The Bishop’s Address to the 120th Diocesan Convention

November 6, 2021

Bishop Doug Fisher at Christ Church Cathedral, Springfield

Repairing, Rebuilding, Reimagining – our Convention theme as we are slowly coming out of the Pandemic. It is a 2021 theme. It was also a theme 2000 years ago at the start of the Jesus Movement.

Many of you know my favorite Bible story is the Feeding of the 5000. So if you have heard me preach about this before, bear with me. And listen for the new context.

5000 people follow Jesus to a deserted place. After hours of preaching and healing and forgiving, the apostles recognize the people are hungry. They tell Jesus to send them away so “they might go onto the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” Jesus tells the apostles, “You give them something to eat.” The apostles say we do not have enough. Only 5 loaves and 2 fish. Jesus takes the loaves and fish. Thanks God for it. Breaks it and gives it away. God multiples the gift and all are filled with 12 baskets of broken pieces left over.

In 2021, in an “almost but not quite out of the pandemic church”, many are saying what the apostles said “we don’t have enough.” We don’t have enough people coming back. We hardly have a Sunday school left. We lack the volunteers for so much that we did before. Trust me. I get it.

Now skip ahead in the story of Jesus. It is after his death on the cross. There aren’t 5000 followers any more. There are only the 11 disciples and the faithful women. They are frightened and despairing. On Sunday morning, all Mary Magdalene wants is the body returned. They are a people who “had hoped”. Hope in the past tense. But this little group stays together. They stay together. Then God did a new thing and raised Jesus from the dead. Even that good news
is met with terror and amazement. The early followers of Jesus needed to Repair, Rebuild, Reimagine.

Followers of Jesus have done this over and over again in 2000 years. The oh-so popular St. Francis heard Jesus calling him to rebuild a crumbling church building in San Damiano. He started a capital campaign and got the building restored. A good thing. Later he went deeper and realized Jesus was calling him to repair, rebuild and reimagine what the Church was all about.

And so here we are. In confusing and challenging times. Unsure exactly what the Jesus Movement will look like. But can we learn from the apostles’ mistake at the feeding of the 5000. Can we say “this is enough” and trust in God’s amazing grace? In our “terror and amazement” can we trust the Risen Christ to Repair, Rebuild and Reimagine his mission of mercy, compassion and hope?

Let’s explore what that might look like. And I’ll do it by using one of our many thriving ministries as a metaphor for this exploration.

The ministry I’m thinking of is our Chaplains to the Appalachian Trail. It is a simple concept. It is a big tent set up right by the Trail in Sheffield. In the tent is food, water, chairs and battery packs so hikers can power up their iPhones. The ministry is organized by our Episcopal/Lutheran Church in Sheffield – Christ Trinity and the UCC Church. Volunteers come from many churches. As we talk with the hikers and hear their experiences on the Trail, we ask a simple question: “Why are you walking the Trail?” Knowing that some hikers are walking for just a day, but many are walking the whole Trail – from Georgia to Maine. People come from around the world to hike the AT. You know to come all this way, they are searching for something. Often it is young people going on an adventure and trying to make decisions about their future. Sometimes there are older people who will tell us “I had cancer a few years ago and I recovered. I’m walking the AT because I can.” Or “in gratitude to God.”

Let’s unpack this and see what it teaches us about being followers of Jesus in our time.

“Why are you walking the Trail?” A big part of this ministry is listening. Do you know in the four gospels, Jesus asks 307 questions? And people ask Jesus questions 183 times. And Jesus only answers three of those 183 questions directly. Most often he answers the question with another question.

We all know we live in a deeply divided nation. In this atmosphere people don’t ask questions anymore. They make demands. What if the Church could model a different way of being? What if the Church could be curious? What if the Church
was a place where we can ask the question “what are you searching for?” And then, like Jesus, invite ourselves into real spiritual depth. Michael Curry says evangelism happens when followers of Jesus go deeper into their own faith.

An example in our diocese is the Loving the Questions program. In most years 7-10 people join this in-depth spiritual search. In 2020 we had 28. Thank you to Jenny Greg and Craig Hammond and others who have made Loving the Questions such a gift to us. Here’s a big audacious idea: what would happen if we had versions of Loving the Questions in all our parishes?

And isn’t asking questions and listening a big part of our desire for racial justice? Racial injustice has been a tragic dimension of our country for 400 years. It is time, way beyond time, to question our history and white privilege and may that questioning produce action that we might become The Beloved Community Jesus intends us to be.

The Appalachian Trail ministry is a clear example of a phrase that is popular in church circles in recent years. “Finding God in the neighborhood.” Have you heard that phrase? We get discouraged about declining church attendance. And we do need to pay attention to that. But the Spirit is not confined to the Church. God is still out there being God. We ask “where are the young people?” I know where they are. They are on the Appalachian Trail. And they are in schools. So many of our churches have helped out at schools by addressing food insecurity needs there. St. Mark’s in Worcester has reached out to their challenged neighborhood by bringing in Marie’s Mission – a ministry of St. Michael’s on the Heights in Worcester -to give away diapers to families in need. And they are starting a tutoring program with students from Clark University as the tutors. Our Cathedral and several churches are engaged in tutoring. And of course, our Walking Together Ministry in Worcester is all about finding God in the neighborhood.

So many of you addressed the needs of your neighborhood by getting vaccines out there. We could add to the Matthew 25 passage that goes, when I was hungry you gave me food, when I was in prison you visited me. We could add “when I could not figure out how I could get an appointment for a vaccine on my computer, you navigated it for me.”

Another example of joining God’s work in the neighborhood is our every growing Veterans Ministry. We are up to 12 locations now.

And our outdoor church communities are an inspiration. There are plans to add others to those that already thrive in Pittsfield, Springfield and Northampton.
Joining God in the neighborhood looks like our Latino congregations in Springfield, Worcester and now Holyoke.

Of course, the AT Ministry reminds us of the beauty of God’s creation. I was so aware this summer, when I was in the midst of that beauty that hundreds of thousands of acres of God’s creation to our west were on fire. Last spring, the Bishops of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, with wisdom from Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, published a document concerning the crisis of climate change. I invite you to read it and commit to pray, learn, act and advocate.

The AT Ministry is a fine example of collaboration. Episcopalians, Lutherans and Congregationalists all working together. And then inviting in other churches. You have heard me say this before – whenever you think of starting a new ministry, ask the question “who can we work with?” There are so many examples in the pandemic of churches working with other churches and social service agencies. The willingness to collaborate has become the new normal in WMA. And we are doing that as a diocese with the diocese to our east. The Exploring Common Mission Task Force is doing holy work and you will hear a lot more about that later today.

Yes, these are difficult times. But look at what we have – what I have mentioned in this address and so much more that I don’t have time to include. Could it be that the work of Repairing, Rebuilding, Reimagining was happening even before the pandemic and we are called to thank God for it and let God multiply the Grace in ways we cannot see yet? In our terror and amazement can we look for more than getting the old body back and follow where the Risen Jesus leads?

Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest who has worked for 40 years with gangs in Los Angeles says “St. Paul tells us to put on Christ. Putting on Christ is the easy part. Never taking him off – that’s the challenge.”

Can we keep Christ on? Even now? Especially now? Our world needs Jesus Mission of Mercy, Compassion and Hope more than ever. Our world needs prayer more than ever.

We will conclude by going back to the AT. In the southwest corner of Massachusetts. It is not at the beginning of the trail in Georgia or the end of the trail in Maine. It is on the way. As we are.

This poem/prayer by Lona Fowler is one I have turned to many times in my journey. It is my prayer for us now.
The Middle Time
BY LONA M. FOWLER

Between the exhilaration of Beginning
and the satisfaction of Concluding
is the Middle Time
of enduring, changing, trying,
despairing, continuing, becoming.

Jesus Christ was the man of God’s Middle Time
between Creation and . . . Accomplishment.
Through him God said of Creation,
“Without mistake.”
And of Accomplishment,
“Without doubt.”

And we, in our Middle Times
of wondering, waiting, hurrying,
hesitating, regretting, revising;
We who have begun many things—
and seen but few completed;
We who are becoming more— and less;
through the evidence of God’s Middle Time
have a stabilizing hint
that we are not mistakes,
that we are irreplaceable,
that our Being is of interest
and our Doing is of purpose,
that our Being and our Doing
are surrounded by AMEN.

Jesus Christ is the Completer
of unfinished people
with unfinished work
in unfinished times.

May he keep us from sinking, ceasing,
wasting, solidifying—
that we may be for him
experimenters, enablers, encouragers,
and associates in Accomplishment.
Thus ends the prayer. But maybe we should end this address by saying “That we may be for him Repairers, Rebuilders, Reimaginers. Amen.

The Rt. Reverend Douglas J. Fisher
IX Bishop, Western Massachusetts
Throughout this liturgical year the Sunday gospel has been from Mark. One of the passages we skipped is Mark 6:1-14. In this passage Jesus preaches in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth after teaching and performing miracles in many other places. Many are “astounded.” “Where is he getting all this wisdom? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!” Then we hear, “And they took offense at him.” Why would they take offense at that?

Maybe we skip it as a Sunday Gospel because there is a very similar story in Luke that is on the liturgical calendar in another year. It is also the story of the first time Jesus taught in the Nazareth synagogue. Jesus stands up to read and chooses a passage from Isaiah. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor…recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.”

Like the astonished people in Mark, “all spoke well of him and were amazed.” Jesus tells them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Their reaction was more than taking offense. They tried to throw him off a cliff.
This incongruent response makes us think of one of my favorite prayers. It appears several times in *The Book of Common Prayer*, including the Easter Vigil and at ordinations.

“O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working out of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”


I still love that prayer, but when I put it next to the experience of Jesus in his hometown synagogue, there is a glaring contradiction. We ask God to help us, “carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation.” The response to Jesus was anything but tranquil. Indeed, when Jesus could have chosen “tranquility” he chose the cross.

Michael Curry reminds us who we are. “We are the Jesus Movement that is out to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the Dream God has for it.” And when we, as humble sinners, name the nightmares and work for change, it is not work carried out in tranquility. In my experience, when we address the public health crisis of gun violence, it is not met with tranquility. Nor are the other pressing issues of our day which include climate change, systematic racism, immigration, income inequality, and more.

The change Jesus brings about in the world upsets the *status quo*. It creates turbulence. That turbulence may never be violent for followers of Jesus. Using our voices for advocacy, “praying with our feet” in the streets, praying the truth of injustice in our worship – this is how “things (and people) cast down are raised up.”

The monk Thomas Merton writes, “The biggest human temptation is to settle for too little.” Jesus gave us a vision of the Kingdom of God: a world of mercy, compassion and hope. As followers of Jesus, we humbly engage this world. We use the power of love (not the love of power) to reshape the world to be all God intends it to be – even if this work cannot be done “in tranquility.”

But what if I’m misinterpreting this prayer? Maybe the tranquility is not an outward tranquility but an inner tranquility. I know many people who are working to move us from the nightmare to the dream who have an inner peace. It comes from knowing they are following the way of love, which includes love for those with different opinions, and who make different choices. Jesus says the kingdom is “within” us. And he loved those who “took offense” at him – even the ones who tried to throw him off a cliff.
God’s power is unchangeable, and through Christ, it courses through the Church. It has never been easy to follow Jesus. There are dangerous cliffs to avoid and systems to unsettle. May we remain steadfast in the tranquility that comes from God’s abiding presence. May we each, with the Church, do our part for the plan of salvation.

+Doug
What has become clear to you this Easter?

April 4, 2021

Happy Easter! It feels like we have been in Lent for over a year now. Thank you for staying faithful. It has not been easy being Church at the very time that the message and mission of the church has been more important than ever. Episcopal priest and spiritual leader, The Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray, once said “Hope is a song in a weary throat.” Thank you for all the weary throats that have sung out hope this year.

Ten years ago, while I was a priest at Grace Church in Millbrook, NY, our daughter Grace was a freshman at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. It was a year when spring break was just a week before Holy Week. We really enjoyed our time with our youngest daughter and on the Saturday before Palm Sunday, I was driving Grace on the four hour trip back to school. On the ride she asked me, “Dad when will you be getting me home for Easter.” I was surprised by the question and said, “Oh Gracie we can’t get you back home for Easter. You have classes up to Friday afternoon. Good Friday. Mommy and I are both priests. Holy Week is really busy.” She sadly said “Ok, Dad.” A couple of hours later we were in Carlisle stopped at a light, just a couple of blocks from campus. There was one of the signs saying “Episcopal Church this way.” Grace noticed it and
said “Look Dad. There is the Episcopal Church where I will be sitting all by myself on Easter Sunday morning.”

Betsy and I got her back home for Easter.

I tell that story knowing many of you are sitting all by yourself this Easter. Very soon some of our churches who can do so safely will be open for in-person, indoor worship for limited numbers. It is my sincere hope by the fall that all our church buildings can be open.

But today we are still physically apart. I’m going to turn to the great spiritual writer, Thomas Merton, for a word of hope and grace. Merton looked at the origins of the word “alone.” He says it comes from “all one.” All one. Even when we are alone we are all one. All one with God and with one another on this Easter Sunday and throughout this year of Lent.

Ralph Waldo Emerson used to greet friends he had not seen in a long time and would ask them this question: “What has become clear to you since we last met?” A great question for all of us to ask each other when we see each other in-person as this pandemic ends. For me, what has become clear is what Merton says. We are all one.

And I think that gets us to one of two key insights of the many, many life changing insights from the Resurrection of Jesus we celebrate this day.

In John’s telling of that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene recognizes the one she thought was the gardener to be Jesus. And although the text does not say it, she must have hugged him. Jesus responds. Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go to my brothers and say to them ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’

At first, we feel sorry for Mary. She wants to hold on to this person she loves so much. But Jesus’ answer is good news. The Risen Christ will not be confined to any one place. He will be with God the Father and that means he will be everywhere.

You know who really understood the power of this truth? St. Patrick. In the hymn attributed to him we sing these words: “Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in the hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.”
We used to say that prayer with our children when putting them to bed. Our son Geoff loved that prayer and if he didn’t want to go to sleep yet he would keep the prayer going: “Christ in the basement, Christ on the roof, Christ at my school…” He was doing that to stay up, but he got the point. The Resurrection and later Ascension of Jesus means he is now, as Fr. Richard Rohr says, “the Cosmic Christ.” We are never apart from Christ. Our life and our death are now incorporated in the life of the Risen Christ.

And here is the second insight from the Easter miracle. I’m taking this from an opinion piece in *The NY Times* written by Esau McCaulley. This article was sent to me by The Very Rev. Jim Munroe, the former dean of our cathedral.

Looking at the empty tomb stories in all four gospels, he points out as I did in my Easter Vigil sermon last night, that the first Easter morning was a time of grief and anxiety. Even after being told Jesus was alive they left the tomb in fear. McCaulley writes: “The women did not go to the tomb looking for hope. They were searching for a place to grieve. They wanted to be left alone in despair. The terrifying aspect of Easter is that God called these women to return to the same world that crucified Jesus with a very dangerous gift: hope in the power of God, the unending reservoir of forgiveness and an abundance of love. Who could believe such a thing?”

McCaulley then brings the first Easter to this Easter of 2021: “To listen to the plans of some, after the pandemic we are returning to a world of parties and rejoicing. This is true. Parties have their place. But we are also returning to a world of hatred, cruelty, division and a thirst for power that was never quarantined… As we leave the tombs of quarantine, a return to normal would be a disaster unless we recognize we are going back to a world desperately in need of healing. The work that Jesus left his followers to do includes showing compassion and forgiveness and contending for a just society.”

Friends, what has become clear to you since we last met? What has become clear to you this Easter? A theologian once said, “The resurrection is in part about the sheer toughness and persistence of God’s love.”

May we rejoice today Easter 2021 in the toughness and persistence of God’s love. And may we recommit to going out into the world dedicated to Jesus’ Mission of Mercy, Compassion and Hope. Amen.

+Doug
Ash Wednesday: Christ’s own forever and that means now

February 17, 2021

Our prayer book is very clear what Ash Wednesday and Lent are all about. They are about facing our own mortality – remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. And it is about acknowledging sin and repenting for it.

I have heard it said that Lent is redundant this year. With this pandemic we are constantly being reminded of our mortality and our vulnerability. And sin is all over the place:

- The sin of the January 6 insurrection at our Capital
- The sin of racial injustice which has been with us for 400 years is getting clearer and clearer
- The sin of wealth inequality has become glaringly obvious as the numbers coming to our food pantries have doubled or tripled or quadrupled.
- And our sinful neglect of God’s creation has brought about climate change.

I’m proposing we have another theme this Lent. I’m proposing we have another “remember” in addition to “Remember you are dust”. Here it is “Remember you belong to God and you are claimed as Christ’s own forever.” And forever includes now.

This prayer by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. should be our Lenten prayer for 2021:

“God we thank you for the inspiration of Jesus. Grant that we love you with all our hearts, souls and minds, and love our neighbors as ourselves, even our enemy neighbors. And we ask you God, in these days of emotional tension, when the problems of the world are gigantic in extent no chaotic in detail, to be with us in
our going out and our coming in, in our rising up and in our lying down, in our moments of joy and our moments of sorrow.”

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King

Now belonging to God does not preclude struggling with God. Let’s look for a moment at a statement by Jesus in today’s gospel that I have always struggled with. Jesus tells us to not pray in public but when we wish to pray we should “go to your room and shut the door.” Now for people like me that make our living praying in public, this is a harsh saying. So for most of my life I have simply ignored it. But then I found an insight from one of my favorite theologians, Walter Brueggeman, and finally I understood.

Brueggeman points out this teaching of Jesus is by way of classic rabbinic overstatement- a type of speech Jesus employed frequently. Of course we are supposed to pray as a community- remember the “where two or three gather” statement. And someday we will gather together in this church, while we stay faithful to community prayer now through zoom and live-stream. But perhaps we need to pray alone as well because there might be some things we want to say to God that would not be polite to say in public. Look at the words of our liturgies – beautiful language awash with praise and thanks to God. But what if life has dealt us some unfair blows? Are there times you just want to argue with God? Aren’t there questions you would like to ask God that are not polite questions? I remember our daughter Garagh, when she was a teenager, asking one of those questions. She said, “Why is it that every time something good happens, we thank God. And when something bad happens it is all our fault?” Good question.

When we go to our room and ask the tough questions, when we go and shout at God that life is so unfair, when we dare to wrestle with God, one of two things can happen. We may succeed in wrestling some answers from God. Great. But perhaps we lose. Perhaps we don’t get the answers. But in losing we meet a God who is not our equal. We meet the BIG God. The God who is bigger than we are. The God who made billions of stars. And we realize the task of life is not wrestling with God but surrendering to God. We belong to that God.

To continue this Lenten theme I’m going to skip ahead a few days to Sunday’s gospel- the first Sunday in Lent. It is from Mark. You all know the story. It happens right after the baptism of Jesus. At his baptism a voice from heaven says “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” Remember Jesus has not done anything yet. No miracles, no healing, no great sermons. But he is beloved.

Then he goes to the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan for 40 days. Now Mark does not tell what the temptations are. Matthew and Luke do. And Michael Curry has given us preachers permission to move around the Bible as we preach. Matthew and Luke mention the devil tempting the hungry Jesus with turning a stone into bread. If you really are the Beloved of God you can do this. You can’t be the beloved of God and be hungry. That wouldn’t be fair. But Jesus refuses the devil’s reasoning. Jesus holds together being hungry and being loved by God. The devil is saying “you deserve better than this. If God loves you, then you would never be hungry. Come with me and you can be full and fulfilled.” Jesus has to deal with this lack of fulfillment throughout his life. Jesus is continually frustrated – AND knows he is loved. Jesus has his heart broken – and knows he is loved. Jesus is tortured to death – and knows he is loved and love is stronger than death. Jesus does not need everything to break his way to know he is loved. God’s love of him is unconditional.

It works the same way for us. Can we have our hearts broken and know God’s love? Can we be unemployed and know God’s love? Can we have cancer and know God’s love? Can we live in the midst of a pandemic and know God’s love? Michael Curry is right. It all begins with God’s love, and that love working in us, will transform the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it.

The Jewish people have a wonderful insight into remembering God’s love given to us before we ever accomplish anything. They believe an angel places the soul in the body and then seals it by placing a finger over the mouth of the child. That is where we have a little indentation over our lips and under our nose. It is where the angel’s finger was when he sealed in that spirit. That is why we try to remember something we instinctively place our index finger onto that little crevice. We are trying to remember and we are trying to remember our divine origins. We are made by God. We are made holy.

A long time ago, someone poured water over your head and said “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” And then oil was placed on your head with the words “I claim you as Christ’s own forever.” Forever we belong to Jesus. And forever includes now. Hungry we are his. Sick we are his. Sad we are his. In everything good and holy we are his. Unconditional belonging is in the very heart of God. Martin Luther King’s prayer got it right. Let’s remember we are God’s beloved this Lent.

Amen.
January 6th is pivotal. I invite us to a day of prayer.

January 5, 2021

After our mother died in 1977, my sister was going through her things and found her “nurse’s handbook.” On the blank first page our mother had written a prayer called “9 Consecutive Hours.”

Excerpt from a prayer written down by Mrs. Louise Fisher. PHOTO: submitted
The prayer begins, “O Jesus, who hast said ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you. Through the intercession of Mary, Thy most Holy Mother, I knock, I seek, I ask that my prayer be granted.”

Then she writes in parentheses, (Make Your Request). That is followed by two more prayers, each ending with, (Make Your Request).

It appears she said those prayers every hour for 9 consecutive hours. My sister made a copy of it and framed it for me. It has a prominent place in our dining room.

Wednesday January 6 is a pivotal day in our democracy. The world will be watching us as some members of the Senate and the House of Representatives, urged on and intimidated by the out-going President, will seek to overturn November’s election and the will of the people. Wednesday is also The Epiphany. We remember the light that guided three travelers to the manger. We celebrate the God who came in humility and embraced the plight of the poor. We remember that when faced with the threat of violence we can take another way. We can choose the Prince of Peace. As this important day approaches, I invite us to a day of prayer.

Pray however the Spirit leads you. For me, I will use my mother’s prayer. And in the space where it says, “Make your request,” I will pray this:

“Jesus, our country is in danger. May our constitution and the rule of law hold in the face of all assaults on our democratic institutions. We ask for a peaceful transition of power that will continue to be an inspiration throughout the world. Keep us from violence and give us hope. Amen.”

+Doug