The Bishop’s Address to the 115th Annual Diocesan Convention

Welcome to OUR Diocesan Convention. Let’s start with a verbal challenge. I am on a campaign to change the adjective that goes before diocese. Most often we say “the” diocese – as in “there are parishes” and then there is “the” diocese with the implication that “the diocese” is the staff at 37 Chestnut Street in Springfield. But the fact is that we are all in this together. “The diocese” is not just my staff. It is all of our churches, and all of our ministries, and all of the holy work God has given us to do in this time and this part of God’s world. We are in this together. From Stockbridge to Sutton, from Southwick to Fitchburg, from Williamstown to Whitinsville. From the Connecticut border to Vermont and New Hampshire. Yes, Yankee fans and Red Sox fans. So let’s change the adjective to “OUR diocese.” Because that is who we are. Today, if anyone says “the diocese”, I invite you to lovingly wave your hands. And this anti-casino bishop bets he will fail this challenge as well and will need to be reminded.

The line from last year’s convention speech that was quoted the most on Twitter and Facebook and in actual in person conversation was “we are going to double-down on social justice.” Remember that? Here is the line I hope you take away from this year: “in OUR Diocese we are invited to double-down on prayer.” Before I express the “why” and “how” of doubling down on prayer, let’s look at what the Holy Spirit did with the “double-down on social justice commitment” in the past year. Because the Holy Spirit ran with it. And this will not be a complete list.

In this year our Creation Care Missioner, Margaret Bullitt-Jonas has been engaged more than ever with our churches. And represents us, and now the United Church of Christ, at numerous politically strategic events, so much so that she received the 2016 “Steward of God’s Creation Award” from the National Religious Coalition of Creation Care. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry put me on the “Commission for Socially Responsible Investing” for the church nationally “because” he said “brother I want you to do there what Western Massachusetts is doing regarding climate change.”

We have begun Towards the Beloved Community: Holy Conversations About Race in our Diocese. This grew out of conversations on our Social Justice Committee after we all read the book The New Jim Crow. The first one was well attended and provided a safe space for people to talk about race. Our church is a place where Black Lives matter…and Blue Lives matter…and all lives matter. But we are still a long way from the Beloved Community that God intends. Michael Curry has made racial reconciliation one of his priorities and now it is one of ours too. I encourage you to participate in future Holy Conversations. We have collaborated with an organization called Ashes to Ashes and prayed a funeral service in Springfield
for the 4000 African Americans who were lynched between 1865-1965. Then many of you prayed those names out loud in your churches on “Speak My Name Day.”

Bishop Alan Gates, Bishop Gayle Harris and I have addressed the public health crisis of gun violence numerous times and actively support Attorney General Maura Healey in her attempt to close loop-holes in the assault weapons ban. Many of our churches take part in the annual Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath to mark the anniversary of the shooting at Sandy Hook. On the first Sunday in June many of us wore orange - orange is the color that hunters wear so they won’t be accidently shot by other hunters. We wore orange to say “we are human and do not wish to be shot” in response to the 33,000 people a year who die from gun violence and in the 300 mass shootings (4 or more people) that have happened this year. We are working with an organization called Don't Stand Idly By to encourage gun manufacturers to use the technology already available for “safe guns” – guns that require the finger print of the owner to fire.

There are twenty three million refugees right now. It is the largest displacement of people since World War II. The Bible is clear in giving us a mandate to “welcome the stranger.” Among many passages we hear this from Leviticus 19:34 – “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you. You shall love the alien as yourself. For you yourselves were aliens in the land of Egypt.”…Egypt where Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus lived as refugees for two years. We are working with Ascentria (the former Lutheran Social Services) to help refugees. I spent a day with New Americans working at their New Lands Farms. More about Ascentria later today. And St. John’s in Northampton is working with Catholic Charities on helping refugees adjust to new life here. This is holy work. This is Gospel work.

Ministry with Veterans is taking off throughout our Diocese. We have a lunch and arts program in Northampton, lunches for Vets in Springfield, West Springfield, Webster and Holyoke and another veterans lunch will be offered soon in Greenfield. We are seeing an average of 50 people at each location weekly. Some vets have told me that these lunches are the only experiences of community they have all week.

More and more of our churches are embracing forms of “outdoor” church and “laundry love” where we hear the stories and enter into relationship with people experiencing poverty. That is happening in Pittsfield, Springfield, Greenfield, Worcester, Milford to name just a few. I’ll never forget Meredyth Ward’s Celebration of a New Ministry in a laundromat and the blessing of the “Walking Together” office in the Main South section of Worcester. In that room were Congressman Jim McGovern, other dignitaries, Episcopalians from our Worcester area churches, and people experiencing homelessness, all in one place. And most recently, a much needed Sober House opened at The Church of the Reconciliation in Webster. These stories and more will be told throughout this day.

“Doubling down on social justice” is not a one year commitment. Michael Curry says “we are the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement that is out to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it.” As long as God’s dream is alive, a dream that is made so clear in the Bible and in the witness of the saints, we are called to work passionately with Jesus’ mission of mercy, compassion and hope.

This is my 5th Convention in our Diocese. My first one was as bishop-elect in 2012. Since Gordon Scruton handed off the crozier to me on December first of that year, I’ve traveled a lot of miles on the Pike…and a lot of backroads to little towns. 136,000 miles to be exact. I’ve seen this depth of prayer with
my own eyes in big churches and small and all those in-between. I am grateful to serve a diocese where prayer already matters. And yet we can get distracted by many things if we are not careful. We can lose our focus on the heart of our faith: Jesus Christ. And so I invite you to join me in doubling down on prayer.

Let’s look at what that commitment might look like. And I’ll begin, as I often do, with Thomas Merton, the Roman Catholic monk, who wrote 60 compelling books on the spiritual journey. He wrote:

“If we descend into the depth of our own spirit, and arrive at our center, we confront the inescapable fact that at the root of our existence we are in immediate and constant contact with God.”

“At the root of our existence, we are in immediate and constant contact with God.” As we run from thing to thing, it does not always seem that way. Instead it seems like we have immediate and constant contact with anxiety. We live in anxious times in our nation, in our world AND in our church. And we can’t think that anxiety away. We can’t make it stop by force of our will. We can only be set free to be authentically human by finding the source of our life and the meaning of our life in God. Our God who is as close as our next breath. It is by entering intentionally into that relationship that we are transformed. No one says that better than last night’s speaker, my friend Rob Wright:

“God causes freedom in people. Freedom to be authentic. Freedom from fear. Freedom for improvisation. Freedom to befriend the world. God is a freedom God and God’s people are in the freedom business.”

What a vision! I want to live that way. Do you?

But remember what Thomas Merton said. He had an “if” clause in there. “We confront the fact that we are in immediate and constant contact with God” – the freedom God- “if we descend to the depth of our own spirit and arrive at our center.”

My invitation to us is to go deeper. And that is a place where average Sunday attendance is not the only measure of our faithfulness. It is a place below our anxiety about the stewardship campaign. It is a deep place of connection to the Living God that will not be destroyed by a church argument about taking out the pews and replacing them with chairs.

What does the “how” of doubling down on prayer look like? How do we go deeper? There are multiple dimensions.

One is a renewed dedication to daily and if possible, more than daily prayer in our lives. I have “holy jealousy” of the Muslim tradition of set prayer times throughout the day. In our own tradition we have the Liturgy of the Hours which many of us continue to pray daily. There is a wonderful story of the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, who founded the Methodist movement. They were asked who taught them the most about God. They said their mother. Now John and Charles were not their mother’s only children. She had 16 others! But there would be a time in everyday when Susanna Wesley would sit down at the kitchen table and put her apron over her head. And the children knew not to bother mom for the next twenty minutes because she was praying.

My mother was a person with a deep commitment to prayer. A few years after she died in 1977, all too young at the age of 47, my sister found two prayers she hand wrote on the first page of a medical book
she had as a nurse. The first prayer is called Nine Consecutive Hours, meaning that this prayer should be said every hour for nine hours in a row - such a Roman Catholic thing to do! The prayer begins “O Jesus, who has said, ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you, through the intercession of Mary, thy most holy mother, I knock, I seek, I ask that my prayer be granted.”

Then it says “make your prayer request.” And then there is another biblically centered prayer followed by “make your prayer request.” Followed by a third biblically themed prayer and then one last “make your prayer request.” Remember she did that every hour for nine hours. While having a hyperactive son who liked to jump down stairs instead of walking down them. This is being intentional about a relationship with the Living God.

And the second prayer she has written down is the Prayer of St. Francis. “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred let me sow love. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is sadness, joy. It is in giving that we receive. It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” She never heard Rob Wright preach, but I think she knew the freedom God.

Doubling down on prayer means a commitment to daily prayer. Even in the midst of our too busy lives or maybe because of our too busy lives. My prayer practice is to pray early in the morning and then I’m off and running. I’m going to make a commitment to practice what I preach and to schedule in 15 minutes of prayer in the middle of every day. Doubling down on prayer.

Maybe doubling down on prayer means a deeper commitment to Bible Study. In groups and in private. On Sundays, we get short bible passages. I invite you to take one gospel at a time and read it straight through. If you are really busy, know that Mark is the shortest one. There is transforming power in reading the Jesus story as a whole and remarkable life. And, if you want to connect it to social justice, I invite church leaders to offer a course looking at all the times that Jesus quotes the prophets – especially his favorite, Isaiah.

And I invite you to consider a parish program that is about going deeper in prayer and in bible study called Renewal Works. Pam Mott can tell you all about it. Pam also has another exciting possibility for our churches. It is called Prayer 5/30. It is a commitment to pray 5 minutes a day for 30 days or a season, checking in on Facebook with a community that is making the same commitment and joining you in prayer.

A renewed commitment to prayer might look like prayer with our brothers and sisters from other faith traditions. Rumi, a 13th century Sufi mystic wrote: “Prayer clears the mist and brings peace back to the soul. Every morning, every evening let the heart sing ‘there is no reality but God’.” God transcends any one expression, any one faith tradition. In the past couple of years I have been blessed to pray with rabbis and imams and Buddhists. We have been in our faith tradition silos for so long, that does not happen naturally. I invite our church leaders to be intentional in seeking out relationships with those from other traditions. Do it for the sake of the communities we live in and do it so our people might go deeper into the mystery that is God. Talk to members of the Cathedral about the enthusiasm generated by our new “rabbi in residence” Mark Shapiro.
And I invite us to consider opportunities to pray in languages besides English. Prayers in Spanish demonstrate a welcome to the largest growing demographic in the Commonwealth. And if you ever sang “Alabare”, you know God is smiling.

Doubling down on prayer might include a commitment to public prayer. Now I know all our churches are open to the public and all are welcome. But we are in a new era. People are not coming to us like they used to and we need to go out to them. We need to witness to the faith like St. Paul and the Apostles who prayed on street corners. We did that on my walk through OUR diocese. Many of you are doing that on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Last Good Friday I was in Worcester and as church people walked along we were joined by all manner of people who usually did not go to church but they were drawn by the cross lifted high and the compelling story of Jesus. A reporter from the Worcester Telegram joined us. Now my experience is that when reporters come to something like this, they get a picture and a quote from me and then they are off to the next thing. But this reporter stayed the whole time. And when she wrote her article, she did not include a quote from me but she did quote several of our pilgrims who were experiencing homelessness. The Holy Spirit was all over that prayer walk.

Public witness prayer and social justice can go together. The House of Bishops has done this several times. In Washington D.C. and in Salt Lake City we had processions to pray for peace in the midst of the public health crisis of gun violence. We will be doing that again in Chicago this spring to draw attention to the Unholy Trinity of Racism, Guns and Poverty. We are clear that these are not demonstrations but prayer. Not marches but processions. We are not another advocacy group; we are a people at prayer. Episcopalians are good at liturgy so why not take what we are good at and bring it to the street?

That is happening right here in our diocese in the next couple of weeks. On the Sunday night before Election Day, our deacons will be leading a prayer service on the streets of Worcester. We will be praying for wisdom in the choices we make and we will be praying for peace and reconciliation after a particularly bitter and divisive campaign season. The deacons will offer those prayers again, here in Springfield on election eve.

On November 13th we are gathering at the Heifer Farm in Rutland with our friends in the Lutheran and UCC churches for “We Are the Earth: Public Prayer for the Planet.” Margaret is leading us in a liturgy that renews our dedication to following Jesus, and that bears witness to our sacred calling to protect the Earth and create a more just and sustainable way of life.

Also in November, the Berkshire Clericus is organizing an Interfaith Prayer Pilgrimage in the Berkshires addressing our addiction crisis. As you know the opioid epidemic is having a devastating impact in New England. Thank you, Michael, for your leadership.

And in June the Episcopal churches of New England are sponsoring a pilgrimage down the Connecticut River - the whole river. I will be with them for the journey that goes through Massachusetts and Connecticut. It is a way to celebrate God’s gift of this river, its history and highlight baptism imagery.

I am often asked what the future of the Church looks like. With you, there is much that the Holy Spirit has yet to reveal to us. Whatever that future is, I am sure public prayer witness will be a growing part of it.

Private prayer. Bible Study. Public Prayer. Our model for this is Jesus. He was committed to all of that. Jesus told us to “pray always and do not lose heart.” Prayer shaped the life of Jesus. And for the next few
minutes I invite you to look with me at the prayer that I think might have been with him his whole life long. A prayer that might become our prayer too.

It is a prayer that we know as one of the seven “last words” of Jesus, spoken while he suffered on the cross. It is Luke 23:46. “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” According to Luke, they were the final words of Jesus as “he breathed his last.”

Jesus might have summoned up those words from the depth of his soul for the first time because they fit the moment. But I think he practiced those words for a long time before his final breath. I think he made those words so much a part of his living that they came naturally and spontaneously to him at the end.

Could it be that when Jesus preached his first sermon at Nazareth – you know the one where “everyone was amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” and then five minutes later they wanted to throw him off a cliff – that one. Could it be that as they “drove him out of town and led him to the brow of the hill so they might hurl him off the cliff”, Jesus was praying “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” And he did not have time to put that prayer request in every hour for nine hours like my mom did. But somehow the prayer was answered and as the bible tells us “he passed through the midst of them and went on his way” – perhaps experiencing resurrection long before he died.

And maybe he practiced that prayer when he was in a house filled with people because they wanted to hear Jesus preach. The house was so full no one else could get in. Outside the door was a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. His four friends knew, if they could just get him in to see Jesus, something great would happen. They climbed up on the roof, carrying him with them. Then they tore the roof apart and lowered him down in front of Jesus. Think of the pressure on Jesus! The roof has been torn apart. If this was a house church, the junior warden is going to be furious about that roof. Before the healing, don’t you think Jesus was saying “Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit.”

And when Jesus was out there in a desolate place and 5000 people gathered. He was preaching and healing all day long. As evening drew near, the apostles told Jesus these people are hungry. Send them away. And Jesus said “you feed them.” But instead of looking what they had, they looked at what they did not have and said “we have five loaves and two fish. It is not enough.” Jesus took it, thanked God for it, broke it apart and gave it away. 5 loaves, 2 fish, 5000 people. Don’t you think Jesus might have been thinking “Father, I don’t want to look like a fool here. Let this food get beyond the first row and out to all 5000. Into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Now if this were a crowd of Episcopalians, it certainly would go beyond the first row because no one would be sitting in the first row. But they were not Episcopalians yet, so there were people in the first row and they joyfully received the food and broke it and passed it on and God multiplied the grace. More resurrection. More being set free for improvisation as our brother Rob would say. More freedom to take risks. To do things that were not done before. Do you think we need that freedom in our churches in our diocese, in central and western Massachusetts right now?

We could go on and on with these stories. The point is that Jesus, the one we follow today, tomorrow and through all time, had a prayer shaped life. And so did the early church. That is why they were not called Christians at first, but followers of The Way. Their faith was not an “add on”. One of many things they
did. Their faith shaped everything they did. And then so many said, “we want that kind of life.” A life shaped by prayer and love of neighbor (also called social justice.)

We started this Convention Address with an experiment. We engaged the challenge of changing “the diocese” into “our diocese.” Let’s keep that experiment going. And let’s end with another experiment. An early church, Pentecost kind of experiment. Earlier, with Thomas Merton, I said God is as close as our next breath. I invite you to get comfortable in your seats and try to stay still. If you are comfortable closing your eyes, do that. In a moment I am going to invite you to breathe in. And as you do, say in your mind “come, Holy Spirit.” We will do that together. And then we will breathe out together. Are you ready?

Ok. Get comfortable. Feel your feet firmly planted on God’s earth. On the count three we will breathe in and say in your soul “come Holy Spirit.”


The word “conspire” means to “breathe together.” That means you are now part of a conspiracy. God’s conspiracy. God’s plan for the Jesus Movement to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many, into the dream God has for it. Amen.

+Doug

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