

Sermon for the House of Bishops

Closing Eucharist and The Renewal of Vows

Isaiah 61:1-8, Psalm 40, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, John 20:19-23

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Come Holy Spirit and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen.

Not long after I was elected bishop in Kansas, I was in a small coffee shop not far from Coffeyville, Kansas. There I sat, resplendent in my dark suit, new purple shirt, and a pectoral cross given to me by my former parishioners at Saint Michael and All Angels, in Dallas, Texas. The cross modest, by Texas standards... was probably the largest golden object in Southeastern Kansas at that time. The waitress came up to take my order and said,

“My... that is SOME kind of cross!”

And I replied, “Well, thank you ma’am...” and then, trying to offer some kind of explanation I said,

“You see, I’m the Episcopal Bishop of Kansas...”

She stopped, looked over her glasses, and said, “Well, La DEE da!”

And then to complete my humiliation she yelled over the counter to the cook, “Hey Frank, his holiness wants his burger medium rare!”

I’ve had plenty of “La-DEE-da” moments as a bishop, but none more meaningful than having the privilege of speaking to you on this occasion.

I have to tell you, when I finally got around to asking Katharine WHY she had asked if I’d be willing to stand for election as Vice President of our House...and this was months after the fact... she explained the office was created so that if something ever happened to the Presiding Bishop, the Vice President could temporarily serve as presider until a new Presiding Bishop could be elected.

So I immediately asked her,

“Are you taking care of yourself?

You’re still running, right?

You’re not flying those little planes?”

Perhaps my sole qualification for this office is that I passionately believe in this body... I believe in the office of bishop and I believe in the House of Bishops.

That has become a bolder thing to say in the Episcopal Church over the last several years and so I want to tell you why, on a day when're renewing our ordination vows, why I believe in this office and in this House.

As it turns out, it is so much more than "La-DEE-da."

I believe in the office of bishop because I grew up in a Christian tradition that didn't have bishops! Even as a teenager I could see the value of having someone overseeing the Christian community from outside it.

Jesus modeled a trans-local ministry and the local community, isolated from the larger community, is always prone to peculiar thought and practice. If you have any doubts about this, read any of the letters of Paul!

In 1st Timothy 3, we're reminded that, "whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task."

It IS good work...It is a GOOD work...but then there's that list that makes so many of us wonder if we're completely qualified to do this work.

"Above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, an apt teacher, NOT a drunkard, NOT violent but gentle, and NOT a lover of money."

And, if those passages do not create any hesitancy, then there is,

"Must manage his household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way..."

(My 17 year old son will love to know about this!)

"...and not a recent convert and... one thought well of by outsiders..."

It's clear these instructions were intended to communicate Paul's thinking in his absence...that the well-ordered household is the model for the well-order ekklesia.. and the impression made by the bishop in the surrounding community counted for something.

As bishops, we proclaim, sometimes by the thinnest, what we hope to believe ourselves. Paradoxically, our proclamation of The Evangelion; the Good News of Jesus Christ, is often at its very best when we are at our very worst. In the midst of profound grief, loss, family turmoil, doubt, and depressions large and small, we cry out all the more boldly,

"Christ has died.
Christ is risen.
Christ will come again."

And there is an authenticity to our proclamations in these moments that make even our most jaded listeners pay closer attention.

When I review our ordination vows, they seem to fall into a few distinct categories....

The promise to listen to others...

The promise to study and teach the old, old stories...

The promise to work collaboratively with those whom you serve...

The promise to become who and what you are...

The promise to stay in intimate relationship with God...

And because these promises are deceptively hard to keep, we need to stick together. If you are feeling alone and isolated in this ministry...it is time to pick up the phone.

It's no secret that clergy who are deeply connected to one another find that to be a strong resource in times of trouble.

When you're too busy to attend House of Bishops meetings...when we don't invite one another to dinner....when you don't come to other meetings... when we don't call one another up when you think there might be a problem...then we have not kept that most important commandment to look after one another; to love others as we ourselves have been loved.

Most of the heretics throughout church history were brilliant loners...they had an infallible sense they possessed a truth to which no one else had access.... and their arrogance was exceeded only by their error...and the damage their error wreaked upon the Christian community.

We know this ancient office holds modern relevance. I attended a conference in Dallas recently on "Authority in the Church" where the question of "Who's in Charge?" was addressed. A Presbyterian minister, speaking about the polity of his own denomination, conceded that in every presbytery he's ever belonged to, there was always one thoughtful, experienced, loving presbyter who served, in fact, if not by office, as the bishop.

Jim Kelsey, of blessed memory...the late Bishop of Northern Michigan and a former tablemate of mine, told our new class of bishops, "Being a bishop is a profession in which the primary tools of the trade are affection, compassion, and respect."

How wise and how true.

We've always been at our best when working collaboratively with each order.... Who among us hasn't noticed that lay leaders, deacons, and Canons to the Ordinary can exercise more episcopate on any given day than the bishop does!

I believe in this body, this House of Bishops, because

I believe in the power of a faithful community (at prayer) to discern the will of God.

A professor of mine once told our class the only heresy which could not be overcome was a break with community... He argued that any other heresy would be remedied over time through the work of the Christian community by the power of the Holy Spirit, but when one willingly takes themselves out of the body; out of the community of the faithful, then they've placed themselves outside the Holy Spirit's protection.

I don't know if that's true, but there is something true about it.

I don't trust any one of us, including myself, to know the will of God. But I do trust the excruciating faithfulness of the members of this House when we are at prayer together. I trust us to hold one another accountable to one another and to Christ and I do believe God will bless our faithfulness. I also believe in the multiple checks and balances on bishops found in our polity, because we know what a church looks like without them.

If we are wrong as bishops, then there will be a correction... and its severity and consequence should give us honest pause in the midst of our certitude on any issue. We should always be quick to admit that we may just be wrong....

And we have, of course, been wrong before. Reading old Lambeth documents on divorce or birth control should give every bishop in the Anglican Communion a certain humility.

We can resemble that colleague of Winston Churchill in the House of Lords.... of whom Churchill said,
"He's often wrong, but seldom in doubt."

The most diligent among us re-read the promises we made at our ordination to the episcopacy every so often and the most honest among us realize the multitude of things we've "done and left undone."

The most faithful among us pick ourselves back up, resolve to do better, and go about righting the wrongs and assembling the shattered pieces...and it seems that we cannot help but leave some shattered pieces in the work we are called to do.

Occasionally, we pronounce our independence like truculent school children released to summer holiday...but in our heart of hearts we know, we must know, that we can never be freed of one another. As it turns out, we owe one another something. We are connected to one another by the promises we've made, by the faith we share, and by the God we serve. We are one in the body of Christ and accountable to one another, more by love than by any covenant, constitution, or canon. And yes, I well know how strange it is to use the word, "love" in the House of Bishops.

For people who have spent years talking about sexuality we have spent precious little time speaking of love...of its commitments...of the bond which exists between the lover and the beloved; of the hold any true love has upon the lover.

And we do love one another even when, perhaps especially when, we annoy one another and when we prod and poke each other.

Our love grows out of the respect we hold for one another even when, perhaps especially when, it is the begrudging respect of rivals who test one another to the very limits. There is not enough time, even in an ever-expanding universe, for those who disagree with us to “get it” in the same way as we “get it.” Could we to live long enough to see the mountains worn to the plains, we would never come to complete agreement. But we can come to a quiet place; a listening place, a place where we can at least hear one another.

I believe the office of bishop is being re-invented...and some of us are quietly mad as hell because we thought we knew what this office was when we were elected and it feels as if there has been some sort of “bait and switch.” None of us will be able to be the bishops we served and so admired because the episcopate has undergone a radical re-visioning and maybe, just maybe, our Lord is asking something else from those of us who now hold this sacred office.

As it turns out, this is dangerous work in a demanding time...and we have lost friends and colleagues to this office.

They live under extraordinary professional pressures...they die in car crashes... they have heart attacks...they fight vicious cancers...they make disastrous personal choices. Occasionally their very lives are threatened. In my time as a bishop in this house, I know of three bishops who have worn bullet-proof vest beneath their vestments in the exercise of their ministries. The recent attempt on the life of the Bishop of El Salvador is not as unthinkable as we might pray.

WE do not speak of these things publicly because we do not wish to appear sensational, or even more vulnerable, but we know the truth; that we are all dying daily to Christ.

And, while we may not be torn apart by lions in the coliseum, or fired upon by assassins, we can be hurt in more subtle and insidious ways.

John Sexton, President of N.Y.U. in an interview with Bill Moyers, noted that we are living in “Coliseum Culture” where in our political and religious conversations two extremes are constantly put in mortal conflict with one another. This culture of conflict creates a good deal of heat... and excellent ratings... but it results in precious little light.

Sexton told Moyers, “We have a growing allergy to nuance and complexity.” In a body intending to seek the complex mind of Christ, the resistance to nuance and complexity is a potentially fatal allergy.

We do not hold these offices for long; the average length of service for a bishop is between ten and twelve years. So we dare not wait.

We gather as the House of Bishops to do work, yes, but often we do something far more important than the work. Some of us came to this service because we felt we had to...but

some of us came because we are running so close to being absolutely empty that we needed to come. We had to come. You needed to be reminded of why you keep making the sacrifices you make. You needed to be reminded of what it was you pledged when you came before God in the presence of God's people and made such audacious promises. You needed to hear someone tell you why your life is a sacrament; a gift in the midst of your pouring it out as an offering for others. You needed to know that you are not pouring out your life for nothing.

Each one of us, each and every one of us, has been called by God in some special way. What a unique company of human beings this is when we remember what it is that we believe; that we have all been called to do God's will to God's great glory!

In other words, you and I have been called to the greatest work any man or woman could ever do or ever hope to do. There is no work on the face of this earth its equal. And, while we may know failure more intimately than success, it is an unparalleled feeling to have walked faithfully, but for even a moment, and to have stood close enough to the Divine to have felt The Very Breath of God.

We dare not waste so much as a precious afternoon...not a single evening gathered around the fire together. We dare not let this brief gift we've been given skitter beyond our grasp.

The disciples were hiding behind locked doors...like we sometimes are....and they were scared...just like we can be...and Jesus appeared before them and said,

“Peace.” Peace. Peace.