

Transcript of Bishop Skirving's Sermon from the Opening Eucharist of the 139th Convention

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Friends, it is so good to gather with you in Wilmington now, here at St. James church for our worship and tomorrow at the Hotel Ballast for our 139th Annual Convention. We have not been together in person for Convention since February 2020, and some of us in the room were not even a part of the Diocese then. While we were able to gather online in 2021 to accomplish necessary business and to share some reports of life and ministry across the diocese, it was just not the same.

I'm so glad that we made the decision to delay this year's convention from February until now, so that we could more safely be together in person. And, let me offer a word of thanks to all who have worked so hard to pull together this time of worship. Phillip, when you came as rector, did you know that your first time to convention would be as host? A thank you to all of the people of St. James who worked together in support of Canon Roberts in planning and in preparation for this worship.

And yet, as we gather, we must acknowledge that the COVID pandemic is not finished with us. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has established a simple three-color system for measuring the threat of COVID, and every week those colors are published in counties across our nation. Green indicates low risk. Yellow indicates medium risk, with the recommendation that those who are most vulnerable to the impact of COVID consider masking. Orange indicates high risk and carries with it the recommendation that *all* should mask for indoor gatherings.

Last week, almost all of the counties of our diocese were colored green with low risk, and only a couple were colored yellow. Today, 14 of the counties of our Diocese are still colored green, including New Hanover county where we have gathered, so that is good. But, 17 are now colored yellow with medium risk and 2—Pitt and Hyde counties—are now colored orange with high risk. It is good that we are gathered here together for Convention, but let us please be respectful of one another's personal needs, and, as we return home, let us be mindful of the risks that we will continue to face in the communities where we live, work, and worship.

As we gather here for Convention, many in our nation are keeping this day as National Gun Violence Awareness Day, an observance that was most certainly planned before recent events. I'm not sure, but some of you might be wearing orange in solidarity with this day of raising awareness of a pattern that goes back to 2013. Just three weeks ago in a Buffalo grocery store, nine African Americans were murdered by a young shooter who self-identifies as an

ethno-nationalist supporting white supremacy, and who now faces a range of charges for murder, hate crimes, and domestic terror. Horrifying, yes, but have we already forgotten about the murder of nine African Americans at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, targeted by a young shooter motivated by ideals of white supremacy? Have we forgotten that we are gathered in a city where on November 10, 1898, as many as 60 African American citizens, by some records, were massacred in a coup d'état motivated largely by ideals of white supremacy? Or are we more horrified by the murders just last week of 19 school-aged children, along with two of their teachers at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas? Have we forgotten about Park Land or Sandy Hook or Columbine or any of the others? What about Las Vegas, Orlando, or Virginia Tech? As we gather for our Diocesan Convention, our nation continues to bury its dead. And we are called as her people to address our inherently racist and violent nature.

Finally, let us remember that we have gathered for our Diocesan Convention during the holiest and perhaps most mysterious time in the Christian year. We have gathered in the last days of the season of Easter, a week after the day when we remember the ascension of the risen Jesus and on the eve of the day of a great celebration of the day of Pentecost. Lest you think I'm going to retrace *all* of those events in detail, I will not. I trust you remember that during Holy Week, we recall the suffering of Jesus and on Good Friday his death. On Easter morning the resurrection from dead, the great Good News. On the 40th day, the ascension. On the 50th day, this coming Sunday, the gift of God's Holy Spirit.

A friend of mine every year on Ascension Day posts on his social media tools a series of pictures from classical art, which demonstrate impressions of what it must have been like to watch Jesus ascending into heaven. He has a kind of wicked sense of humor and some of the pictures might challenge some sensibilities. I keep waiting for one though that he posts in which the disciples of Jesus are leaping into the air trying to grab the feet; I haven't seen one of those yet. And, yet, as church sometimes I think, "We're that kind of afraid to let go."

I reflect on the emotional state of those followers of Jesus, terrified, perhaps, during Holy Week and on Good Friday fearful that Jesus experiences what waited for them. We hear of their astonishment and joy. We hear of their disbelief when Mary Magdalene tells them the Good News, that fear that returns quickly and causes them to stay behind locked doors, fearful of the crowds, of God appearing through those walls and being present with them, wishing peace on them, and letting them touch and letting them work out for themselves what resurrection meant. I love the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who only recognized Jesus when they stopped for the night and he took and broke the bread. Think of the astonishment and the wonder, but remember that on the day as they walked with him *they did not recognize him*. Though they had followed him and been closed to him for *years* in some cases, still they were not able to make sense of what he had taught them and to understand what was happening.

On the day of ascension, as he disappears, what must they have thought? They would not have had the layers and generations and centuries of theological interpretation which we have since put upon that event and what happened. They would have simply perhaps wonder, “Here we go again.” He was gone, and he’s back, and he’s leaving again! What’s next?

He told them to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit until the Holy Spirit came upon them with power but did they understand that? Or, were they as surprised as those around them when they were filled with the power that allowed them to proclaim the Good News and be witnesses to God’s love in languages and in ways that they could not have ever imagined doing on their own. Frightened, sceptical, doubtful followers of Jesus became powerful witnesses to a love which has transformed the world, a love which is still present in our world this day. In words from the reading we have this day from the Acts of the Apostles, we get a taste of that in a question they ask Jesus. So, when they had come together they asked Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Has anyone been asking that question lately?

When? When will that kingdom be restored? When will we understand the fulfilling of the promise that we have had through all of the centuries? When will everything work out just the way we like it to?

They ask, Lord is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel. He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by His authority.” You know, if I had heard that, I might have sworn. I almost just did reading it. It’s not for us to know, but don’t we behave like people who think we should know? Who think that, if we work hard enough, we can actually control how it’s all going to turn out?

He goes on to say, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” [*Loud thunder sounds are heard from the storm going on outside the church building.*] Maybe we won’t be having Convention tomorrow; maybe God’s got more important things for us to be doing.

Living as we do so many centuries later, we know how that story turned out and how it is recorded in scripture for us. We know that on that day of Pentecost, all of their human limitations and fears were transformed in order that God’s work could be done on earth. And yet, we continue to live as if it is up to us. We continue to live as if by our own wisdom, and right thinking, and decisions, or by our energy, or power, or our cajoling of one another and saying “Let’s go!,” we can make it happen. “You will receive power,” Jesus told them, “the power of the Holy Spirit, and you will be my witnesses.”

It's really hard to feel powerless in the face of great suffering. I was in my early to mid-twenties when I spent a year as a hospital chaplain as part of my formation for ordained ministry. It was particularly ironic when WWII vets were calling me "Padre" and asking me to help them make sense of things like their spouse dying of a painful cancer and recognizing that in those moments I really didn't have anything of my own to offer. Together we could be aware of the presence of God in our midst and we could share with one another our experience of God's love, but we were not in a position to remove the cancer from the one who suffered. He told me about having been on the side of a, I think he said "foxhill" or whatever he called it; some of you will know the language better than me while the allied forces chaplain prayed for victory in battle and he was absolutely certain that on the other side of the hill that the Lutheran pastor was praying for victory in battle for the Germans. That's when he lost his faith.

Sometimes we take religion and we try to control it, and we try to market it, and we try to put it out there with the power that we think gives us an authority over others, and we fall short. It's tempting to claim whatever power we think we might have, to cling to old models of power, like the power of the empire, a power that has been wielded by the Church for centuries, a power which has been wielded to commit horrible acts in the name of God, when in fact the actions were not in any way "of God."

It's frustrating to get caught up in endless debates that distract us from possible action. Doing a little bit of good, after all, must be better than doing no good. As followers of Jesus, and members of the body of Christ in our time, we have so much to offer the world in which we live, and in which we are called to be witnesses of Jesus and of God's love for every human being. The potential in the body of Christ, powered by God's Holy Spirit is that we might demonstrate a unity, as we abide more and more fully in God's love. And yet, these last years have been a time where we've experienced more division. More conflict. More disagreement.

We're called to be witnesses of Jesus and be witnesses to God's love by living in our own flesh, the self-sacrificing love of Jesus. I'm not going to take the time to work through the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians, but what powerful language about how the one who had, as we might understand it, *all* of God's power, let go of that power and gave it up and became, as it were, a servant for all, symbolized on the day we call Maundy Thursday when he got on his knees and washed the feet of his disciples. But, too many times, rather than being servants in that model, we wait for others to wash our feet. We have to offer to our world, not our own power, but Holy Spirit power, power that is beyond any feeble human effort, whether individual or collective. And yet, sometimes in our despair, sometimes in our pain, sometimes in the face of suffering, we focus on what we think we can and should and must do.

And so, as we are gathered here this day, in the midst of ever increasing suffering and conflict in our world, let us renew the faith of our baptism. Let us renew our ordination vows.

Let us bless the oil of chrism for baptism, here in the container that might look like a container of sweet tea, but it's not. Let us bless the oil of chrism for baptism and be reminded of our call to go out into the world and baptize all people. To go out into the world and be witnesses of God's love. To go out into the world and be witnesses of Jesus.

Let us be the faithful witnesses that Jesus calls us to be. Let us be Holy Spirit-powered vessels of God's love, Holy Spirit-powered vessels for God's work of healing and reconciliation in the world where we live. We as God's people are called to **prayer**. And, we are called to **thought**. And, we are called to **action**. In God's name let us be the church that God's world and God's people needs us to be. Amen.