

Bishop Skirving's Sermon Transcript from Convention Eucharist for the 140th Annual Convention of the Diocese of East Carolina

Welcome! Welcome to all of you who are attending Convention of the Diocese of East Carolina for the first time. And, welcome to all of you who have been here many times before. Welcome to those of you who are in the room together. And, welcome to those of you who are watching live online or who are going to be watching a recording of our time together sometime in the future.

Welcome to those of you who are delegates, to those of you who are exhibitors, to those of you who are organizers, and to those of you who are here as guests. It's good to be together. And thank you: thank you to all who have planned for this Convention. With all of the changes involved in relocating to Greenville, in going paperless.

Thank you to the local arrangements team who have pitched in and done all sorts of things, not always even knowing what it's going to be, but they've been willing. Thank you to them. Thank you to our workshop leaders and our exhibitors, and to all who will be offering presentations tomorrow. Thank you to those who have planned this liturgy and to many from our Pamlico Deanery churches who will help lead worship today and tomorrow. To the staff of the Greenville Convention Center and to the staff of Diocesan House, we say thank you. And, to all of you who have committed time and money to be here as representatives of your congregations and as leaders in the Diocese of East Carolina: thank you all.

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen. To be honest, I wasn't paying enough attention to the liturgy to realize this would happen until it happened, but if you wondered where that prayer comes that you hear me or other clergy always use, it was in the Psalm today.

I'd like to begin by sharing what I'm going to call for tonight's purposes a Pamlico Deanery story. Has that got your interest, maybe? Even if you're from Lower Cape Fear or somewhere else? This is a story that was passed to me by the Reverend Gary Fulton towards the end of 2021, it came in a big manila envelope with, I think, three sets of stories and a cover letter.

Gary retired from active ministry in 1999, and I only just met him at the beginning of my time as a bishop. He doesn't live in the diocese any longer. At one time, Gary had led what he calls the "Down East Cluster," eight individual congregations in Hyde and eastern Beaufort counties. Some have since closed, I think three. Others clergy came, including Jim Lupton. All sorts of changes happened in his last years. The cluster for him became St Thomas in Bath, where he served as rector in a time when, as I understand it, there was some significant growth. The article I'm going to read is titled "A Small Rural Church Discovers Its Mission." Now, there's no date on this, but it was clearly from a time before he retired. You can probably help me with those details afterwards. So, I'm going to read from part-way in to the story, and then probably a good number of paragraphs, so settle in.

[Below is an extract from the story shared by Gary Fulton]

He writes, “Sometimes the mission of the church becomes self-evident when the congregation rises to a challenge set before it. That was the case for Saint John's of the Down East Cluster when two of its members, Florence Williams and Forest Sears Jr., recognized a tremendous opportunity for evangelism, outreach, and pastoral care.

St. John's Church is a lovely little wooden church sitting in a grove of tall pines on the banks of Slade's Creek in the community of Sladesville, brought up the creek by barge from the nearby community of Makelyville in 1909. The building may possibly date from 1743, making it the oldest church structure in Hyde County. Once a thriving agricultural and commercial center, like many rural communities, the population of Sladesville has decreased over the years, and this tiny congregation struggles to remain viable. This summer (whatever year that was) for the first time, one of Hyde County's fish houses located in Germantown, an even smaller community four miles south of Sladesville, hired a group of women from Mexico to pick crabs. The women, many of them in their late teens and early twenties, many married with children who remained in Mexico, live and work at the crab factory.

The mission of St John's became crystal clear when, responding to a personal invitation from Florence and Forest, 15 of those Mexican women, disembarked from a school bus in front of the church on a bright Sunday morning, early that summer. Every Sunday since, these lovely ladies swell the ranks for this small congregation. Now Spanish-speaking voices are raised in prayer to commingle with those of the English-speaking congregation, and when the Gloria and the Creed are said in unison, there is a sense of Pentecost revisited.

What are some things we may learn from the experience of St. John's? First, it seems to me a congregation must be intentional about identifying its mission. One way of getting at that task is to raise the question: What opportunities has God set right before us in our own little corner of His kingdom?

Having done that, and assuming that the congregation has identified one or more mission opportunities, the second thing to note is that St. John's leaders were proactive. Perhaps those 15 women might have stumbled into St. John's to worship, but I seriously doubt it. They are there, because Florence and Forest issued a personal invitation. They return, because they have been warmly welcomed and received.

St. John's has made an effort to incorporate its sisters in the Christian family by providing an interpreter in Helga Jarvis, a member of the Down East Cluster who lives in Swan Quarter, by providing Spanish prayer booklets, by offering coffee, snacks, and warm relationships following worship. In order to be faithful to the Trinitarian formula, that is the third thing to note.

St. John's congregation was serious about exercising this ministry, and they have been meticulous in carrying it out. Recently, for example, the congregation hosted a fiesta on a Sunday afternoon at the home of Florence Williams. All of the Mexicans came, and the Williams

and Sears children and grandchildren returned home for the celebration. Barbequed chicken and watermelon were enjoyed along with flour tortillas and black beans.

Plans are already underway to send Christmas presents to these women and their families in December. On the surface, it may seem that this small congregation is giving a lot and getting little in return. Nothing could be further from the truth. One of our faith's deeply-held convictions is that there is reward to be had when we unselfconsciously give of ourselves in the name of Christ.

We don't minister in order to receive reward, but reward comes when we minister. In this outreach and ministry, the members of St. John's are being richly rewarded, and this is evident in their faces on Sunday morning. It is evident in what they say about this relationship, and it is evident in the vitality which has come to the worship being experienced in this tiny church.

“Whatever you do to the least of these,” Jesus said, “you do it to me.” The risen Christ is making his presence known in Sladesville. If you ask a neighbor there, what is the mission of St. John's, they will tell you that is where the Mexicans worship.

[Bishop Skirving continues]

But the story didn't end there. The author also tells the story of celebrating the Eucharist at a migrant farm worker camp near All Saints Church in Fairfield and recounts the invitation as being from “three elderly genteel ladies” to use the buildings of St. Matthew's, Yeatesville as a base for Hispanic ministry. He tells the story that as that ministry grew, the Reverend, then Deacon, and now Archdeacon Janet Sueiro Rodman provided pastoral leadership for this ministry, now remembered by many as San Mateo's.

In time, this Hispanic ministry was moved to St. Peter's Church in Washington where it continues to this day. In fact, as I read their website, one current member of the vestry at St. Peter's Church was once a member of San Mateo's. Finally, I have to say, when I visited St. James Church in Belhaven last Sunday, one of those who was confirmed was Blanca, a woman who is a part of the Hispanic community, a community with which the people of St. James are actively involved. So one story, from one of our priests, that eventually involved at least six different churches in Pamlico Deanery.

We have this treasure in clay jars, we hear in the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians. Some of the churches in that story have since been closed and the properties passed along to others. St. John's in Sladesville is only open for special services. The clay jars have not all survived, but the treasure remains. In the letter that we've heard tonight, the Apostle Paul also writes “for it is the God who said Let light shine out of the darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

This is the treasure we have. We do not proclaim ourselves. We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as servants for Jesus' sake. But sometimes we can be guilty of holding on too

tightly to the clay jars and of placing more value in them than they might deserve. Sometimes we value the clay jars over the treasure and our occupation/preoccupation becomes the care of those clay jars.

In this season of Epiphany, we began with the story of the Magi who followed the star to the place where they found the infant Jesus—the toddler Jesus, maybe. But the story of Epiphany does not end there. The story of the season of Epiphany carries on for all of these weeks, including the one that we are in the midst of now.

We continue with many other stories that reveal the light of God shining brightly in the world. From the first Sunday after January 6th, the day of Epiphany, we have the story of the baptism of Jesus. On the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, we have a story generally called the Transfiguration. In Year A, the gospel readings from both Sundays are offered from Matthew's gospel. In each of them we hear these words proclaimed from the heavens: “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

We hear the story of John the Baptist inviting people into the wilderness to be baptized, and he calls them to repent with these words: “Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.” No longer some future reality for which we must wait, it has come near. It is here, it is now, and we need to have eyes that are opened to see.

Now, a couple of weeks after hearing that story, we hear another one from Matthew's gospel. Jesus has finished his time in the wilderness, the time of temptation, and he's come back into public, and having heard a little bit about what's been happening, and he picks up the ministry which had been that of John the Baptist and, to show continuity, amongst his first words he proclaims, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Everything that comes next needs to be understood in the context of those first words. A week or two after, we heard the Sermon on the Mount. Think of those familiar words in the context of the ones that John the Baptist and Jesus both said, “Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.”

Tomorrow in our Convention, we will begin our day by hearing stories of some of the ways in which the Good News of God and Jesus Christ is alive and burning brightly in our midst. We will consider the need for new wine skins to hold God's new wine. But, this day, let us continue to celebrate the treasure we have in one another and in our relationships as people of East Carolina.

Let us renew the vows of our baptism and the vows of our ordination, holding in our prayers as we do this, the needs of the world we are called to serve. And I have not been giving as much attention to the news on television these days, but I'm pretty sure that you'll all be very aware of the thousands and thousands of people who have died in the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria.

Let us remember and hold in our prayers the needs of the world we are called to serve right outside our front door and all around the world. Let us recommit ourselves to the mission that God has given us, and in recommitting to that mission, let us remember that we are the clay jars. We need to value the creation that God has made us to be.

We need to give thanks for what we have as church community and the structures and the things that support our life together, but we need to remember them in the right order of importance. They are there to hold, they are the vessels to contain the glory of God, which is a treasure: a treasure that can be passed from generation to generation, a treasure which enlightens us and illuminates the path forward, of light that the world needs when it becomes too dark.

May we always be people who hold up the treasure of God's light, God's life, God's love, from these clay jars that God has given us. Amen.