



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF VIRGINIA

Micah 4:1-5

Matthew 5:43-48

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit:

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” So the prophet Micah proclaims will be said by all who come and stand before the grace and glory of God. And so let it be for us this day.

Good evening, my dear friends in the Diocese of Virginia. Before I begin my address – I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has been so kind to me following the death of my wife, Joy, a week ago yesterday morning. I have felt truly consoled and strengthened by the prayers that I know are being offered for her, for my family, and for me. Joy was a wonderful person, without whom I would not be who I am – she has been the love of my life. She would never put up with any of my nonsense, she helped deepen my faith, and she taught me how to love – really love. I am so sorry that most of you in this room never had the chance to meet her – she would have loved being with you, and would have been one terrific bishop’s spouse. Y’all would have been much happier seeing her on Sunday than seeing me.

For now, though, I am comforted that her battle is over, her mind is freed from the prison in which it has been held, and – in the fullness of time that is the providence of God – she is fully aware of all things – especially that she is loved.

I know that many are concerned for me – and I really am doing okay. The notes and messages of support have been deeply moving to me. But if I don’t react really well to something over the next few days, please understand that such is not my intent. I just have moments from time to time when my filters drop. And again, thank you for your care of me through all of this.

It is so very good to be here with y’all, singing and praying in this holy place. This is going to be a wonderful and life-giving Convention. I am looking forward to our conversations with the Spirit of God at our backs and in our hearts.

I am thankful to and for so many people and groups that have worked long, hard hours to pull this all together. It is dangerous to start naming names, but I do want to mention just a few folks. We owe a debt of gratitude to the volunteers who have and will keep us organized in these days; to the diocesan staff, who have worked more hours on this event than any of us will ever know; to the Diocesan Committee on Liturgy and Music that has crafted worship experiences that will ground us in our work; to the people of St. George’s for their hospitality and welcome; to those who will lead workshops; to the collection of bishops who have joined us; and to those who are offering exhibits in our ministry fair. To all of these fine folks and to so many others, I say thank you.

I also want to say a special thank you to three individuals in particular. (And this is where I get into trouble – because there are lots of people who could and should be thanked by name. But, here goes...) First, you would not believe how hard Nerissa Crockett works to make this Convention a reality each year. Nerissa serves on the bishop's staff, and she is a wonder to behold when a project is put before her. She is gracious, and patient, and has a wicked sense of humor. Even when the ups and downs of her life might be more down than up, Nerissa shows up – and we are all blessed for it.

Second, I offer my most heartfelt thanks to my Chief of Staff, and Secretary of this Convention, Mark Eastham. Mark is always patient and understanding when I walk into his office, or call him on the phone, and utter the phrase, "I've been thinking." Which usually results in more work for him. Mark manages to organize the unorganizable day in and day out, always with a smile. I can guarantee that anything and everything that will go well this weekend will be in large part because of him.

And third, I want to thank Bishop Ted Gulick for his pastoral care – his care across this diocese, yes, but even more so for his care of me personally. You may or may not know this, but being a bishop in this Church can present some interesting challenges – and there are not a whole lot of folks that we can have full and open conversations with who truly understand what we are going through. Bishop Gulick has been a gift from God to me in this. His counsel to me professionally and personally always helps to get my head, heart, and soul in a better place. If you believe that I am doing anything at all well as your bishop, I encourage you to thank him for his making it so.

As many if not all of you know by now, I am a life-long, die-hard Chicago Cubs fan. I try to make a pilgrimage to Wrigley Field every season – and this year's trip occurred in early August. It was a beautiful day with an afternoon game (as God intended baseball to be played – without lights and on real grass), and my friends and I got to the park a couple of hours before the first pitch.

On the outside of Wrigley there is an area – accessible only to folks who purchased a ticket for the game – where you can listen to live music, enjoy a beverage, visit the monuments of legendary Cubs players, and just generally enjoy the buildup of excitement to one of the greatest gifts God has ever given humanity – a baseball game.

Anyway, my friends and I grabbed a drink, and located some chairs at a table near the band. In between where we were sitting and the stage, though, was an area of water spouts – perhaps you have seen something like this someplace – a tiled space, an area maybe 10 feet by 20 feet, with holes drilled in random spots, through which water shoots up three to five feet in the air at random intervals. It's sorta fun to watch, and it is fun to try to guess which spout will be next.

Not long after we sat down, a young boy – maybe three or four years old – ran out onto this field of unknowing, and – with laughter and glee – began chasing down the water spouts, jumping up and down on each one as he attacked them, getting thoroughly soaked in the process. And as he would catch one, his laughter would get louder and stronger, his heart exploding with joy.

It wasn't long before other kids joined in, mostly about his age, but a few a little older. It was fascinating to observe the various personalities interacting with this game that wasn't a game.

One little girl tried to put her foot over the holes to block the water from getting out. The trouble was, she did not have sufficient patience to stay over any one hole long enough – just about every time she would

give up on one un-spouting spout and move to another, the one she had just abandoned would go off and she would grab her hair and scream.

Another little boy kept putting his water bottle on the holes, and waited until the water would shoot it up into the air.

Another child clearly did not want to get wet – nor really even play this game – but his older brother kept making fun of him for being chicken, so he made the best of it and ran around hoping no one would see how miserable he was.

And one little girl took another's hand and danced and sang and danced some more, weaving through the explosions of water as though they were the source of life itself.

And through it all, that first little boy just kept laughing and chasing the future, giving in to utter joy every time that he caught up to it.

A dear friend of mine recently reminded me that Emily Dickinson wrote that *"Hope is the thing with feathers that perches on the soul and sings the tunes without the words and never stops at all."* Such hope was this young man's that day. Such hope is an inspiration to me even to this day.

My experience of that event outside of Wrigley Field has become a powerful metaphor for me, particularly as I think about our common life together as Christians, and as Episcopalians, in the Diocese of Virginia.

Now, I would like to think that everything is as joy-filled as was the case with the boy chasing the future and relishing the present, or as care-free as the two young girls dancing and singing as they dodged obstacles, never really caring if those obstacles got in the way or not. But that is not the reality in which we live.

We live now in the days immediately after one of the most contentious national elections in my 60 years of lived memory. These last few months, these last few years, have turned friend against friend, and family member against family member. Social media has become a battleground of unchecked vitriol; news media has become partisan; states have been relegated to being known only as one of two colors – blue or red.

None of us knows how this will turn out in the coming four years. And yet I implore us all to remember – regardless of who we voted for – that we are Christ's, and beloved children of God. We are called to be prayerful – even as Jesus calls us today in our reading from St. Matthew to "pray for those who persecute (us), so that (we) may be children of (our) Father in heaven." We are called to be a place of safety and of health, and not, as Jesus reminds us elsewhere, to be anxious about earthly things – because being anxious will not add a single moment to our life. We are called to be a people of clarity – and clarity first and foremost as a community where all are valued – all are respected – all are cherished.

These are not care-free days, I know – yet God is still real, and present, and very much in love with each of us.

There is also some anxiety here in this diocese. This I know. One of those places of anxiety is found in our work towards racial justice and truth-telling – and, in particular, in our efforts at funding a program of reparations. For many – myself included – the work just does not progress fast enough. We seem, like

that young girl who could never quite get the timing right on the water spouts, to be always a bit behind where we should or could be. There are rarely enough voices of people of color at the table. Our ministry efforts are always playing catch-up, or making excuses. There are often missteps, and wrong words, and naïve thinking. And, of course, there is the question, “Where is the \$10 million called for in the 2021 R-10a Resolution for reparations?”

As to the first set of things, I simply say that we are going to keep at it. Injustice did not get deeply ingrained in our system and culture overnight, and it won’t be rooted out overnight, either. When we make a mistake, we will learn from it. We are learning. This I promise you.

And as to the \$10 million, I say two things – first, we are working on it diligently. I had hoped to be able to make a major announcement at this convention about a substantial amount of the goal, but negotiations are such that I am told that I may not. But stay tuned.

But second, I say this – we have allowed ourselves to be sidetracked by this \$10 million dollar directive. It has made this work one of transaction instead of transformation. One of “if we just do this, if we just raise and spend this, then we will have done something” instead of “we must reach deeply into our hearts and souls and seek the kind of redemption and change that will make it possible to raise *\$100 million* at the drop of a hat for the work of repair.”

This sometimes insatiable need to raise and spend \$10 million is, in the words of singer/song-writer Luke Combs, “chasing that same old devil down the same old dead-end highway,” instead of, in the words found in the book Genesis, “walking with God in the Garden in the cool of the day.”

We will identify the \$10 million and satisfy the Resolution – but more importantly, we are going to live more and more into the beloved community that is God’s dream for the world.

These challenges and others aside, though, there is indeed much walking with God going on in these days; there is much walking with God in this diocese. Everywhere I turn, there is dancing and singing and joy. Everywhere I turn, I am seeing evidence of what I call the Six Words – the theme of this Convention and the vision and mission of the Diocese of Virginia: Love Jesus. Embody Justice. Be Disciples.

These Six Words, and the way of life that they lift up, are the framework that gives focus to the guiding principles of our common ministry. Later in this liturgy, we are going to sing a hymn that was commissioned and written especially for the Diocese of Virginia, and is based on the theme of the Six Words. My thanks to Bishop Gayle Harris for taking the lead on this and making it a reality. As we sing that hymn, I encourage us to soak it up, to chase after its hope, and dance with it playfully. For the words of this hymn are grounded by the first two of the Six – Love Jesus. That is who we are, above all else.

More on the Six Words later, but first I want to highlight for you some of the evidence that we are being drenched by this spirit – like that young boy enraptured outside of Wrigley Field – and we are relishing in it.

Our congregations are gathering, and worshiping, and having fun together. The dark days of the pandemic are further and further behind us, and we are seeing new life. We are baptizing, and confirming, and ordaining, at a fever pitch. St. Peter’s, Oak Grove – whose church building burned to the

ground late last year – is figuratively and literally rising from the ashes – a wonderful example of resurrection that should inspire us all.

And while there are countless examples of creative and life-renewing ministry in our congregations, allow me to highlight just one – that of Cople Parish, which has received a grant from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund to seed a coalition of 14 congregations of various denominations and other community partners that will provide emergency assistance to individuals and families to heat their homes, pay their rent or mortgage, cover the cost of prescriptions, and put gas in their cars to get to their jobs, school, and medical appointments. This is exactly what Jesus talks about doing in Matthew 25, and it is life-giving. And is but one example. Congregations all over Virginia are teaching the faith, living out their call, and singing tunes of joy and hope, with and without words.

We have much to be thankful for in the work we have done together in this past year, as well – work that is laying the foundation for great ministry to be done for years to come. One example is that The Lilly Endowment has granted us funding for five years for a program we are calling Pathways to Prayer and Practice, a program that will work to create a roadmap to guide us for the meaningful engagement of children, aged 10 and under, in corporate worship. Lilly is encouraging us to experiment – to learn from our mistakes as well as our successes. This is an opportunity to reach whole new generations.

Similarly, we have begun a multi-year strategic look at our ministry on college campuses. As we do this strategic work, in full cooperation with students and campus ministers alike, we will be able to make sound, evidence-based judgements and take strong steps forward.

The staff has been hard at work, too. We continue to evaluate our structures in order to provide the best resources to this diocese. We are providing support for congregations to grow in vitality; to navigate transitions; to engage in processes to assess strengths and needs; and to create action plans with milestones and timelines that will deliver quality outcomes. We are networking to attract the best clergy in The Episcopal Church to come to Virginia. We have created New Clergy orientation days, and implemented a new program called Connecting in Ministry for newly ordained clergy and those new to this diocese, to provide ongoing formation and networking. Our vocational discernment process has been revamped. Our Treasurer and Canon to the Ordinary have created what they refer to as the “Ted and d’Rue roadshow” – a series of gatherings across the state to provide resources and best practices for congregations.

In our work for racial justice and healing, I have already mentioned our commitment to transformational and not simply transactional work. To that end, our Canon for Racial Justice and Healing, Lee Hill, is spearheading work with leaders across our diocese – as well as in other dioceses of The Episcopal Church – that reaches into our past, wrestles with our present, and calls us into a more just and honest future.

We hosted a prayer breakfast at the state capital with legislators earlier this year, and we continue our conversations with key community leaders around issues of justice. There was a diocesan wide study of how Jim Crow laws affect those of Indigenous heritage, and a large and geographically diverse contingent of our folk participated in a Reparations Summit at VTS. Our Triangle of Hope Youth pilgrims – in the face of obstacles beyond our control – regrouped this past summer when a full pilgrimage had to be postponed, and held a Grounding Experience in Virginia – where more than a dozen young people spent time with the Indigenous nations of the Mattaponi and Upper Mattaponi, walked the Richmond Slave Trail, and engaged the past and present of injustice in the Commonwealth. And through it all, the Reparations Task force continues its work, as does the Commission on Racial Justice and Healing.

In our work of deepening discipleship, we have been mapping and networking and lifting up the good work that is already being done all across this diocese, while at the same time dreaming and planning and digging footings to build a future where church growth begins and is empowered by the growth of souls and faith.

Our Interim Canon for Discipleship, Heidi Kim, is engaging us – both subtly and not-so-subtly – in asset mapping, as the human assets that God has placed in this diocese in this age are identified through conversation and reflection.

As a part of our time together this weekend, I am inviting all of us to learn more about our neighbors by getting a glimpse of the gift that each of us are to this community. We have created a simple survey that will allow you to hear about the gifts and passions for ministry from others at this convention, and we will share what we learn through these surveys on Saturday morning. You received information about the survey at registration, and we ask that you have three conversations with people you don't know well in order to hear about what they love, what they're good at, and what sets their hearts on fire with the love of Jesus.

Further, the seeds are being sown to bring back diocesan youth retreats for both middle school and high school students. Planning is underway to have a 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade fellowship day. A vision has been cast to have a discipleship and formation summit. Our own resident Excel expert, treasurer Ted Smith, has built me a spreadsheet that identifies which congregations are having success in the baptizing of adults – perhaps we can all learn from them. We are working to connect youth ministries, Episcopal church schools, campus ministries, and Shrine Mont camps in a sustainable way that benefits all parties.

And, speaking of Shrine Mont Camps, and Shrine Mont more generally, let me take just a moment to talk about some of the amazing things happening on the mountain.

Shrine Mont Camps has had several successful post-pandemic summer sessions now, with numbers of attendees stabilizing, with folks being transformed by the experience that only this historic program can offer. We were served faithfully by James Williams as Director over the past two summers, and our search process for his successor is making good and steady progress. Dates for this summer's sessions are already posted on ShrineMontCamps.org – giving everyone plenty of opportunity to make plans for this coming summer. I know we have lots of work to do, and I am excited about and hopeful for the future of Shrine Mont Camps.

Of course, Shrine Mont is more than just the Camps programs. It is a spiritual home for many throughout the year, and a place that offers programming, and relaxation, and a connection to God and creation in a unique, important way. This coming summer, we will celebrate the 100th Anniversary of that holy place – y'all can hear more about what is planned by visiting the Ministry Fair – but I can tell you this – for the celebration liturgy at the Shrine on August 6th, I have convinced a recently-out-of-work itinerant preacher to come and be our homilist – former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has said “yes” to my invitation. Mark your calendars now.

So, as I think you can see, the Diocese of Virginia is dancing and singing through the water spouts, even in the face of anxiety and concern. This is a good place to be, and I feel so very lucky – and blessed – to be your bishop.

But I want to return for just a moment to the Six Words that I mentioned earlier – our theme for Convention and for the months ahead – Love Jesus. Embody Justice. Be Disciples. I want to return to these

words, because if these are not the things that we are about – if these are not the explosions of joy and hope and accomplishment that we are chasing and dreaming of and being drenched by going forward, then we are not about what we are called by God to be about. All of the achievements and aspirations that I mentioned just now – and so many more that I did not – all of those things will wither and pass away into history with a whimper if we are not about the business of loving Jesus, embodying justice, and being disciples.

Everything must, of course, begin, continue, and end in the love of Jesus. In his love for us, and in our love for him. This love of Jesus is eternal. Like the tides, the gravity of divine love pulls and tugs at us, drawing us back when we are distracted, or anxious, or in pain. This love is real. This love makes all things new. This love offers hope.

Recently, another dear friend shared with me a piece written by the poet Mary Oliver, entitled *Don't Hesitate*. It reads as follows:

"If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be. We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that's often the case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb."

So writes Mary Oliver.

This is the love of Jesus for us. It begins anew every moment, just as powerful and full of promise and joy as the moment before. And it is the love that we are called to have for Jesus. This love is possibility, and redemption, and power. This love is unquenchable.

And, as we embrace this unending, unquenchable love, that act naturally leads to a desire to love all whom Jesus loves. In so doing, embodying justice becomes second nature. Embodying justice means that when faced with someone who is hungry, we feed them – and then go find out why they are hungry in the first place – and do what is necessary to fix that. Embodying justice means helping to heal those who are sick, and then fighting for the healthcare they need to prevent further illness. It means affordable housing, and wages that are more than living – but that allow for thriving. It means demanding an educational system that is available to all, is culturally aware, and is not used as a political ping-pong ball by those who would promote an agenda of the supremacy of one category of person over another. And it means repairing centuries of damage caused by chattel slavery. It means telling the truth, taking responsibility, and embracing change.

Embodying justice means – embodying justice is – loving Jesus.

Which, of course, leads us to the final two of the Six Words – Be Disciples.

In our life together, if we are not doing this, then why are we here? If we are not desirous of a deep relationship with the Son of the Living God, then what are we about? Our call is to draw near to Jesus, to walk with the Holy Spirit, to praise the Father in heaven – and to be better for it. And then, it is to invite others to join in the explosive dance of the water spouts.

Virtually every single thing that the Church does is done by non-church groups – and they often do them as good or better as do we. And yet the one thing that we do that they cannot is create a deep, transformational relationship with the God who created us.

Yes, we need to provide safe spaces for people – but those spaces must be a place where the gospel is taught. Yes, we need to be of service to those with needs beyond themselves – but that service must be done with the love of Jesus shining on our faces. Yes, we want people to come to our church events and feel welcome – but when they are there, they must be told the Good News of Jesus Christ – crucified and risen.

At the risk of putting my foot against the metaphorical “third rail” – I have been doing some thinking about a controversy that surfaces from time to time in the Episcopal Church – that of what some call a practice of “open Communion” – that is, inviting the unbaptized to receive the Eucharist, even though our canons prohibit it. But here is what I have been thinking. This is the wrong argument to be having. I don’t think this should even be an issue. I think we – and I include myself – I think that we should be asking ourselves why we have people in our congregations for any significant period of time who are not baptized. Why are people not seeing the joy on our faces, hearing the truth of our words, feeling the presence of the divine from our actions, seeing our own growth in our faith in Jesus, and then, like the Ethiopian eunuch talking with Philip in Acts 8 – why are they not demanding to be baptized?

The teachings of Jesus, the way of life that Jesus offers, the freshness of joy that comes from it – these things are not crumbs. They are *“the thing with feathers that perches on the soul and sings the tunes without the words and never stops at all.”*

My dear friends in Christ – Love Jesus. Embody Justice. Be Disciples. The love of Jesus is unquenchable – and that is a gift which does not require the purchase of a ticket. The embodiment of justice is a life of loving all those whom Jesus loves. Being disciples is dancing from water spout to water spout with joy and hope; a dancing that soaks us with a spirit of wanting more and more. And, the beauty is – Jesus gives us more and more, every time we thirst for it. Without end.

My dear friends in Christ – “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”

Love Jesus. Embody Justice. Be Disciples. For we are the Diocese of Virginia.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mark".