

CONVOCATION OPENING

Years ago I heard Bennett Sims, the retired bishop of Atlanta, speaking about mission. He stated quite clearly, “The second healthiest state of the Church is the Church in reform. The healthiest state of the Church is the Church in mission. All else are stages of disease.”

We are in reform. That’s what this whole BCMS/MSN process is all about, and no wonder we are in tension. Some have worked very hard on our behalf; we have all been invited to participate and many of us have while others have not; some spoke and do not believe they were listened to. That sounds pretty typical and normal for a time of change, of reform.

We have come to the point where our mission strategy has been pulled together and written up for us to go further as a diocese. The latest version was printed just after Easter. Responses to it have been all over the map, with strong feelings. I want to remind you that we have been here before; this is the fourth time in my episcopate. This is the point where our diocesan “family system” goes into reactivity, resistance and refusal. We have done this for at least sixty years, and the question is, will we do it again or will we try another way? Will we choose some new behavior? And what will it take to help us do so?

The blessing this time is that the first year or so of the BCMS process helped us to see and name this behavior. Before, we simply did it one more time, blissfully unaware of our repetitive behavior. Now we have the opportunity to do something differently, or, we could do this old one again, but without blindness or naivete as an excuse.

Here we stand, on the brink of choosing to live out Jesus’ gospel in a new and powerful way or doing in that very gospel by our hesitancy, criticisms or fear. We may need a good floor fight to clear the air, but do we have to destroy the possibilities in front of and within us? Do we have to diminish hope? Do we have to alienate each other? That is what we have done countless times before.

We did not come here to bind ourselves to a program today, although I hope we can continue moving toward commitment to a shared vision and mission. We came to be bound to each other in the Holy Spirit. We came not to bind, but to be bound, for we cannot make unity happen, any more than we can make grass grow or create love. This is a process, a gift of the Holy Spirit.

There is something we can do to invite unity, and that’s to go inside and do an examen of conscience, a personal inventory. *What is there inside me today—my attitudes, my behaviors, my use of language—that puts up barriers and walls to others?*

Even more, what is there in me that I have brought along that speaks of my expectations and my demands and my bottom line rather than hope and possibility and promise?

Where have I set limits and boundaries to what I believe we must do, that make it difficult for me to hear anything new, especially from particular people?

I invite you to take a few moments with me in silence to go inside with these questions, to become very aware of any blocks you have within you to new ideas, to other people, to being part of community. Let me repeat the questions.

SILENCE

Last summer, I had the distinct privilege of hearing the Archbishop of Canterbury, ++Rowan Williams, talk about practicing a generous hospitality, making room for new ideas, even more than that, making room for each other in our hearts. He asked us bishops, divided in more than a few ways on several issues, if we could try walking toward each other. That is what I am asking of you. For us, spiritual transformation is about letting go of what we hold onto too tightly, about letting go of any attitude or behavior which stands between us and the free-flowing love and grace of God. Spiritual transformation will be manifest when we actually move into mission together rather than torpedoing it one more time. Can we move beyond this seemingly endless or chronic state of trying to be in reform? Remember, reform is the second healthiest state of the Church. Can we move into mission?

What is *our mission*? Is it about going out into all the world, seeking souls and making disciples of Christ? That's part of it. Is it about finding ways to mend brokenness, bring healing, reconcile differences? That's part of it. Is it about the process or the goal? Both. The goal is connected to what we do. The process is about who we are. Without a shared goal for ministry, we are only an aimless collection of people who somehow self-describe as Episcopalians. Without process, i.e., focused, intentional relating to one another, we miss seeing the Christ in one another, and we deny the dignity of each other's souls. Mission is always about goal and process in a balance that relies on both to honor each of us yet take us beyond narrow self-interest or crippling fear or pessimism.

Years ago I said to Diocesan Council, "You may change any line items in the diocesan budget, except for two: our apportionment to The Episcopal Church and our Indian Work. Everything else is about what we do. Those two are about who we are." Fifteen years ago as the new bishop I could get away with saying that without a single question or opposing voice. Today that does not seem to be true. I shall say more about that later.

What do we want to come out of this meeting with today? Is this take it or leave it with regard to the latest version of the MSN Report? Is this about all or nothing? I do not think so. The rumbling in the diocese tells me we may have missed or undervalued some basic questions about our identity and about mission. Let us name that and include what we need. And of course, there is always more we can imagine with regard to specific

ministries and common mission. Let us add that. And if there are recommendations in this report that you believe work against either our mission or our community, then by all means name that, too.

Nothing here is being forced upon you; nothing is being shoved down your throat; we are not practicing water-boarding. We do not have to take all of this. But there is more to this than taking it all or putting up with something. *We do have to give all of ourselves.*

Today is a trial and a test for us, as we image it in the Lord's Prayer: "save us from the time of trial." The trial is not, as we may fear, about eternal judgment or damnation, and yet it has some elements of that. It is a trial or a test of our trustworthiness. And let us get beyond the spectator sport of this, the audience version, where trustworthiness is about *the other*. It is not about the bishop or the MSN or the metro or Greater Minnesota. We have gone there so many times before, and each time we do we are really looking for reasons not to move forward together, camouflaged in our critique of other people's skills, capacities, attitudes, friendliness or whatever. If you find it hard to trust, say you find it hard to trust, but spare me and others the rhetoric of blaming others for that.

Trustworthiness is about you, about your willingness to overcome your internal barriers to trust, to take risks, to have faith. Two things we can be certain about in mission: if it is from God, it is always about risk and leaving safe harbors behind. And, if it is from God, it is always on behalf of others. I think Jesus describes it as "losing one's life for my sake." Do we trust enough to follow him?

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