

United Episcopal Church *of North America*

▪ Missionary Diocese of the South and Ozarks ▪

Episcopal Address – 2022 Convocation **The Rt. Rev. Daniel J. Sparks**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as people of God, we acknowledge that the Bible is the word of God. It is the revelation of God. It conveys the will of God. In our confessional statement, we say that the Bible contains “all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.”

Given the significance we place upon the written word of God, we must ensure we have church members who are biblically literate. Bible reading has fallen off across the country, and we are no better for it. Our Anglican liturgy provides for extensive reading of the Scriptures in services and throughout the year. We do a disservice to ourselves if we forsake the word of God or neglect the readings for the sake of saving a little time for less important things.

Given the significance we place upon the written word of God, we must have pastors who are faithful to preach the word of God. What does it mean to preach? To preach isn't simply to read. To preach the Scriptures is to convey the message of God. Preaching involves relaying the message, conveying the meaning of the message, and exhorting the hearers to apply the message in their lives.

Preaching is not motivational speaking. It is not a stand-up comedy routine. It is not a Vaudeville act or Shakespearean soliloquy. Neither is it a stream of consciousness or a rambling string of anecdotes, jokes, or cultural commentary. Preaching is a holy task set out by God for his ministers.

I want to speak very plainly. In the Continuing Anglican world, we have a history of ordaining some men who are not fit for ministry. Some have questionable reputations and other moral concerns. Some lack any real educational qualifications, being ignorant of basic Christian doctrine. Some are egotistical and self-centered, focusing on their own glory, and seeking titles and honors. Some have hardly any degree of compassion and do not know how to engage in pastoral care. Some have no understanding of the biblical model of preaching or how to craft a biblical sermon.

When I say this, you should know that I am not referring to ministers currently in our diocese. Let me be clear, however: ignorant pastors beget ignorant church members. Lazy pastors beget lazy church members. Foolish and unlearned pastors beget foolish and unlearned church members.

At the time of the Reformation in England, there was widespread clerical ignorance. This necessitated the creation of two *Books of Homilies*. Pastors were required to preach the *Homilies* throughout the Church of England because so many of them were unlearned in the Scriptures and unable to craft their own sermons. We have inherited the two *Books of Homilies* as teaching tools for conveying essential biblical doctrine. In the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, our doctrinal confession, the *Homilies* are recognized as containing “godly and wholesome doctrine” which should be used in churches to help the people understand the Christian faith.

I mention the *Homilies* for two reasons. One, pastors will find them helpful for instructing our church members in the faith. Two, we see them as examples of how to craft biblical sermons. Pastors, I am not suggesting that you attempt to imitate the length of the *Homilies*, but I do recommend that you imitate their reliance upon Scripture and their explication of Scripture.

In the days ahead, I will work diligently to ensure no ignorant or disreputable man is ordained in this diocese. Recently, I have been contacted by men who expressed interest in ordained ministry. One of the first questions I ask is, “Where did you attend service last Sunday?” I’ve found that some of them cannot answer this question, which suggests to me that they don’t meet the minimum requirements for church membership, let alone ordained ministry.

I want you to know that you have a sentry on the wall who will be keeping out of our churches the wolves in sheep’s clothing, the charlatans, and those who have no true interest in humble service in God’s work. This does not mean that men of low stations in life cannot be ordained. It does mean that the qualifications of every minister will be tested and proven. There will be no fly-by-night ordinations in this diocese.

Of great importance in the evaluation of men for ministry is their faithfulness to the doctrines of the church. No man will be ordained by me who teaches anything contrary to the Bible, the Articles of Religion, and the other formularies of this church. Any minister who teaches anything contrary to the doctrine of the church will be challenged and engaged. We need not all agree on every minor matter, but we must agree on the essentials of the faith.

I also call upon all of us to honor our canons. The canons are the rules whereby we apply the doctrines of the faith in the life of the church. The canons address church discipline, which is required by the Scriptures. The canons address the qualifications of ministers, reflecting the teaching of the Scriptures. The canons address the ordering of worship services, upholding the model of worship from the Scriptures.

What does canonical compliance look like? It looks like behavior that reflects fidelity to biblical doctrine, as summarized in the Articles of Religion. It looks like Lay Readers

performing only the duties the canons permit them to do. It looks like congregations submitting their annual reports to the diocese. It looks like vestries ensuring proper management of church affairs. It looks like ministers catechizing their congregations. It looks like worship services that only include the permitted elements.

Later, I will be reviewing some items about our worship, liturgy, and ministers that reflect our doctrinal and canonical positions. I will also be speaking to clergy about how we carry out faithful pastoral ministry. I hope you recognize that my interest in these things is motivated by my zeal for the faith, for the survival of the faith, for the maturity and stability of our churches. I do not have accusations to make against any person or congregation. Instead, I want to remind us of our beliefs and how we put them into practice.

We also need to reevaluate our mission. The leaders of each congregation should ask themselves questions such as these:

- Why does this church exist?
- Why does this church exist in this community?
- What does this church do to bear witness to the gospel in this community?
- What does this church do to strengthen and mature believers in Christ?
- What does this church do to care for the sick and weak among us?
- Is this church prepared to receive visitors?
- Does this congregation practice Christian hospitality?
- Would members of this church recognize if the minister was preaching heresy?
- Does this church, within the means available, properly provide for its pastors?

There are many similar questions we can reflect upon. Are we serious about the Lord's work, or are we simply maintaining a social circle? If we are not centered on proclaiming the gospel, building up believers in the faith, and worshiping God as he requires, we should either have a radical reformation in the church or close it down.

Our six congregations make up little more than 100 people, and about half of those are in one church. There is nothing wrong with being small. The question is whether we are being faithful. Are we being faithful to the Lord? Are we being faithful to biblical doctrine? Are we being faithful in the ministry to which all Christians are called—the Great Commission? Are we being faithful in transmitting the faith to our children and grandchildren?

Perhaps our churches will always be small. Better a small church with faithful Christians than a large one that is faithless. However, we must reflect on what it means to be faithful.

One of my seminary professors shared a saying from his father: "The church is the poor man's social club." Is that reflective of your church? I pray it isn't. Yes, we build social relationships and engage in social activities among our congregations. That is as it should be as we enjoy the close bonds of brotherhood in Christ. However, Sunday morning is a

time for us to worship the Lord in spirit and truth. We come to the church to learn, to practice, to pray.

The church is not a social club, a social welfare organization, or an entertainment society. Each congregation may be involved in some of those things, but those things do not make up our mission. What is the mission of the church?

Jesus told his followers to preach the gospel, to make disciples, to celebrate the sacraments. This is our mission. Everything else must yield. If what we are doing isn't supporting our mission, it needs to stop. If our buildings aren't facilitating faithful preaching, the spiritual growth of believers, and the magnification of the Lord, they need to be abandoned. If our programs and activities aren't conducive to the mission, they need to be set aside. If our community engagement doesn't provide an opportunity to fulfill our mission, we need to halt.

Am I suggesting we throw aside our resources and withdraw from our communities? No. What I am saying is that everything on our church agendas must be weighed against whether it supports the mission.

- Are we going to have vacation Bible school? Only if it supports our mission.
- Are we going to support the local soup kitchen? Only if it supports our mission.
- Are we going to have a church outing? Only if it supports our mission.
- And so on.

Let's engage our creativity toward supporting the mission the Lord has given his church. We cannot afford to be distracted by the world's agenda or by the world's values. We live in a day when most people think the church is here to run social programs, to provide free resources. No, that's not our mission. We exist to worship God, to mature believers, to bring sinners to Christ. If we have an outreach in our community, it must be focused on that mission.

Several years ago, I was asked to consider a call to an Anglican church in a very large metropolitan area. The church was fairly young but it was established and seemed stable, with a good number of families in it. In the congregation were a couple of physicians and other medical providers. The church owned two RVs equipped with medical equipment, with which it conducted free medical clinics around town. Each RV was valued at more than \$1 million. The church was offering a monthly stipend of \$500 for a full-time pastor. It quickly became clear to me that the focus of this congregation was on running social services instead of preaching the gospel.

We don't have millions of dollars in our churches. So, we don't have the problem of figuring out how to spend millions. Thank God for his blessings! What are we doing with the

resources we have? Are we directing them to the Lord's work, or are we making ourselves comfortable?

There is much more I could say, but I hope you've clearly heard this message: We must remain faithful to the mission of the church given by Christ. We must reach out to our communities; we must preach and teach the Scriptures; we must nurture believers. Everything else is secondary.

The Continuing Anglican movement is clinging to life. Some churches are thriving, and we should rejoice that they are. But many of them have died or are dying. If our churches aren't faithful, they need to die. If we are content to gather on Sunday for our pat prayer book service and do nothing else, we will die. If, instead, we dig into the word of God, have some real preaching and some real teaching, and discipline ourselves, we will be pleasing to the Lord.

I am open to your questions, ideas, and feedback. I don't have any magic solutions to make our diocese grow, but I am deeply committed to making our diocese faithful. We may continue to be small but let us ever be faithful.