

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I begin today with a basic fact about life in middle American culture, a fact which we must ever hold in front of us. The simple truth is that where we live, here in the American heartland, we cannot assume that the culture around us is going to provide much in terms of spiritual nourishment. By appearances, it used to be different.

Not long ago, for example, preachers could assume that just about anyone within hearing would have more than a basic familiarity with everything in the Bible. It was just there, in American life. You could take it in by osmosis. Abraham Lincoln—not a preacher, never baptized, not a professing Christian—could still pepper his speeches and writings with obscure names from the Bible and know that people would get what he was saying. Naaman the Syrian, Jael and Sisera, Tabitha (whose other name was Dorcas), Archippus.

Today, you had better not assume that even the foundational stories from the Bible are common knowledge.

It falls to us to provide the food for folks who are spiritually hungry. Dominant American culture has basically given up on sponsoring the Christian story. It is not going to fill the spiritual yearnings of anyone—as if it ever did with any substance.

This situation is not necessarily bad news for us, by the way. It leaves us with a clarity of purpose, in our larger Church, in our Diocesan community and in the 47 congregations around the eastern half of Missouri. We had better be prepared to feed the spiritually hungry. Nobody else is going to do it. We had better be prepared to welcome the spiritual pilgrim. Secular culture does not know what to do with pilgrims and their spiritual yearnings. Usually that culture resorts to one of a of extremes—either scientific and philosophical reductionism, or else some dismissive and vague spiritualism, often of a New Age sort.

Dear friends, there is work aplenty for us in meeting the legitimate and very real spiritual longings a around us. The age old and orthodox practice of forming disciples toward the image and likeness of Christ, who is fully human and fully divine, the Word of God who is none other than God who became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus Christ is our first and most important template, the basis of the Christian character.

When people in Antioch started calling the followers of Jesus *christianoij*, they were using a pejorative. Little Christ-ies, they called them, who then took this intended slur and wore it as a badge of honor. Little Christs, little anointed ones—exactly! That is who we are.

The end and purpose of the work given to us is likewise deeply rooted in the tradition, for the best destiny of every living person is to be drawn into God's own life; the Holy and Undivided Trinity. The One God who is our source . . . is also our end.

The fact that God has entrusted these riches from the tradition to the Episcopal Church is no ground for boasting; humility is the proper response. God has entrusted us? With these riches, we are to make disciples, and to grow in discipleship ourselves. Why in the world would God choose this Church? The best I can make of it is that God shows an eye for the unlikely and delight in the marginalized—and has a sense of humor. I remember Stanley Hauerwas saying that if the Church were to get serious about following Jesus, then we would take anybody who would show up and not be too picky. The gospel message is that radical—which, again, the culture around us is not likely to understand. The great teachings of the tradition are just this bracing: The gospel and tradition are both life-giving, to within an inch of our own life.

Remember that Jesus shared table fellowship with people he was supposed to avoid. Outcasts and nobodies, lepers and tax collectors, notorious sinners of all sorts. We are servants of that vision. And from such a vision we can find an evangelical purpose for this Church.

I say all this up front, lest we give all our power over to the anxiety of these days, an anxiety caught up in matters of human sexuality, and the Anglican Communion, and what it means to have a Bible as authority. These issues are not going away; I am well aware of that. But it seems to me that just about everything that can be said has been said already.

I remain committed to catholicity and communion. I still set my eyes toward Canterbury, the primary reference point for what it means to be Anglican. Within this context and in the meantime there are gay men and lesbians among us. It is my firm belief that there is no true catholicity without them. The Greek root *katholikos* means literally “according to the whole.” It has to do with the entirety of the Church's witness. It encompasses every family, language, people, and nation—including those peoples, perhaps especially those peoples, whom we do not know and do not understand, those who far off and those who are near. Catholicity is a comprehension across space and time beyond imagination. Perhaps we can reframe modernity's cant about inclusion in this more robust language from the tradition.

The issues of communion and sexuality and the Bible are not going away, and anyone's fantasy to the contrary, the issues are not likely to be resolved soon. Remember that Arianism, condemned at the Council of Nicea in 325, continued to thrive off and on. Here and there--sometimes even as a majority expression for some centuries afterward. The first ecumenical council settled but did not resolve the most controversial theological issue the Church ever faced.

I have no intention of minimizing these matters before us now. But I would like for us to develop the disciplines required not to give all our power over to them. They want our power. And I have seen us give it over to them. In the meantime, there is other work, remarkable work, for us to do, in the presence of God and for the sake of Jesus.

I return to the scenario of a post-Christian America that I set before you at the beginning

of this address. So how is it that we can live faithfully as servants of God's new world, and distinctively as Christians, in this peculiar setting? For me that is the most important question to ask about mission and ministry. There are challenges we have never faced before. There are also opportunities beyond measure.

My fondest hope lies in our 47 congregations, that they realize their full potential as the Body of Christ for all those who otherwise would never encounter him. It has to do with the character of our congregations as much as with the content of what they are about. If you were to drop a living, breathing human being, someone seeking God, a deeper knowledge of God, into one of our communities, what would happen?

We are a people who do not live unto ourselves alone. We are the Lord's possession, and as a Church we exist for the sake of those whom God is calling. It is for the spiritually hungry and a radically secular culture that we have a purpose.

We do well to name our own spiritual hungers, to recognize that we are but beggars showing other beggars where to find bread. The imperial Christianity of Lord and Lady Plentiful has no credibility left to it. A friend once told me that the Episcopal Church at its best looks a little bit like the island of lost toys. Well look around, dear friends, because here we are, treasures of God in frail earthen vessels.

I can report that we do a pretty good job in the congregations around this diocese, and we are getting better. I get to see strong hints and intimations of communities formed on the character of Christ. Some of our places are the body of Christ in ways they might not even admit, even if they could recognize it. But I see it. It humbles me to see strong, healthy communities numbering 20 people, and strong, healthy communities numbering in the hundreds, as I make my rounds in this Diocese. Places where living, breathing people hungry for something more . . . can find actually Christ, and a place to call home.

Numbers never tell us everything, but they do tell us something. So here are some numbers for you. From 1990 through 2002, the average Sunday attendance in the diocese of Missouri declined 37 percent. During that time only five of our congregations showed consistent growth. Those are sobering data to take in. In 2003 we grew by 1%; in 2004 we declined by 1%; in 2005 we grew by 1%. These numbers since 2003 are hardly sustainable, but they at least suggest a bottoming-out from persistent decline. More important: Over those three years 24 congregations have shown growth in average Sunday attendance.

These things don't just happen. They depend upon God's grace and careful discipline and practices from all of you. I think you can see from the numbers that we still have work to do, but at least the trend is beginning to work in our favor. From my office I intentionally have made congregations a focus for ministry, and there are staff resources and other costly resources for the work going on in our congregations. The character of the Diocese of Missouri finds its clearest expression in the Eucharistic communities where you live and worship. Supporting Congregations remains a priority for me.

The character of our congregations matters, but content still counts. I am glad to be called old-fashioned, in that I think learning the Bible and learning the tradition go to the heart of Christian practice. Jesus himself was a teacher. People called him Rabbi, respected teacher. There are implications for us from this important part of his identity. How can people learn to sing the songs of Zion, unless we are there to teach them? How can people learn to envision that great throng of people gathered at the throne on the day of the Lord, unless we can describe it? And how can we teach the songs and describe the glory, unless we know the book? In a death-dealing world, the good news of resurrection is bracing and life-giving. How can we tell such good news unless we know it in head and heart?

You support costly and important teaching ministries in this diocese. A School for Ministry, with its two departments of Theological Studies and Congregational Studies, has made a huge difference in our life together. We are forming ministers of every sort, lay and ordained, right here in Missouri for the needs of Missouri. We are putting before the laity and clergy of this diocese by the dozens the content of what it takes to build strong and healthy congregations. We have staff to support ministry with and to our children and youth, and we have staff specifically to support adult formation. Again, here is work that is both costly and crucial in our life together. That second priority I continue to hold before you holds comes under the heading of Making Disciples.

Much less costly in terms of real dollars is our relationship with the diocese of Luján in southern Sudan. Just don't confuse dollars for value. What we have in knowing these friends and companions in Africa is not unlike a pearl of great price. Once found, such a pearl deserves safekeeping. It is to be cherished. Southern Sudan is also a place where a few of our dollars can leverage a much bigger change for the good. So you will see in our budget that compared to much of what else we do, we don't spend a lot of money in Sudan. Ah, but the return in God's gracious economy goes beyond measure, especially when it comes to Sudan. And in this season when catholicity and communion are at risk, such a partnership is all the more important. I hope to find ways in the year ahead to draw all of us into greater ownership of this work of mission.

Now, all this brings me to name before you the greatest point of anxiety in our common life, and that is money. From the days of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus, from the days of Zacchaeus, and of Ananias and Sapphira, has it ever been so. You have seen already a budget marked with sizable deficit. It is not a sustainable deficit. Which means that we cannot do this for ever. Both my sense of Christian stewardship and my Scots heritage bar my supporting this kind of deficit for very long.

Here's the bind: the ministries supported in this operating budget are valuable. They cost money, and most of that money goes toward what is costliest of all—and that's personnel. People are costly. Period. I have already described some of what these valuable people do, and the difference their ministries make in our common life. I am almost certain that we would not want to be without these ministries. If we cannot provide them by staff whom we compensate through our operating budget, then we

would have to find other ways.

What I put before you today is really a matter for our discernment. It may be that we find ways to close the gap in this deficit. The unmet assessments from eleven congregations in 2005 was \$352,000. That would close the gap, and more. It may be that the new measures of accountability we have instituted will make a difference. It may be that we will need more creative ways of holding one another accountable. It may even be that a scarcity of money (is there such a thing, really, in middle-American life?)—it may be that a scarcity of money is the Spirit's way of getting our attention for something new.

Let us face it, that health insurance costs are out of control, and put unforeseen binds on the Churches in this Diocese. Let us face also that it is costly to maintain and to heat and cool the big old buildings that are our treasures. I recognize the struggles facing vestries and bishop's committees around this Missouri. The scarcity of money does not mean the absence of Spirit. Our brothers and sisters in Sudan give us living proof of that fact.

Scarcity of money also may mean that God is calling us to a deeper discipline of stewardship. Sacrificial giving, as described in the Bible, has two standards. Either ten percent—or else everything you have. (Friends, there is room for us to grow.) It may be that if we cannot or will not afford the compensated staff for these valuable ministries I've described, then we—you—will need to step into the fray. Becoming a ministering community on a diocesan level would not be such a bad thing. There is a different kind of cost in so living. It may mean sharing your life for our work together, more fully. It may mean expecting your clergy to be shared for our life together, more fully. It may be that our resource congregations will have to become just that, places of collaborative resource for the rest. I say collaborative resource, because the imperial style of Lord and Lady Plentiful has no credibility left.

There are these open questions to which I hope we can have some answers by this time next year. I do not have them now, but in the questions lies important work for the two deliberative bodies in this Diocese, Council and Standing Committee, to consider and discern. And for all of you to consider and discern.

Last night we at the Eucharist we sang an under-utilized hymn from our hymnbook. I don't know that I have ever sung it in a parish in Missouri. Hymn 51, a text by John E. Bowers.

The second verse describes a setting which I hope is true for all 47 congregations in this Diocese.

This is the Lord's house,  
home of all his people,  
school for the faithful,  
refuge for the sinner,

rest for the pilgrim,  
    haven for the weary;  
all find a welcome.

My hope is that every line of that hymn might be true for us already. And that it will also challenge us in that Augustinian sense: May we become more fully what we already are. Little anointed ones. Communities of character, in the name of God and for the sake of Jesus who has called us.