

## **BISHOP'S ADDRESS 2/23/2018**

**The Rt. Reverend Russell Kendrick Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast**

**SLIDE** I have good news & I have bad news. The good news is that I am combining the canonically required Bishop's address with tonight's sermon which means less time you must listen to my pontifications. **CLICK** The bad news is the sermon just got longer than I usually preach

**SLIDE** To those who read and inwardly digest the canons and rules of our diocese, yes I know that one might argue I am not supposed to do it this way. I decided to offer my address within the context of our worship because it seems a right and good thing to do. After all, the Bishop's address is part sermon, part state of the union, part praise, and part thank you note. That's a lot to expect from one speech so to set it within the context of our worship---which is also about the state of our union with God as well as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, makes sense. Eucharist means thanksgiving, so first and foremost, thank you. Thank you for being here. You could be a lot of places and doing lots of different things, but you have given yourself to this time together as the Body of Christ, the Church. Thank you.

**SLIDE** Thank you to the people of St. Andrews. We should not be surprised that a parish located in the luckiest fishing village in the world, would be made up of people as tenacious and strong and as faithful as the fishing families who founded her. St. Andrews has endured storms that shook these walls and storms that shook their souls. And yet you are here. Just as the steeple atop your original building was once a beacon for navigation, thank you for being a beacon of hope and compassion for these 90 years. In addition to enjoying their hospitality, I hope that all of you will take the time to visit the Blue Door Ministry and Bike Shop. This is the site of our diocese's first Jubilee Ministry, which is a title designated by the Episcopal Church.

**SLIDE** Thank you for the good news you will hear tomorrow. **CLICK** For the 3rd year, your giving to our diocese has increased. That, I hope, is a sign of your renewed trust in each other, greater confidence in your diocese, and an endorsement of the direction of our work together as the Episcopal Church. Speaking of good news for which to be thankful, we actually grew. I know numbers are just that, but it is nice to see good. **CLICK** Our ASA went up by a whopping 4 people. I know its not much, but given that so many trends are downward, lets be glad for this.

**SLIDE** Finally, thank you for the ministry you are about as the Episcopal Church. One of the privileges of being your Bishop is that I get to see and celebrate the ministry in your communities. I get to see you seeking and serving Christ. From food pantries and raising the roof, from collecting coats for the poor to providing shelter for the homeless; from teaching children to read to offering a meal to the hungry, from pub theology to daily high mass, you are being the church. It is a great privilege to serve with you. Thank you. **CLICK** This is my third convention w/ you. If there is a rhythm to being a Bishop it continues to elude me. I have been to your churches enough that I know which door will get me to the sacristy or vesting room. It may not sound like a big deal, but knowing where one is going is helpful. Thank you for the fusses & feasts you make when I show up. It may be time for a diocesan cooking competition to settle who has the best banana pudding, collard greens and seafood gumbo.

**SLIDE** One of my greatest joys as a priest in parish ministry was standing at the altar, looking out at the congregation, and not just seeing faces, but seeing and knowing lives. I have missed that greatly. Last Fall I was at the anniversary celebration of St. Cyprians. I looked up from the altar and it happened. I saw many people from around the diocese who had shown up too. Folks I have come to know and love. I saw lives. I still get you mixed up, and I am sorry. I have had to let go of my pride of remembering names. I have regularly confused you, and I think I have even confirmed a few folks by the wrong name. I beg your forgiveness and I trust that God knows our names far better than I do, and God has it figured out.

**SLIDE** Children continue to keep me humble and they continue to teach me about God. On a Sunday not long ago there was a young boy who kept peering at me over the pew with a guarded look in his eyes. I asked him to carry my crozier. He did, but he kept glancing over his shoulder at me, as if to be sure he knew where I was. Afterwards, his mother thanked me. She went on to tell me that on the way to church they had discussed that the Bishop was visiting. **CLICK** Apparently, this boy knew something of the Bible, and not much about the Bishop. He asked his mother, Does the Bishop have lots of hair? Does the Bishop eat bugs? **CLICK**

**SLIDE** I have learned that when I show up, a lot of expectations and a few misperceptions show up too. I was at one visit, enjoying a mighty fine piece of pecan pie when an older woman walked up and asked “Where am I going to go to church?” After making sure the piece of pie in my throat went down, I replied, “Don’t you go to this church?” “Well yes,” she answered, “but you’re here to close the church, so I want to know where I am supposed to go.” I am not sure she ever fully believed me when I said I was not there to close her church. I am sorry for misperceptions I have caused, and for the fears that a purple shirt seem to create.

**SLIDE** The theme for our convention, and one that I hope will carry on further than this weekend is *Being the Church*. It is a theme that captures the focus of my ministry long before I was ever your Bishop, and it has only become more important to me since being your Bishop. Of course, the danger of any theme is that it misses the mark, or reduces nuanced complexity to the point of absurd simplicity. However, I do believe that there is a case to be made that the issue that underlies the fear and anxiety I witness during my time in our churches is an issue of identity, which is far more about our being church rather than doing church.

I am reminded of the time a Mom asked me to talk with her daughter whose hamster had died. The 3 of us sat together in the church library. It only took a few minutes of conversation to know this little girl’s heart was broken. We talked for a while, and as we did, her eyes filled up with the biggest tears I’d seen in a very long time. I tried to give her comfort; I tried to let her know her hamster was OK. I also realized part of what was happening was she had never been in this place before. This was her first time to encounter death. She’d never felt a broken heart; she’d never been here before. The world as she knew it had given away to the unknown and she was totally disoriented. We are not unlike this little girl. We are living in a time of great disorientation with so much going on that we do not understand. Without going too far down a sociological rabbit hole, the world out there is a mess, and we are too.

**SLIDE** I just read an article that said in ten years quantum computers will be a part of life. They will be 100,000 times faster than our binary computers we use today. Some surmise that artificial intelligence will surpass human intelligence. **CLICK** Some are wondering what such progress will mean to the question of ‘what does it mean to be human?’

**SLIDE** Budweiser is using driverless beer trucks; Amazon is working on automated grocery stores; one year ago Bank of America began testing three 'employee-less' branch locations that offer full-service banking automatically, with access to a human, when necessary, via video teleconference." What does this mean for vocational identity? **CLICK**

**SLIDE** This is the first time in history that five generations have lived at the same time. That means five different ways of communication. Digital natives and digital aliens are rubbing elbows right now. Five generations of disciples of Jesus who are articulating their hopes, concerns and expectations for our churches.

**SLIDE** Study after study lament the surprising side effect of isolation and division that the so-called rise of connection of social media. Tomorrow we will hear more about this from Brene Brown

**SLIDE** And then there is all the hatred, mistrust, and anger. Language that would have made my Mama wash my mouth out with soap has been legitimized by the most respected figures in our culture. And too, the 5 deadliest mass shootings in history have occurred in the last 10 months.

**SLIDE** The church is not immune to disorientation. We contend with three demons in particular: ignorance indifference and irrelevance. Those who do not know; those who do not care; those who do not think it matters.

**SLIDE** Way back in 1987, Yale law professor and Episcopalian Stephen Carter wrote a book called *The Culture of Disbelief*. 30 years ago, Carter foresaw a time when "religion, far from being cherished, will be diminished, and religious belief will ultimately become a kind of hobby: something so private that it is as irrelevant to public life as the building of model airplanes."

**SLIDE** If your head is spinning, that is my point. It is more than disturbing. It is disorienting. Its no wonder we may feel like that little girl. The world we have known has given away to something unfamiliar, unimagined, unfathomable. And here we are, the people of God, trying to make sense of it all. [esp mention clergy and the challenge of standing in the pulpit, Thank you. ] How we are to follow Jesus in this time of disorientation? **CLICK**

I will begin by telling you this. Disorientation is not just a 21<sup>st</sup> century issue. In fact, it is all over the Bible in the stories of people whose world gave way to the unknown. The Bible word for times of disorientation is wilderness. Back in the time of Moses, before their feet were barely dry from wading through the Red Sea, they wanted to go back to their former life as slaves. **SLIDE** "We have never been here" they cry out to Moses. Then too there is the exile when the Babylonians stripped the Israelites from their homes and their religion, forcing them to be refugees in a foreign land. The disorientation was too much, and many of them gave up on God.

**CLICK** Disorientation is not new, neither is it easily navigated. I wish I could give you a sure-fire formula forward, but that too is part of our issue. Disorientation means standing in the rubble for awhile. It means not knowing. And it means that even when you think you know a way forward, it is not safe, nor is it easy. It means turning around, and trying again. I do not have a clear-cut answer, but I do want to offer a couple of ideas that might guide us that emerge from my understanding of tonight's Gospel.

**SLIDE** "When did we see you" they ask. I am not the first preacher to note that all the examples that hold the potential to see Christ involve engagement with people that were probably not sitting in church on Sunday:

hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, prisoner. The point being made is that Jesus is not just somewhere, he is everywhere, especially where the people we least expect are, which means that the best way to live is as if Jesus is always around. The word I want to suggest for this way of living is **engagement**. It is the call to a deeper awareness of the context and culture out there. And it is an essential part of being the church.

In my former life as an architect, part of the rhythm of being an architecture student was that at the end of each assignment, you presented and defended your design to a jury of professors. One of the most damning criticisms I ever got, and never forgot, was when I had clearly missed the mark about the context of the surroundings and how that affected my building design. The professor said, “if your building can sit anywhere, then it is meant to sit nowhere.” So my question is this. Do we truly know where our churches sit? Do we know the needs of our neighbors? Engagement is the work of learning about where our churches sit and responding to the context and culture around us. **VIDEO** Here is an old commercial about engagement.

Engagement is happening, I am thinking of the young girl who suggested that her church cook a meal for the hungry. Today that meal has turned into a weekly feast of some 50-70 people at Redeemer Church Mobile. I am thinking of St. John’s. At my last visit during a vestry meeting I was stunned by their candid assessment of their future. We will not survive as we are. From that a conversation began about how to use their facility. Today McKemie Place is using their parish hall as a day shelter. Their parish hall has become a sanctuary for women in transition. During our preconvention meetings, one of their parishioners told how that event has opened her eyes to the power of God.

**SLIDE** Engagement underlies our creation of the Congregational Enrichment Venture. **CLICK** It is the reason I am asking you to consider funding a part-time missionary for development. It is why we are one of six dioceses who are testing an on-line demographic database that will assist churches to learn about the context and culture of where their church sits. **CLICK** This idea of engagement inspired us to go for a grant to study the ministry of/to young adults. It is still ongoing, but what we have learned is that if we seek to reach 20-something adults, we will need radically new ways of ministry and forms of teaching. They are deeply relational and want to belong, but they want to belong to a community that clearly articulates a purpose. Moreover, they care much less about ownership than us baby boomers do. They value access. An entity like Uber is an example of this trend. If true, then how does this change our time-honored teaching about stewardship to people who do not treasure ownership of ‘things’ as much as we do. Because of such learnings, maybe we should consider hiring a full-time missionary to young adults. This person would focus on building relationships and explore new models of ministry, especially on our campuses, that may not depend on past traditional institutional structures.

**SLIDE** Engagement is not only about learning the culture and context out there, but also examining more closely our culture in here. I have been touting the work of Renewal Works. **CLICK** Their recent study has concluded that there are four catalysts for spiritual growth in a church. I am compelled to be about the work of providing you with resources that address these four catalysts. This is a reason we have been highlighting Sharing Faith Dinners and Good Book Club. **CLICK** And I am grateful for your response to our efforts.

**SLIDE** Engagement can be summed up in the words of Verna Dozier a lay theologian, Episcopalian, and author of The Dream of God. She once remarked, “Jesus never asked people to worship him, but only to follow him. But what have we as the church done? We spend an awful lot of time in what we consider to be worship. And important as that it is. But to hear the words that we are to follow, worshiping is not enough. It is only a

beginning. It seems you and I are called to be followers. That is the struggle in being the church.” What Jesus asks us to do is follow him. And where Jesus went was out into the world; he engaged the least and lost. And that is where we will find him, too.

**SLIDE** Now look again to this Gospel. The goal is not a game of hide and seek with Jesus, but rather to inspire us to treat every person as if they the Christ, especially the least and lost among us. It is not simply about encountering people. It is about relationships, which brings me to the second point I want to suggest for a way forward in a time of disorientation.

**SLIDE** Being the church involves the work of advocacy. Advocacy is much more than simply walking in a march or forwarding a Facebook post. When Jesus himself speaks of the idea of an Advocate, he says, *If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth.*

The work of being an advocate begins in the spirit of truth. Such a spirit is at the heart of the prophetic tradition of our story. The prophets were something like God’s check and balance against the institutional powers of their time. They told the truth that was not easy to tell. They called out wrongdoing, exposed injustice, uncovered sin. But such truth-telling was always held within the hope of restoration and reconciliation. We catch a glimpse of such truth-telling in tonight’s reading from Ezekiel, “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.”

**SLIDE** Now think about our world. Last year Time magazine named as its person of the year, “The Silence Breakers.” We live in a time of tremendous truth-telling. **CLICK** From Black Lives Matter, **CLICK** to the women’s Metoo movement, to the recent rising up of **CLICK** our teenagers over gun violence.

All this truth-telling can be disturbing, disorienting, even divisive. But in my sanctified imagination, I wonder if somehow God might be involved. It would not be the first time that God raised up prophets to break the silence of the status quo and disturb the powers of the world. And if God is involved, then we as a church need to be involved too. **SLIDE** Moses once said “Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets...”

**SLIDE** Again, I say to you, truth-telling is held within the hope of restoration, and according to the Book of Common Prayer, restoration is the ministry of the church.

When I was 7 yrs old my best friend in the world was Ernie Parker. He was the funniest and smartest kid I knew. We were inseparable at school. We ate together, played together, and we laughed a lot. One day I asked my Mom if Ernie could come to my house. With no explanation my Mom said no. I begged, I pleaded, I demanded a reason. That was the day I learned about black and white.

**SLIDE** I felt as if someone had shoved me across a chasm, and I am still trying to find my way back. Because of that I am deeply committed and impassioned to the truth-telling work of Bryan Stevenson, and specifically his project called the Community Remembrance Project. It focuses on telling the story of racial terror inflicted on African Americans, and includes a museum that is being built in Montgomery. **SLIDE** Mostly this project involves

telling the truth so that we can find a way forward. And the truth is that in the geographic area of our diocese, between 1877 and 1950 there were 114 African American victims of racial terror lynchings.

Why stir up all this? **CLICK** Because it is clear that in the Bible the one recurring fatal flaw of the people of God is that they forget their story. And that means the entire story: the triumphs and the tragedies and the terror. For it is only in remembering who we are, that we discover whose we are. And find our way moving towards restoration.

And while our black sisters and brothers have faced horrific terror, we are learning that women have been suffering a secretive but just as systematic and horrific terror of harassment and prejudice. As a part of this address, I want to acknowledge and give thanks for the women clergy in our diocese. We have some amazing people in our midst. There is Margaret Shepard, who was the first woman elected to serve as a Rector in the Diocese of Alabama. There is Mary Roberts, the first woman ordained to the priesthood by Charles Duvall. Mary was also the first woman ordained deacon in Tennessee, but no one would hire her. She told me a dear friend hired her and her first job as a deacon was putting out pencils and pouring lemonade. Then there is Jandy Watkins, one of the first two women ordained priest in Dallas. After her, future Bishops stopped ordaining women. I am sure that beyond each of these examples are many painful stories. I know that I have work to do, as we all do, to shine a light in the darkness of prejudice and harassment and inequality that still exist in our structures and institutions.

Advocacy is about truth-telling, but that is not all that it is about. The Greek word for advocate literally means “to stand with.” In other words, our truth-telling is not simply to hear a story, make trouble, or listen to our own voice. It is to build a relationship. Advocacy is more than a march or a speech. It can be as simple and as subversive as sitting down next to someone and listening to their story. Here is a video of advocacy.

**VIDEO OF ROGERS....**

**SLIDE** And here is a quote by someone who is living a life of advocacy. This is was part of a talk given by a teenager at our most recent Happening. “My purpose is to love” **CLICK** In other words, being an advocate is about loving our neighbor. **SLIDE** And loving our neighbor is being the church.

This call to advocacy is inspiring our diocesan work in racial reconciliation that you will hear about in this convention. It underlies a conversation about youth having not only a seat in convention, but a vote. Last year you referred this issue to me for study. Since then I appointed a committee to study ways to provide our youth with voting rights. Through this address I introduce for consideration a resolution prepared to amend the canons of the Diocese to allow for the election of youth delegates representing each convocation. A formal resolution will be referred to the Comm on Canons and Rules of Order for additional discussion, and thereafter, because it is a canonical change--I expect the proposal to amend canons to come before the 2019 Convention. While I would prefer to have the vote on this matter this year, it is important to follow the procedure set forth for amending canons. I will also be proud if this resolution passes to welcome youth delegates with seat, voice, and vote to our Diocesan Convention in 2020, our 50th anniversary as a diocese.

Another aspect of our culture and voice is the role of Deacons. By their vows, they pledge their lives to engagement and advocacy. Through this address I am also introducing for discussion by resolution the idea of

extending the rights of vocational deacons canonically resident in our diocese to have seat, voice, and vote at our conventions.

Last Fall I traveled to Alaska for HOB meeting and I met a group of people who truly are engaged with the world around them, and are courageous advocates for God. They are one of the clans of indigenous people called the Gwich'in. One bit of wisdom that I learned has affected me deeply, it's the way Gwich'in talk about creation, which they refer to as the land. It is a land they have been living on and dependent to for 10,000 years. They are only indigenous tribe in North America that was not forced to move from their land. As one elder told us, "every inch of our land has a history."

**SLIDE** The history of one particular place has stayed with me. It is the coastal plain at the northern shore of Alaska that Gwich'in call "the land where all life begins." This sacred valley is the only place in the world where porcupine caribou go to birth and nurse calves. **CLICK** Every Spring caribou gather from all over Canada & Alaska to this one location. So sacred is this plain, we were told, that the Gwich'in people refuse to go there. Sadly, the earth under that sacred plain holds vast amounts of oil. Even though 95% of Alaska is open for oil development, it is this 5% protected area that is the focus of politicians and developers. But here is the point I want you to consider. One of the elders said this "for us protecting the land is neither an economic issue, social issue, or a political one. For us it is a spiritual issue. All of life is a spiritual issue"

**SLIDE** "For us it is a spiritual issue" Everything I have said tonight is held within that sentence. I wonder how our lives might look if we considered the issues of our time and the matters of our life, first and foremost as spiritual? I wonder how it might affect how we treat our neighbor?

...Which is the point of this Gospel. Jesus is not just somewhere. Jesus is everywhere, especially near the people we least expect, which means that the best way to live is as if Jesus is always around, waiting to be sought and served---in the stranger and your neighbors, in adults and teenagers, in the rich and in the poor, in the person sitting next to you right now.

**CLICK** For in truth, all of life is a spiritual issue. And every encounter holds divine potential. May we live as if Jesus is always near, treating everyone as if they are the Christ. Because they are.