

Bishop's Address – Diocese of Eau Claire Convention 2022

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that was set before us. Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Who for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding the shame and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

I have a recurring fantasy the Sunday when I get into the pulpit to preach, I will look out and see one or more of the folk in the Book of *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* sitting in the congregation.

Lesser Feasts and Fasts contains the saints and other worthies that we remember and celebrate. I wonder what it would be like if I looked out – if I looked out here at Convention – and saw Julian of Norwich over there, and St. Augustine over there, and Martin Luther and Catherine of Sienna, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Evelyn Underhill and Dorothy Day – the whole crazy quilt, three-ring circus that is the company of saints.

I hope that any time I'm preaching or teaching, I wouldn't embarrass or offend them too much. And, if I disagree with them, that I'd be able to explain why I see things differently than they saw them, but do so faithfully. It doesn't hurt that many of those characters didn't agree with one another. Still, I want to be faithful to that great cloud of witnesses.

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. That passage from Hebrews 12, follows, of course, Hebrews 11, which lays out some of the Old Testament saints that make up that great cloud of witnesses. In Hebrews 11, you'll recall that the author writes about Abraham, Moses, and others. They were looking for another country, another homeland. Abraham went to the Promised Land. Moses brought the people back to the Promised Land. But they knew that that was not home. They knew that they were, as Hebrews 11 says, strangers and foreigners looking for a homeland.

They wandered in deserts and in mountains. They were pilgrims prepared to follow God into new territory as they journeyed toward the New Jerusalem.

The church has always been a pilgrim church. The Episcopal Church in Wisconsin came here as a sort of pilgrimage. A couple of weeks ago we will be celebrating the 200th anniversary of the coming of the Episcopal Church to Wisconsin in the company of the Oneida, who came to this area from New York. It's important for us to acknowledge that they would have rather stayed in New York. But, pressured and pressed by the expansion of White People, they decided to journey to a new home. They were refugees. But they were also pilgrims of a sort.

In time, Episcopal Church spread throughout Wisconsin. As it spread, it invited others to join and it grew. It was a pilgrim church. It was also a missionary church. Jackson Kemper, the first missionary bishop of the Episcopal Church, was also the first Bishop of Wisconsin.

Building on the missionary heritage, Frank Weston, the first Bishop of the Diocese of Eau Claire, wrote,

The Church cannot live for itself. It passes on its treasures. .It is never a club for the enjoyment of its members. It is a society for service.

(What a Churchman Ought to Know)

The church is a society for service, society for mission. Did you know that in 1835 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church adopted a new constitution which declared each baptized member of the Episcopal Church a member of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society? That means each of you is called to be a missionary, or at least pray for and support the mission of the church.

We are a missionary church. We are a pilgrim church. Pilgrimage is not always easy. Much that is unexpected can happen. And sometimes you do

wander through deserts and mountains. But, as we were reminded on All Saints' and All Souls', those went before us form a great cloud of witnesses who cheer us on as we take our turn in the great pilgrimage of faith, continuing on towards that heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God.

They cheer us on

As I said, pilgrimage is not always easy. And friends, I believe that our pilgrimage is going to take us, into some rough territory in the coming decades. There is a lot going on in the world that is going to make it harder and harder. We will be living in challenging times on many fronts.

We are continuing to make our way out of COVID. The whole world seems discombobulated and on edge. And when people are discombobulated and on edge, they don't always act out of their best selves. That includes me. And I suspect that it includes you.

The church continues to decline in numbers. That's true for us here, but it's true for everywhere. And it's true of just about every church of every tradition. If the current trends continue, and, even if they level off eventually, in fifty years Christian will only make up just 30-40% of the population in the United States. That means it will be harder to continue being faithful, surrounded by a world that does not understand what that means or why.

We are faced with secularism, individualism, consumerism, relativism. We are faced with a deep divisiveness, a narrowing of the spirit, a lessening of a spirit of hospitality and generosity, an impatience with difference. All of this infects our imaginations and, if we're not careful, will shape how we engage faith and how we engage one another.

The whole world order feels shakier than it has felt for a very long time. The invasion of Ukraine is just one example of that. Democracy across the globe seems threatened in one way or another and our own democracy feels shakier than it has felt in decades.

We were reminded in 2008 and 2009 that our economy can unravel quickly. Not just because of the ebb and flow of the market and inflation, but beyond that, many experience a deep lack of economic security. Even people with jobs often lack a sense of job security. For many it is harder and harder to find work that pays a living wage.

And the internet and social media, for all the gifts and wonder that they bring, has a pernicious, dark side, that messes with us all in ways obvious and subtle. We need to learn how to engage those technologies in ways that are fruitful and life giving.

Over everything hangs the threat of global climate change.

The list could go on and it all sounds kind of depressing. But, then, Jesus didn't promise that if we follow him, all was going to be smooth and comfortable. That great cloud of witnesses that has gone on before us, made their pilgrimage through some really hard times. If we are headed into some really hard times of our own, we can be assured that that great cloud of witnesses will continue to cheer us on. And that Jesus, that great pioneer and perfecter of our faith, goes before us to prepare a way and walks alongside us by his Spirit.

As we continue our pilgrimage in the Diocese of Eau Claire we are still making our way out of COVID. Or we are finding our way in the continuing reality of COVID.

Attendance, in many places, is not back to what it was before COVID. And it might not be for a while for lots of reasons. But, giving has continued to be steady in most places. Given all that we have been through, that is a testament to the faithfulness in this diocese. People are finding their way back into engagement, one way or another.

Ministry in the communities of our several congregations continues. God is worshiped, the Gospel is proclaimed, and communities are being served.

As I visit congregations, there is often a positive an energy and a spirit of hopefulness.

The diocese is served by many faithful servants. Of course, there is our Canon of many hats, Aaron Zook. But we are also served well by people like our treasurer, Bob Weathersand our chancellor, Jim Pelish. And many others, lay and ordained who in a variety of ways help to serve and lead this diocese.

This diocese is blessed with some very faithful, committed lay members. We also have some wonderful clergy in this diocese. We have retired clergy who are prepared to travel considerable distances to serve our congregations. We have bi-vocational clergy who serve congregations while also holding down other jobs. We need to find more ways to support them. We have welcomed new priests into the diocese – Mike McElwee at Christ Church, La Crosse and Heather Hill at St. Paul’s Hudson. We have also recently received a new deacon, Bramwell Richards, who will be serving the Northern Highlands Benefice. Benjamin Thomas, who has been serving a the interim dean here at the Cathedral has transferred his membership into the Diocese of Eau Claire.

We are pilgrims, taking our place in the pilgrim church of the ages. We are missionaries needing to find new ways to offer the good news in our time and place. We are continuing to find ways to be faithful in our time.

We have lots of challenges ahead of us as a church and as a diocese. But, challenging as that all is, it also presents us with an opportunity. As they say, in every crisis there is an opportunity.

The good news of Jesus Christ is still good news. People are hungry. They might always be sure just what they are hungry for, or where to have that hunger satisfied, and it is not always obvious to them whether the church is such a place. And, God help us, we have not always been good at offering something that looked all that appetizing.

But people are hungry. People are yearning for belonging. There is an epidemic of loneliness in this country that has only been exacerbated by COVID. People are looking for meaning and purpose. Maybe above all right now, people are hungry for hope.

Friends, we who have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, know that we have something to offer. There is good news in Jesus Christ. There is hope and there is peace that passes understanding. We have good news to share. The Holy Spirit is active in the world and in our lives.

The Anglican tradition, as we have it in the Episcopal church, has particular gifts in the way we express that good news.

We need to take a good look at where things might need to change and where to carry our heritage forward.

As you know, we are in conversation about a proposed reunion with the other two dioceses of Wisconsin. That is not a done deal. Let me just be clear about that; it is not a done deal. We have decided to pursue it and to prayerfully discern. It will only become real if the people of each diocese discern that it is the best way forward.

I will be honest with and say that I think it is the best, most faithful way forward. In fact, I think that the opportunity we have before us is providential.

I think the church in Wisconsin will be stronger if we reunite.

to better engage the changed and changing world

in which we find ourselves.

I do not think that we are currently organized

to face the new realities before us.

We can combine our financial and human resources in a diocese
that is organized for mission, evangelism,
public witness and service
and the forming of disciples ready
to live faithfully in these times.

We can organize ourselves to better support
each of our existing congregations.

And we can encourage, cultivate, nurture and finance,
new communities of worship and discipleship.

Some might look like conventional congregations.

Some which might look quite different.

We can better encourage and train lay leaders.

We can find ways to faithfully and responsibly
use new media to reach people we might not otherwise reach.

We can become more catholic.

Not just in the sense of worship and piety,

But more importantly,

we truly have to include people

regardless of their class, their income,
whether they are rural or urban,
whatever their education level, age, race or ethnicity,
political party, sexuality, etc.;

So we embrace the range of folk living in Wisconsin.

We can become a church where

all are welcome,

all are encouraged,

all are challenged,

and all are transformed by the Holy Spirit.

We can draw on our heritage, going back to Jackson Kemper,

I believe that in reunion, if we do it right,

we can organize ourselves to be a missionary diocese

for the 21st and 22nd centuries.

We can stop only playing defense and start playing offense.

We need to be a missionary diocese in the 21st and 22nd centuries.

We need to be thinking now how to organize ourselves

to be prepared for whatever the future brings.

The world is changing.

And changing significantly.

Change is hard

Whether we choose it or it is thrust upon us.

The world is changing whether we like it or not.

That change is changing the church whether we like it or not.
We do have some control over how we engage the change that is upon us.

Any change involves loss.

It usually involves some cost.

We need to acknowledge that as well.

But, one way or another, change is upon us.

Still, Jesus is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.

We need to adapt.

Not just continue existing,

but be about the good news we know in Jesus Christ.

That is good news the world needs desperately.

We can become a church that confidently lives and bears witness

to the good news,

even as with due humility,

we listen to and learn from our neighbors.

Together, in ways that we cannot do separately,

we can become a missionary diocese,

organized to engage the changes, challenges

and opportunities before us.

Surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses,

we can run with perseverance the race that is set before us,

looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

And, with him,

we can face the times ahead

for the sake of the joy that is set before us.