

Transcript of the Bishop's Address to the 139th Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina

It seems like it comes quickly in our agenda that we get to that point where I'm invited to offer my address. I don't want to terrify you with all of the books: one's a Bible, one's a prayer book. I won't be reading everything from those books, but there will be some moments when I might want to actually open them.

Well, good morning, people of East Carolina. We are now live with Facebook, so that those other five people in the diocese and across the world can also watch with us. I know the reach is farther than that, and I'm glad for the technology that allows us to be together and allows us to extend our reach as God's people more broadly and more deeply.

In some ways I'm thinking of this address as something like part two of last evening's sermon. Yesterday, our worship was rooted in the collect and readings that would be used in our church on Ascension Day. This morning, I want to focus more fully on the day of Pentecost, which we will celebrate in our churches tomorrow.

The day of Pentecost, when we celebrate it in our churches, we typically hear from the first verses of the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. We hear about how the 120 or so remaining followers of Jesus were gathered together in one place, and we can reflect, as I hope we did a little bit last night, about some of the emotions they must have had. Jesus had suffered a cruel death. He was raised from the grave by God's love. He appeared in their midst, and then he disappeared again with Ascension Day, so the story tells.

Their emotions must have been all up and down, but on this day as they are gathered, everything changes dramatically, because God's Holy Spirit comes into their midst, and it's described in the sense of a rushing wind. It's described in the idea of tongues of flame that rested on the head of each of the disciples. It's expressed in the reality that, somehow beyond our understanding, allowed those humble disciples to be able to speak in languages that they did not even know. That—surprise, surprise—gathered a crowd in the city of Jerusalem amongst devout Jews who were gathered there for the feast of Pentecost. And, as the crowd gathered and came together, each of them, no matter where they lived and no matter what language they spoke, was able to hear someone speaking in their language such that they could understand.

And, when the crowd was gathered Peter—probably not by deliberate planning, probably more on inspiration—Peter rose up and preached a sermon about Jesus. And, at the end of that sermon, there were so many in the crowd that were moved that they asked the question, “What must we do?” And, this answer was simple: repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus. And, we're told that more than 3,000 people who were in the crowd listened to and responded to that

invitation, and so what had been a hidden group of followers of Jesus became a Holy Spirit-empowered and quickly growing gathering of folks from all across the known world.

Reading from the last verses of chapter two, after Peter's sermon has ended and after that question and answer about what they should do had taken place and they had been baptized, as I said, about 3,000 persons were added. And now from scripture: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42-47 NRSV). Were we to take these few verses and implement them as our mission, I think most of us would chicken out.

Except for the power of the Holy Spirit moving them, I don't know that many of them would have taken on this plan. How many of us, for example, would be willing to sell everything we own in order that it could be redistributed to those in need? That's not very American is it? The people who heard Peter's sermon and who were moved by God's Holy Spirit committed themselves to living their lives together in such a way that people just flocked to be with them. They came and they joined them, because, not so much of their words, but because of what could be seen in the lives and the witness of the people who came together to share life.

It's easy for me to get from this passage of scripture to the language of the five questions that are a part of our Baptismal Covenant. Again, last evening I spoke of the Baptismal Covenant and we renewed our covenant together before the clergy then renewed their ordination vows. I teased, and some of you caught it, that I might actually renew my baptismal vows more often than any of you. It's something I get to do most Sundays and often more than once.

For most of our churches. It's something that happens at the time of a baptism, at the time of the Easter Vigil, and at other great feasts in our life together. I haven't yet learned of a church whose people renew their baptismal vows every Sunday. I hope you're familiar with it, though, and I hope you can know from memory that the Baptismal Covenant starts with three questions. By answering those three questions, we recite together the Apostle's Creed, an ancient expression of our Christian faith, and we follow those three questions with five more. I will read them without expecting response this time:

1. The first: will you continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship in the breaking of bread and in the prayers? Where does that one come from? I think I just read the passage of scripture. It's that closely connected.

2. Will you persevere in resisting evil and whenever you fall into sin repent and return to the Lord?
3. Will you Proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?
4. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons loving your neighbor as yourself?
5. Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?

To each of those five questions, we are called to respond, “I will with God's help” (BCP 304-5). I have come to understand for myself at least but I think for the church that living fully into these questions empowered by God's Holy Spirit is to **ACT** in the ways that God calls us to live and in the ways that the world needs to witness.

Four years ago and a couple of months before that in March of 2018, a number of young people in our diocese spoke up and said “We want to go to Washington for the March for Our Lives,” and some of our adult leaders worked with them to support them. I remember clearly that Emily [Emily Gowdy Canady, Missioner for Lifelong Christian Formation] explained that came from our young people first—adults supported them. I'd already had plans and couldn't go with them. My plans included being with my wife Sandy for the long-promised retirement party after she finished life as a nurse. And where do you go in retirement? Florida.

So, we went to Florida and watched some baseball. Went to Disney. Lined up, because I didn't realize it was spring break week. But, on one day, we joined with people in Tampa who were gathering for that same March for Our Lives. If you don't know about that movement, pay attention: it's coming to Greenville again in a week or two, next Saturday I believe. It's a movement that was organized by survivors of the Parkland shootings.

And, while I was there I took a picture of a sign that someone was carrying, and it had three words on it very simply: thoughts, prayers, actions. The words ‘thoughts’ and ‘prayers’ were crossed out, and the word ‘actions’ was circled. I think that's a pretty simple representation of a critique that many can level against us in the church. We can be perceived as being all about thoughts and prayers. We can be seen gathering for prayers and to share in the breaking of the bread; we might not be seen so actively repenting of our sin or proclaiming and living into the dignity of all people. We may not always be seen to be pursuing justice, and so sometimes people assume of us that we're all about thoughts and prayers and not so much about actions. As I've said, I think that if we take our Baptismal Covenant seriously, our actions should show the love of God that is at the heart of our baptismal living.

Later today, we will give our consideration to a good number of substantial resolutions that will challenge us to **SPEAK** and **ACT** in some important ways:

- to combat racism

- to consider the forms of Spanish language that we should use in our life and relationships as Church
- to stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine
- to expand access to healthcare for the people of North Carolina
- to work together to reduce gun violence

These resolutions have been prepared and presented by the people of East Carolina, **AS YOU** have faithfully lived out the vows of your Baptismal Covenant. I believe that these resolutions represent our best intentions to be the sorts of witnesses that Jesus called his disciples to be, as he prepared to ascend out of their sight. Living fully into them will demand that we rely upon God's Holy Spirit power, rather than trusting only in our own, human power. As we move forward, let us remember Paul's teaching, that "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25 NRSV).

And, "God's weakness is stronger than human strength" from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, words that remind us that we ought not to get so caught up with ourselves and our ideas of what is right and wrong and our ideas of what we're going to accomplish, recognizing that God can accomplish more than we can ever ask or imagine. And so, I am grateful for those who have brought resolutions for our consideration. Thank you.

I'm also particularly grateful for all across the diocese who, at one point or another, have participated in the work of prayerfully discerning priorities for our life and mission together, work that has happened during these last two difficult years. Today, we will be asked to adopt a statement that gives a fresh expression to our sense of self-identity as the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement here in eastern North Carolina, a statement which focuses our attention on aspects of our life and ministry to which we believe that God is calling us to give our best energy and our resources.

This morning, we will hear from four leaders of our diocese, each of whom will speak to one of the four Mission Priorities that have emerged. Mission Priorities which can be really briefly summarized in the four words that God calls us to lead, learn, serve, and heal. None of them has been asked to explain the priority they have been assigned. Rather, it is my hope that they will stimulate our collective imagination, helping us to see what might be possible as we continue to count on God's Holy Spirit to lead us forward in life and ministry.

Assuming that this statement of Mission Priorities will be adopted, our Diocesan leadership and staff will begin to reorganize our life and ministry around these priorities. It is not that we will abandon other important ministry, but we will give attention to work and ministry that has, in many cases, suffered from a lack of deliberate effort and energy. When we follow patterns of power, such as some that we can see in the world around us, all authority is pushed

up. Life in the body of Christ should be different and should bear witness to Jesus who gave us a different model when he knelt to wash the feet of his disciples and then taught them that they should love one another as he had loved them.

These last years have been difficult and have strained our understanding and experience of what it means to be Church. In every congregation, those who have offered leadership have found that leadership challenged. All of us, don't you know, have medical degrees or degrees in public health administration. At every step of the way along this COVID journey, our congregations have been provided, God willing, with the resources they needed to make difficult local decisions.

I know it's been difficult for the leaders in our local communities, and I thank them for their hard effort. I thank them, the vestries that support them, and others who have lived together through these difficult times. I know it's been difficult for them, because I've heard much of it. You don't know how many people have written me over these years to suggest ideas that they imagine we had never considered, or to argue for them. Early, early on we determined that we were going to set parameters within which we would ask every congregation to live, rather than simply leaving every congregation to figure it out for themselves.

In the early days, that was alright. But, as the parameters started to grow and stretch, we were all comfortable with different manifestations, and that's where the challenges rose. In these strange times we have been faithful, and it is my prayer that we will continue to be faithful to God's call as we move forward together in the name and in the example of Jesus.

I remain confident that God's Holy Spirit will empower us with everything we will need to **ACT** in ways that will bring healing and reconciliation to our broken world, in order that every person will more fully know of God's love for them and for all people. This is where some of you would like me to have provided an action plan with maybe 23 points, each of us being responsible for every one of them in a very particular way. And, I say, "Well, that might work in Edenton; don't know if it'll work in Wilmington."

We are called by God's Holy Spirit to move together, but we are not all called to move the same way. The journey ahead will continue to be complicated and challenging and will demand our best efforts, and as we have moved together, we will continue to move together, God willing.

A couple of last words before I sit down, and I'm sorry if this has been too short. I never say that. I want to offer some words of thank you and then a special announcement. I want to say thank you to all who share in the leadership of our congregations and of our diocese and its

ministries, including those who plan for and host Convention no matter how many times we schedule it in one year.

I want to say thank you to the members of our Diocesan house staff: LaTonya and Mollie, Jimi, Hannah, and Sara, Emily, and Fred, Litisha, and those others who have come and gone during the past year. Like other employers across our diocese, it's not always easy to keep people in place. It's been good to work with all of you, many of you here at this table [*gestures to table of Diocesan House staff, off to the side of the main stage*].

I want to say thank you for patience from all in the diocese as I have navigated my responsibilities as Chancellor at the University of the South during a particularly challenging four years, and I won't get into the details now, but it was to the point that a short time ago I announced to the Vice Chancellor and to the Chair of the Board of Regents that I intended to step aside two years early. Enough was enough, I thought, and they managed to convince me that I ought not to do that. But, we renegotiated my role with the hope that it will be far less demanding in the next couple of years.

I want to say thank you for all of the prayers and personal support that have been expressed for Sandy and for me and for our family, as we have lived through the deaths of three of our four parents and the sudden death of one of Sandy's younger brothers. Thank you for that. It's meant that at least on three, four occasions during COVID, I've needed to disappear for periods of time to be present with family and emergency situations or for long delayed funerals that were planned. Thank you for your support.

Finally, now, I want to share what I believe to be some very exciting news. Clergy, do you have your pen out near your paper? You may want to pay attention to this. You are hearing this with enough advanced notice that there ought to be no excuses for absence. Our clergy conference in 2023—not this year, 2023—will be on the 18th and 19th of October, and Bishop Michael Curry will be leading us as part of his visit to our diocese. He will stay after clergy conference and be with us for the weekend of October 20th to 22nd, and there will be a planning group brought together, some of those people already in place, who have been praying for this day and wanting to act towards it. A visit that will get him around the diocese with about as many stops as he's willing to make with his entourage. We hope that this will provide enough opportunities for folks across the diocese, and indeed from the wider community around our Episcopal Church, to have the chance to come and hear what I think many of us would argue to be one of the most powerful preachers of our generation. So, October 18th and 19th, mostly clergy only, and October 20th and 22nd in 2023: mark your calendars. We'll get you more details as the planning team gets to work.

And now may God's Holy Spirit guide us and empower us for the work that faces us today and for all that waits for us in the days ahead. Oh, man. Now, just before we assemble—not part of the formal address—I've been carrying this staff lately. Some think it might be more appropriate for Gandalf than for a bishop. That's fine. But, it's a staff with a story, and some of you who follow me on social media will have had a chance to hear that story or to read it, and some who have watched me carry this in visiting your congregation may have heard the story. It's a brightly colored piece of wood, obviously, with a hook in the top that was painted by Lisa Richie and given to Bishop Daniel on the occasion of his first visit to Grace Church in Whiteville. Did I say Whiteville properly? I'm never sure I say it properly, but you know what? I mean, right where you go to church. Yeah where MacKenzie Gore is from, one of the all-star pitchers of the San Diego Padres. Anyway, I'll stop. Not only is it painted in bright colors and was presented to Bishop Daniel, but it's also signed with the names of all of the congregations of our diocese, at least at that time in history.

And so, I'm going to leave it at the front, and you can come and look and maybe try to find your church. I won't help you, because I'm not sure I know where they all are. At least on here; I know where they all are in the diocese. But, I'd seen this living in a corner at the Julian Chapel at Trinity Center, and I thought, you know, what else could this be except an intended Bishop's staff? So I've just decided—I checked with Mary Beth and I said, “May I confiscate this piece of wood? May I carry it around the diocese?” And, I've been doing that. So, for those of you who wonder if I've just gone off the rails a little bit. Yes, maybe, but I think in this year when Trinity Center has been so much that our hearts in their minds it's been kind of good to carry around a symbol of Trinity Center and a symbol of our life together as the diocese. So, Lisa, thanks for that gift then and thanks for owning up to it and telling me the story. Thank you.

It's time to shift and go back to that table and pick up the other microphone. Thank you for your attention.