just preach a soft, simple sentiment of society. When we wonder why attendance in our congregations is going down, let's ask ourselves if we are challenging God's people to live as Christ commanded us to live – a life of sacrifice – or are we just offering

God's people comfort to continue their current way of life? Are we challenging one another to accept the challenges of Christian living – putting off the old self, and putting on Christ?

In writing to the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul wrote: "For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ ... therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." As indeed you are doing. Are you?

We need to be convicted to learn and teach the scriptures. We also need to be convicted that prayer is both necessary and efficacious.

Prayer is what keeps us connected to God – and through that relationship God can guide and lead and support and uphold us as we make our way through the hills and valleys of life. Paul said to the young churches he traveled to and wrote to -- "pray always" – "be constant in prayer" – "in everything offer prayer to God with thanksgiving." In everything. Do we take prayer that serious?

There's a hymn in our old Hymnal which you may remember – "What a friend we have in Jesus." The phrase that keeps repeating throughout the three verses is "Take it to the Lord in Prayer." "Have we trials and temptations?", "Are we weak and heavy laden?", "What a privilege to carry – everything to God in prayer!"

Does your congregation have prayer groups? If not, start one. If so, urge others to join. Do you pray daily, at all times, in everything? Prayer can accomplish a lot – bring comfort and healing, bring peace and harmony, and bring us into a deeper relationship with Jesus.

My final challenge is to develop a spiritual conviction. We talk a lot about spiritual renewal – our diocesan Prayer for Revival even reflects this – but it needs to be more than renewal. We need to be convicted in God the Holy Spirit who can accomplish everything, even when it seems impossible for us.

When we develop a spiritual conviction, we will not only develop within us a trust in God – knowing that His promises are true and will be ours – but a spiritual conviction can help our relationships with others – even those with whom we disagree the most.

Only with a deep spiritual conviction can we trust God enough to turn our whole life over to Him – and be assured of an abundant life as He promised.

Spiritual convictions can be strengthened through participation in the sacraments of the Church. Therefore it is important for clergy to make the sacraments as accessible as possible. Some clergy tell me they don't celebrate the Eucharist on mid-week feasts because no one attends. What if there was a person that particular day that needed to strengthen their spiritual life – because of a need they had? Wouldn't it have been wonderful if the Eucharist had been offered?

This is my challenge for every member of the diocese – be convicted in study and teaching – be convicted in prayer – and be spiritually convicted. As the poet said about the building of the great cathedrals: "In those days people had convictions, not just opinions."

This is not “our” church – to do with as we please. It is God’s Church – it is the Body of Jesus Christ – and as followers of Christ we are commissioned – yea, commanded -- to build it up – with convictions, not opinions. We are all called to proclaim Jesus’ teaching, to fulfill His mission, and to receive the promise of eternal salvation that only comes through our Savior and Lord.

We are at a watershed – in the Church – in the Diocese – and maybe even in your congregation. Are you will to take up the challenge so your congregation and the whole Body of Christ will move into the future, strong and vibrant?

I’ve quoted a story from years ago. I’ve quoted Scripture. I’ve quoted the Hymnal. I’d like to close with one more quote. It is what Dumbledore said to Harry Potter toward the end of the “Chamber of Secrets”: “It’s not your abilities that make you what you are. It’s your choices.”

God has given us all the abilities that we need to continue His ministry and build up his Body. What will we choose to do?