

The Bishop's Address
178th Annual Convention of the Diocese of Alabama
20 February, AD 2009

Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. It is good to be together once again as the family of God and to give thanks for all the parishes, worshipping communities, shared ministries, and faithful people that we embrace in this vital diocese of the Episcopal Church. This is my 13th annual convention among you and my love for you and gratitude for your faith and ministry has only increased over these good years.

It is a special grace to be hosted by the Church of the Ascension in Montgomery. They have just celebrated a joyous Centennial in 2008 and, after a difficult time of conflict several years ago, they have emerged stronger than ever with a new unity and abundant spirit. Clergy and people of the Ascension, we salute you and thank God for you.

We come together in perilous and uncertain times in our world. I heard some one say last fall that he had only two positions in the market, cash and fetal! Since mid-2008 we have seen unfold, unexpectedly and dramatically, an economic crisis that appears to be the most serious since the 1930's. Sadly, we are tasting the bitter fruit of greed and irresponsibility on the part of leaders in the financial arena, coupled with our national overdependence on debt and a shocking lack of proper oversight of our banks. It has vividly shown us that the seven deadly sins are not a thing of the past. As a society we should be ashamed and contrite. Worshiping the god of money always brings painful disorder to our lives. The crisis is causing mounting unemployment, economic distress, and suffering for many of our neighbors, and may very well signal that we are moving into a new era of frugality and of having less.

Such times should cause us to look deeply at ourselves and remember what really matters. In the presence of the living God the importance of the S & P 500 pales in comparison to the gifts of faith and Christian virtue, which never lose value. We may live in leaner times, but we must not let them affect the abundance of our souls. Nor let them

cause our commitment to God's mission to falter. Fear worships at the altar of a false god, and turns us inward. The true God of abundance would turn us outward, asking how to be generous and compassionate, seeking whom and how we can help. The darkness of our human sin calls us to be ever more a beacon of hope.

In the midst of it all we have experienced stresses on our parish budgets and on our shared diocesan budget. We salute gratefully those parishes that are faithful to our 10 and 15 percent guidelines and if we are to meet our corporate commitments, we must all be as generous as possible in our covenant giving. I appeal to your loyal stewardship this year especially and I hope that there will be increased equity in our giving at the diocesan level. May the generosity of our spirit unequivocally eclipse the leanness of the economy.

Your diocese is strong, nonetheless, and pressing forward in our shared ministry. In this convention we rejoice to have two congregations petitioning for parish status, St. Catherine's Church in Chelsea – our newest church plant – and Trinity Church, Clanton. These are wonderful signs of vitality. The marvelous new Chapel of St. Francis at Camp McDowell will soon be completed and we will dedicate it on a great day of diocesan celebration on Saturday, May 2nd. I hope that all of you will be there. We are moving forward with the other goals of the Acts 2 Campaign, thanks to your generous gifts.

Great things are happening in our youth ministry, in the campus ministries of the diocese, in outreach and service, in healthy renewal ministries, and at camp which had its best attended year in recent history in 2008. The Commission on Ministry is busy raising up new candidates for our third class of deacons. We are grateful for our missionaries, Jeremy and Penny Lucas in Namibia and Laura Conville in Guatemala, who are doing brave work for Christ. Many of you have engaged with our emphasis last convention on environmental stewardship and conservation, and I rejoice to see us Episcopalians being "greener." Bishop Sloan and I are enjoying our ministry together and are very grateful for our partnership in the Gospel. We will hear from several parishes in our diocese in this convention that will tell of their efforts in service to others and remind us wonderfully that WE are the diocese. All of us.

As most of you know I had a three month sabbatical last year following the Lambeth Conference. It was restful and restorative in mind, body, and spirit for Becky and me. I did not realize how badly I needed some sabbath time, and Becky deserved a

break after doing yeoman's work as the convener for the national bishops' spouses for the past three years. It was good for us both and we are grateful for this important opportunity afforded the clergy of our diocese every five years.

Our convention theme focuses on "the Gathering Christ" who longs to reconcile all things and gather us into one. The phrase comes from a retreat address by the Archbishop of Canterbury at last summer's Lambeth Conference. Speaking specifically of the ministry of bishops and more broadly of the whole church, he said,

Each believer is called to be a place where God's Son is revealed. In bishops, what is distinctive is that aspect of God's Son that is revealed in the *gathering* Christ – the Christ upon whom all reality converges, comes together . . . We seek for God's Son to be revealed as the hope of humanity: that is, for God's Son to be revealed as the body of all God's children, past, present and future, called into a particular kind of fellowship . . . That is the mission of the church, to draw together the scattered children into one family.

Eloquently expressed, that is our mission – to be a community of reconciling love where all people can learn and live their true communion in God. The church is called in worship and mission to embody the gathering Christ who works to draw the scattered children into one family. "God was in Christ," Paul writes, "reconciling the world to himself, and giving us the ministry of reconciliation." This is our birthright. It is what we are for.

But it isn't easy is it? We human beings are difficult to reconcile and bring together. The centrifugal forces of sin and self-centeredness pull us apart - Israeli from Palestinian, Sunni from Shiite, liberal from conservative, even in some places today sadly, Anglican from Anglican. The politics of polarization have played havoc of late in our society. An insidious individualism that makes us think that 'I can always have it my way' is eroding our sense of community. Sin would always separate us. Grace will always bring us together.

Do you remember the poignant moment in the gospels when Jesus wept over Jerusalem? He lamented, “How often have I desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not.” Here we see the fullness of the divine *pathos*, God’s suffering love as he weeps over fractured and fissiparous humanity. The beautiful feminine image of the hen and her chicks tells us what God’s love is like

We resist that love in our human self-centeredness and will to power. We fly apart like sparks from a fire. But the gathering Christ never gives up. He “stretched out his loving arms on the hard wood of the cross that all might come within the reach of his saving embrace.” The cross is where all the world is reconciled. There God suffered with and for us, accomplishing once and for all the victory of love over the separation and death of sin. The cost of peace is always a cross. Reconciliation does not mean that we all become the same, but that our human alienation is overcome by the love of God. Christ means for there to be “one flock, one shepherd,” embracing all the diversity of humanity in the Spirit’s communion and fellowship. God will not stop the march of eternity until we all get there together, gathered around one Table, sharing one Bread.

I felt this very keenly at the Lambeth Conference last summer. There we were some 650 bishops and many spouses, from practically every language, continent, race, and nation, with a vast diversity of views and practices, standing at the ancient altar of Canterbury Cathedral sharing one Bread. It was a transforming experience. In the power of God from beyond ourselves our many differences were a beautiful quilt of grace. Our communion was a taste of that which God means for all his scattered children. Lambeth’s use of the *indaba* method of conversation, where all could honestly voice their opinions and listen deeply to each other without the tyranny of righteous resolutions, helped bring us to more profound understanding of one another. There was a welcome graciousness among us, which is a very precious gift of the Anglican spirit.

Painfully some bishops were not there, because of the regrettable differences we are struggling with at present, and that made us very aware of how far we have yet to go on the journey. Nevertheless, the Spirit of unity embracing great diversity was palpable and strong at Lambeth and we came away, most of us, with a firm resolve to hold together as a communion, forbearing with one another in love for the sake of the Gospel.

This is an inestimably important aspect of our Anglican heritage that we need to reclaim today. We have been given the gift of holding together things and people that tend to pull apart. As Episcopalians we know deep in our souls that we individually do not have all of the truth. We need one another across our great human diversity to comprehend the love of God and to do God's work. As Paul wrote to the divided Corinthians, "the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you." In the church as in the human body all parts are needed and essential. Ours is not a unity based on doctrinal confessions beyond that of the catholic creeds and the Prayer Book. It is one of unity in Christ alone, in worship and prayer, and in the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit. We are the church of the reconciliation. This does not mean anything goes. But it does mean everyone belongs. All around one Table.

In our mission to bring diverse believers together there will always be tensions among us. As Bishop John Coburn once said, "we should not apologize for tensions within our church; we should not be frightened of them; and we certainly should not pretend they are not there . . . as you and those who disagree with you remain loyal and discuss, debate, and argue, in the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace, then we may glory in the goodly heritage God has given us." He is quite right. Loyalty and honest dialogue are crucial. "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea," as our great hymn says. We must cherish, protect, and promote this heritage in our time, come what may and cost what it will.

The reconciling work of the gathering Christ is what we are about in our parishes and ministries day by day. It is what Sawyerville and our mission trips and special camp and our many outreach ministries are all about. It is what every Holy Eucharist celebrates and embodies as we stand together at the Table. It is about building bridges rather than settling for old divisions.

The work of reconciliation is the purpose of our Race Relations Committee and especially its stories project, called "Past Imperfect and Present Hope: Liberating Our Racial History," which invites us to look at our church's involvement in the tragedy of slavery and its long aftermath of prejudice and division in American society. The formula still holds true: truth + forgiveness = reconciliation. There is some difficult truth to be told, as some of us will see in the stunning film "Traces of the Trade: From the Deep

North” at our workshop later today. But when difficult truth is shared in a spirit of contrition and forgiveness this leads to reconciliation and new freedom. I urge us to participate in the stories project and our on-going efforts in anti-racism training, and I look forward at the right time to a diocesan service calling us to this aspect of the ministry of reconciliation.

Things like this are the message we need to present more vigorously to the world around us in our time. It is my hope that our new communications effort made possible by Acts 2 will help us do so. I am pleased to announce that Deacon Dave Drachlis will join us as our director of communications on 1 March to help lead us forward in getting our message out both among ourselves and to the larger community. We are also changing the format of our diocesan paper this year, reducing it to six issues that will be in more depth and better readability and using our website and email more effectively. Excellent communications are essential today. We must not let ourselves be defined by the secular media. We need to find ways to help the media represent more truly our unique identity and mission as Episcopalians. So that we may better be a light set on a hill, not hidden under a bushel.

Our ministry with our companion diocese of Haiti is all about the work of the Gathering Christ who is the Light of the world. Our mission trips and your parish efforts to raise money and support for the schools, nutrition programs, medical missions, and water projects with Pere Valdema and Carmen are making a real difference in the Croix des Bouquets area of Haiti. There is no place of greater need in the Western hemisphere and we are part of a courageous church there engaged in the repair of a land torn by the sin of slavery and economic exploitation. In serving with them we ourselves are being transformed. I recently heard a Haitian priest, whose mission at Cange with Dr. Paul Farmer serves over a million people a year say, “the future belongs to those who have the greatest capacity for love and generosity.” Amen. May we be among them.

The new work of the Alabama Faith Council, pioneered by our diocese, is bringing together people of faith across our state and across denominational, racial, and religious lines to build understanding and speak together about some of the moral issues facing the people of our state. Wonderful, reconciling things are being done through this ecumenical and interfaith organization, the first of its kind in the history of Alabama, and

I commend it to your support and involvement. One of its current goals is to strive to eliminate the state grocery tax in our state. We are one of only two states in the Union which still has a tax on all groceries, and its elimination will greatly help the poor and low income persons among us.

Finally, the reconciling work of Christ extends to the earth and its living creatures as well. As we stressed at our last convention, in our time Christians must be leaders in the care and conservation of the earth. If we love God we must love the creation he has made. "It's not easy being green," as Kermit the Frog said, but it is an essential part of our mission. Let us take this to heart across our diocese, observing our Stewardship of Creation Sunday, April 26th, doing energy audits of our church facilities and making sacrifices to reduce our carbon footprints, and challenging our members to adopt more environmentally-responsible lifestyles. Let the Episcopal Church be known as a visionary leader in addressing the crisis of climate change and in stewarding the earth as God's beloved creation.

I have heard it said that there are three kinds of people: those who watch things happen, those who make things happen, and those who wonder what happened! Which are you and your parish? In a rapidly changing world such as ours it is easy to be among those who long for the good old days and wonder what happened. God calls us to be people who look forward and make things happen. The risen Christ means for us to be living instruments of reconciling love, in worship, in mission, in community, always struggling to gather God's people all around one Table.

To do so we must be humble, generous, and morally courageous. And always we must realize that we cannot do it on our own. It is God's work. We are earthen vessels who must trust absolutely in the power of God that comes from beyond ourselves. In that sure and certain power of the Spirit we must pray the prayer of Christ, learn the mind of Christ, and do the deeds of Christ, with all our heart every day. So that, through us, our gracious Lord may continue to "draw together the scattered children into one family."

Norman MacLean concludes his magnificent story *A River Runs through It* remembering the people he has loved and their stories of beauty and sadness and hope, and he writes:

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.

In all we do in our diocese, may our words and our stories be part of that great river of grace wherein eventually all things merge into one.

God bless you.

The Rt. Rev. Henry N. Parsley Jr.
Bishop of Alabama