

## **Pastoral Address of the Rt. Rev. Matthew Gunter, Eighth Bishop of Fond du Lac to the 148th Annual Diocesan Convention, October 29, 2022**

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that was set before us. Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Who for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding the shame and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

When I was a priest, and even now that I am a bishop, every now-and-then, when I’m getting into the pulpit to preach, I have this little flash of imagining what would happen if any or all the characters in the Book of *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* suddenly showed up in the pews in front of me for my sermon. *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* contains the saints and other worthies that we remember and celebrate. And, I wonder what it would be like if I looked out, if I looked out here at Convention and saw Julian of Norwich over here, and St. Augustine over here, and looked out and Martin Luther and Catherine of Sienna, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Evelyn Underhill and Dorothy Day – the whole crazy quilt, three-ring circus that is the company of saints. I hope that any time I’m preaching or teaching, that I wouldn’t embarrass them too much. And, if I disagree with them, that I’d be able to explain why I see things differently than they saw things, but do so faithfully. It doesn’t hurt that many of those characters didn’t agree with one another. In fact, some of them would not have recognized one another as fellow Christians. But, still, I want to be faithful to that great cloud of witnesses.

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. And friends, we hear in the Diocese of Fond du Lac, we are surrounded by a more particular cloud of witnesses. We are not the largest diocese, by a long shot. We are not the oldest diocese, by a good many years. But we are a diocese with a great and storied history. A great cloud of witnesses.

Later today, we will be celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coming of the Episcopal Church to Wisconsin in the company of the Oneida, who came to this area from New York. It’s important for us to acknowledge, that if they’d had their own druthers, they would have stayed in New York, but were pressured and pressed and decided to move and went on a sort of pilgrimage to come to this area to lay down new roots. There are a lot of books you can read. There’s one outside on the display table of Holy Apostles, Oneida called The Wisconsin Oneida’s and the Episcopal Church. There’s another wonderful book called The Journey of the Oneida that tells the story of their coming from New York to Green Bay.

In Lesser Feasts and Fasts, we actually have some folk from the Diocese of Fond du Lac. Do you know this? Did you know that Cornelius Hill, who was a hereditary Chief of the Oneida and then a priest in the Episcopal Church, serving at the Holy Apostles, is celebrated in Lesser Feasts and Fasts? It’s true. But not just him. Jackson Kemper, who was the first Bishop of Wisconsin, and the first missionary bishop of the Episcopal Church, is also there. And so is the second Bishop of Fond du Lac, Charles Grafton. So, smallish diocese, not that long, but we have three people that the whole rest of the church remembers throughout the year. Kemper, Grafton, and Hill. That’s a pretty impressive cloud of witnesses, right there.

But, here are some other things when I think about I think of the Diocese of Fond du Lac. Maybe not everyone knows, so let me just tell you a bit of our history. We have a rich and varied relationship with monastic communities in the Diocese of Fond du Lac. Charles Grafton, even before he became bishop, founded the Sisters of the Holy Nativity, who then moved to Fond du Lac. For decades the order has been headquartered in the Diocese of Fond du Lac and served throughout this diocese. But, then it spread across the country. From Rhode Island to Santa Barbara, the Sisters of the Holy Nativity served and taught and prayed. Did you know that the Order of the Society of St. Francis in the Episcopal Church was founded in the Diocese of Fond du Lac? I'll bet the people of Ascension, Merrill know. It was actually founded there in the 1920's. They since have moved to New York and San Francisco, but they got started in this diocese. We now have the Order of Julian of Norwich within our Diocese. Two priests of the Diocese of Fond du Lac are brothers at the Benedictine Monastery of St. Gregory at Three Rivers, MI. We even have a hermit, Carol Amadio, living on Washington Island. And now we have two members of the Anamchara Fellowship; Sisters Julian and Barbara Jean in the diocese.

We're surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses in this Diocese, many of whom are monastics, who remind us that there is more going on in the world than what's right in front of our noses. They remind us that, if we are not careful and get too caught up in the rat race of this world, we will just become . . . rats. We believe that there is more going on than what's right in front of our noses, but because there is so much right in front of our noses, we can sometimes forget it. It is good for us to have people around us who have dedicated their lives that there is something more.

Did you know that we have the North American proto-shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in the Diocese of Fond du Lac? At Grace Sheboygan, whose annual pilgrimage gathers people from around the country to come for worship. The Eucharistic Festival, that we have every year at our Cathedral, also gathers people from around the country to worship and celebrate the gift of the blessed Sacrament.

At the other end of the theological and church spectrum, how many of you know this? The first time Eucharistic Prayer C, now in the 1979 Prayer Book, was celebrated at a formal Eucharist was at the Eucharistic Festival here in the Diocese of Fond du Lac. The rector of Holy Trinity, Oshkosh, Fr. Spicer, was involved in the composing of that prayer.

From 1907–1934, the Rev. Canon Charles Winfred Douglas was the residentiary Canon at our Cathedral. Canon Douglas was largely responsible for bringing plainsong and ancient liturgical worship to the Episcopal Church. He was the music editor of the 1940 hymnal, which some of you remember and some still use. Hymns that he wrote and some of his settings of ancient music are in our current hymnal.

Also, at the cathedral for many years, there was the Cathedral Press, that printed and published pamphlets and other resources for the church, not least a lovely series of Stations of the Cross. And the Cathedral Press Stations of the Cross now hang in the chapel of the Episcopal Church Center at 815 in New York City.

Louie Crew, founder of Integrity, the organization that advocate to include LGBTQ members of the church, taught at UW - Stevens Point and worshiped at Intercession, Stevens Point.

At least 5 priests that have served in the Diocese of Fond du Lac have gone on to become bishops.

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. We have this heritage, whether it's all the faithful in Lesser Feasts and Fasts or those not in the book, but known to us or to God alone. That history, that tradition, is not dead weight. Rather, I want to suggest to you that the tradition is momentum, propelling us into a faithful future. We are not bound to do everything just as they did. And sometimes we will disagree with them about something. But, still, we are part of and take our place in that faithful pilgrim band.

That passage from Hebrews 12, follows, of course, Hebrews 11, which lays out some of the Old Testament saints, a cloud of witnesses. In Hebrews 11, you'll recall that the author writes about Abraham, Moses, and others. They were looking for another country, another homeland. Abraham went to the Promised Land. Moses brought the people back to the Promised Land, but they knew that that was not home. They knew that they were, as Hebrews 11 says, strangers and foreigners looking for a homeland. They wandered in deserts and in mountains.

We are, like them, pilgrims and a pilgrim church. Pilgrimage is not always easy. Much that is unexpected can happen. And sometimes you do wander through deserts and mountains, sometimes not of your choosing. And we are now part of that pilgrim band who went before us and cheer us on as we take our turn in the great pilgrimage of faith, continuing to head towards that heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God.

As I said, pilgrimage is not always easy. And friends, I really do believe that our pilgrimage is going to take us in the next decade into some rough territory. There is a lot going on in the world that is going to make it harder and harder. We will be living in challenging times on many fronts. We are continuing to make our way out of COVID. The whole world seems discombobulated and on edge. And when people are discombobulated and on edge, they don't always act out of their best selves. And that includes me. And I suspect that it includes you.

The church continues to decline in numbers; that's true for us here, but it's true for everywhere. And it's true of just about every church of every tradition. If the current trends continue, and, actually, even if they level off eventually, in fifty years, it is expected that Christian will only make up 30-40% of the population in the United States. That means it will be harder to continue being faithful, surrounded by a world that does not understand what that means or why. We are faced with secularism, individualism, consumerism, relativism, and a deep divisiveness. All of which infects our imaginations and, if we're not careful, will shape how we engage faith and how we engage one another.

The whole world order feels shakier than it has felt for a very long time. The invasion of Ukraine is just one example of that. Democracy across the globe seems to be threatened in one way or another and our own democracy feels shakier than it has felt in decades. We know, we were reminded in 2008 and 2009, that our economy is prone breaking down. Not just because of, the ebb and flow of the market and inflation, but beyond that, a deep lack of security. Even people with jobs often lack a sense of job security. For many it is harder and harder to find work that pays a living wage.

And the internet and social media, for all the gifts and wonder that they bring, have a vicious, dark side, that continues to mess with us all. We need to learn how to engage those technologies in ways that are fruitful and not damaging.

The list could go on and it all sounds kind of depressing.

But Jesus didn't promise that if we follow him, all was going to be rosy. And that great cloud of witnesses that has gone on before us, pilgrimaged through some really hard times. And if we are headed into some really hard times of our own, we can be assured that that great cloud of witnesses will continue to cheer us on. And that Jesus, that great pioneer and perfecter of our faith, goes before us and walks alongside us.

And we are still making our way, here, in the Diocese of Fond du Lac. Continuing, as I said, to find our way out of COVID. Or find our way in continuing in this phase of COVID. Attendance, in many places, is not back to what it was before COVID. In some congregations it is; in some places in the diocese it's back and better. But, giving has continued to be steady in most places. Given all that we have been through, the fact that most of our churches continue to have a budget that is pretty much what it was, or better, before COVID, is a testament to the faithfulness in this diocese. People are finding their way back into engagement, one way or another. Ministry in the communities of our several congregations continues. The hungry are being fed, backpacks for students are being filled, people who did not know and have not known that they belong, know that they belong and are welcome. In at least a couple of our congregations, there is a ministry to refugees from Afghanistan and elsewhere. This Diocese, small as we are, has raised thousands of dollars for development in the Diocese of Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Everywhere I go there are new members to be received or confirmed. And almost without fail, in every congregation that I visit, there is an energy and a spirit of hopefulness and life that is undeniable.

We have a group who is looking at finding ways to engage students and staff on our college campuses that are near one of our churches. That is a rich mission field to which we need to reach out more fulsomely. You'll be hearing more about that in a bit. We have one congregation that is experimenting with being both Lutheran and Episcopalian, or at least worshipping together now and figuring out what it's going to look like going forward. This is a diocese that has a rich tradition. But it is a diocese that, out of that rich tradition, is not afraid to try new things.

We have a fabulous camp ministry. Led by Erin Wolf, it is the envy of many dioceses across the church. Over the last few years, our camp ministry has welcomed campers and staff from the other two dioceses in Wisconsin. We will continue to do that, no matter what comes next.

You all know this, but we have a fabulous staff to help us be the church that God is calling us to be. Matthew Payne, as you all know, wears several hats. Sometimes he puts on more than he's supposed to put on, because there are things that need doing and he is someone who likes to get things done. Lisa Baltes is our administrative assistant. You know that any time you call the office of the diocese you are going to get a warm welcome. And whatever help she can give you she will give you, or she will tell you where you can go to get the help you need.

Meredyth Albright does great work as our transitions officer. And many of you know what a gift she is to this church. Any of you, whose church has been in transition looking for a new priest, know what a great resource she is and how tirelessly she works to help with that transition and recruit new clergy into the Diocese. Many of you who are wearing collars are here because of Meredyth's faithful ministry.

We do have some really fabulous clergy in this diocese. And it doesn't hurt, although it's not necessary, it doesn't hurt that the average age of the clergy of the Diocese of Fond du Lac keeps going down and down.. We have several priests in charge now, who are in their 30's. Which is a fair bit younger in age than when I first got here. And, let's be honest, a fair bit younger than me. But they do bring a different perspective and a new energy. Meredyth is a great asset to this diocese, helping us recruit fine new clergy.

We are pilgrims now taking our place in the pilgrimage, surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses that have gone before. We are continuing to find ways to be faithful in our time. We have lots of challenges ahead of us as a church and as a Diocese. But, challenging as that all is, it also presents us with an opportunity. As they say, in every crisis there is an opportunity. The good news of Jesus Christ is still good news. People are hungry. They might always be sure just what they are hungry for, or where to have that hunger satisfied, and it is not always obvious to them whether the church is such a place. And, God help us, we have not always been good at offering something that looked all that appetizing. But people are hungry. People are yearning for belonging; there is an epidemic of loneliness in this country. Only exacerbated by COVID. People are looking for meaning and purpose, maybe above all right now, people are hungry for hope.

Friends, we who have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, know that we have something to offer. There is good news in Jesus Christ. There is hope and there is peace that passes understanding. We have good news to share. The Holy Spirit is active in the world and in our lives. The Anglican tradition, as we have it in the Episcopal church, has particular gifts in the way we express that good news. We need to take a good look at where things might need to change and where to carry our heritage forward.

As you know, we are in conversation about a proposed reunion with the other two dioceses of Wisconsin. That is not a done deal. Let me just be clear about that. It is not a done deal. We have decided to pursue it and to prayerfully discern. I will be honest with and say that I think it is a very good idea. In fact, I think that the opportunity we have before us is a providential opportunity and I think the church in Wisconsin will be stronger if we go forward with it.

If we do so, we have the opportunity to reconfigure ourselves that is organized to engage the changed and changing world in which we find ourselves. I do not think that we are currently organized to face the new realities before us. We can combine our financial and human resources in a diocese that if organized for mission, evangelism, public witness and discipleship. We can organize ourselves better to support each of our existing congregations, and we can encourage, cultivate, nurture and, perhaps finance, new communities of worship and discipleship. Some which might look like conventional congregations. Some which might look quite different.

We can form disciples, prepared to live faithfully in these times. We can encourage and train lay leadership. We can find ways to faithfully and responsibly use new media to reach people we might not otherwise reach. We can become more catholic. Not just in the sense of our worship and piety, as important as those might be. And, let me just say, that the Diocese of Fond du Lac is so catholic that we have high church, Anglo-Catholic incense every Sunday and praise-band low-church worship. That's catholic!

But more than that, we truly have to include people regardless of their class, their income, if they are rural or urban, whatever their education level, age, race or ethnicity, political party, sexuality, etc., so that we can mirror all of Wisconsin. And become a church where all are welcome, all are encouraged, all are challenged, and all are transformed by the holy spirit.

We can draw on our heritage. Going back to Jackson Kemper, who was bishop of all of Wisconsin. Back to the Oneida who pilgrimaged here, to establish the episcopal church in Wisconsin. Jackson Kemper, first missionary bishop of the episcopal church. I believe that in reunion, if we do it right, we can organize ourselves to be a missionary diocese for the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> centuries.

We need to be a missionary diocese in the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> centuries. We need to be thinking now how to organize ourselves to be prepared for whatever the future brings.

The world is changing. And changing significantly. But Jesus is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. We need to adapt. Not just continue existing, but be about the good news we know in Jesus Christ. That is good news the world needs desperately. We can become a church that confidently can live and bear witness to the good news, even as we do humility, we listen to and learn from our neighbors. Together, in ways that we cannot do separately, if we join into one Diocese, we can become a missionary diocese, organized to engage changes, challenges and opportunities before us. And surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, we can run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. And, with him, we can face the times ahead for the sake of the joy that is set before us.