

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

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

I want you all to know that I know that I'm a lucky man. I am blessed, and I'm grateful.

I am blessed to be married to Miss Tina, the best friend I ever had; we're blessed to have two wonderful children, McKee and Mary Nell. And that alone would have been enough.

I was blessed as a child to be part of a family that went to church and Sunday School every Sunday, blessed to be part of our parish EYC, blessed as a teenager to go to Episcopal church camp, blessed at the ripe old age of fifteen to be invited to serve as a counselor at a special session for people with disabilities, and blessed to have learned there that all people are the children of God, and worthy of dignity and respect. I was blessed somehow to have come out of all that with a sense that I should be a priest. Imagine that.

Since then, I have been blessed with a long line of people in five parishes, one college chaplaincy and two dioceses who have loved me, and been patient with me, and forgiven me, who have done all they could to teach me how to be a better person and a better servant to God and God's people.

I was blessed, and surprised, to be elected your Bishop Suffragan, and now I am blessed with all of you, and now you have the opportunity to be patient with me, to forgive me, and to continue my education in this new role.

I am blessed to be working with my friend Henry Parsley, who's had plenty of that opportunity already, and who has already been very patient and several times forgiving, and taught me a great deal about being a Bishop, about our faith, and about the Church we love. I could not have asked for a better mentor, example and guide. We don't know how lucky we are.

I am blessed to work with your Diocesan Staff, especially Miss Denise Servant, who is my assistant and caretaker. All of them are not only competent and efficient, which you would pretty much expect, but they are also outwardly pleasant, which is a bonus, and they make it a fun place to work, which for me is essential.

One of the recurring questions I'm asked, especially at gatherings like this, but even when I go out into your parishes, people who have known me for a while and know who I am ask me if I'm having fun. I think it's a wonderful question to ask a Bishop; it's a good question for us to ask each other, as we go about the work of our Lord: Are you having fun? If what I was taught in Sunday School is true, and it's not only the right but also the duty of a Christian to be joyful, then we ought to be having fun, or we're doing something wrong. When people ask me if I'm having fun I tell them the fun parts are more fun than I thought they would be. But not everything is fun – there are budget meetings – and I've

been part of some difficult moments and conversations, but that's part of everybody's life. Yes, I'm having fun, for the most part. And I hope you are, too.

We are blessed, you and I; we have so much to be grateful for.

Now I'm already on page three of my address, and I haven't quoted anybody yet – surely I ought to quote somebody; it's to be expected; it's what Bishops do at these things. I need to get on the stick here.

The late George Carlin, one of the most influential comedians in American history, added to his fame and fortune by telling us about the Seven Dirty Words You Can't Say On TV. They are ... not appropriate for a Diocesan Convention, either. Actually we probably don't need to say any of these words at any time.

(And you will be relieved to hear that I'm still looking for a quote.)

But following his model, let me say that I think there are Three Words Which Are Not Comfortably Said in the Episcopal Church. I will be so bold as to say them out loud here today, whether we are comfortable with them or not.

The first Uncomfortable Word in the Episcopal Church is **Evangelism**. Some of us have left other parts of our Lord's One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church because they talked about Evangelism too much, or because they were too aggressive with it, or because they actually thought we would do something about it. When somebody tells us that we need to be more evangelical, we have images of handing out pamphlets in front of the WalMart, or asking people if they've been saved, or getting a bad haircut and a floppy-back Bible and preaching on TV.

We are good Christians committed to the work of God's Church, and we know that the essence of Evangelism is at the heart of our mission together: to share the Good News of the love of God in Jesus Christ. But too often we are frozen by the prospect of being pushy or intrusive, and then we overcome that when it comes to Evangelism, "we have not done those things which we ought to have done." (Hey, there's a quote.)

Interestingly, one of the things that Episcopalians do naturally and gracefully is hospitality. For most Episcopal parishes and gatherings, receptions, potluck dinners, supper clubs and all manner of soirees and galas involving wine and cheese and little things to pick up and nibble on are important parts of the fabric of our life together. Perhaps it will help the evangelically-impaired among us to re-imagine Evangelism as Hospitality.

The loving and patient people of St. Thomas in Huntsville Alabama worked with me on this for a while, and now I have the opportunity to tell you that we figured out that we're probably never going to do much about Evangelism as long as we continue to allow the word itself to paralyze us with visions of tackiness, weigh us down with unfulfilled 'shoulds' and 'oughts,' and leave us all feeling vaguely guilty.

But if we can reconsider that what we ought to be doing is inviting our Lord's guests to come to His table, a foretaste of the Heavenly Banquet, then maybe we can follow our well-developed instincts of hospitality. It shouldn't be difficult for us to put the Guest List together: all of God's children, especially those in our neighborhoods. We can invite our Lord's guests, and prepare an event that will encourage them to accept our hospitality: a

social event, a worship event, an event involving education or entertainment or raising money to reach out and help those less fortunate than we. Remember: we're not trying to trick people into joining our parishes, although of course we hope some of them will find a church home with us, and we're not trying to get them to write us a check, although of course our clergy have been carefully trained to never turn a check away, except under extremely dubious circumstances. We're trying to invite our friends and neighbors to come to our house, to our Lord's house, and share with them some of why we love it so much.

The First Uncomfortable Word of the Episcopal Church is Evangelism, and the second is like unto it: **Stewardship**. It's like unto Evangelism in that it is burdened with a sense of dread and an idea that we ought to be doing more than we are going to be willing to do. But Stewardship is different in that it has a season in the church year, Stewardship Time, and there are some people among us who understand that it's a critically important part of our response to generosity of God, and absolutely essential to our life together as an institution dedicated to the mission of the Gospel.

Actually we, the Diocese of Alabama are among the leaders in the Episcopal Church when it comes to Stewardship, so we're better off than most. And yet, and still ...

I've already confessed that I'm not real keen on budget meetings. I don't enjoy them, but they are a part of our life together, and part of my job. I've been sitting in on budget meetings in parishes and dioceses for a long time. What makes most of them so unpleasant is that they all seem to follow the same pattern, with largely the same result.

First we make an educated guess about how much money is going to be available for us to spend. It has to be an educated guess because no matter what, some people have not turned their pledges in when we have the meeting, no matter how many times we've invited and prompted and encouraged them to do so before the deadline, or how lovingly we have threatened them after the deadline is passed; or some parishes haven't sent in their covenant form, no matter how affectionately we have encouraged, invited, reminded and threatened them. After we agree on a number that represents our guess about how much money is available, we label that The Income, and then we begin to talk about how we'll spend it, that's The Expense. First we consider the Non-Discretionary Spending: what we'll give to the Diocese, what we'll give to the General Convention, utilities, insurance, "hard costs." Then we're ready to talk about Compensation. This usually makes at least one person at the table uncomfortable because her or his paycheck depends on this moment.

And then, almost without fail, we begin to be concerned that the amount of money we guess we have available to spend, after we subtract the Non-Discretionary Spending and the Compensation, is not going to be enough for all the things we say we would like to do. At that point, we can either go back reconsider Compensation, or we can increase the Income, or we can reduce the other part of the Expense: the programs and ministries. What makes budget meetings so difficult and painful is that almost inevitably we choose to reduce programs and ministries that we love and value, things that are important to us, and

the work we have been given to do, cutting a little here, trimming a little there, sometimes not funding this or that at all.

Just once before I retire or die, I'd like to go to a budget meeting and realize that we have more money to spend than we need. Just once I'd like to Increase the Income. Every budget meeting that I've ever been to seems to just barely miss it a little bit on the side of Not Quite Enough. If we're just going to barely miss it, could we miss it by A Little Too Much? Or, since it's my fantasy: A Lot Too Much? Can you picture what it would be like in your Vestry meeting, in your parish budget meeting, if you come around the table and realize that after all the bills are paid and everything you thought you want to do is fully funded, and then you have the happy problem of figuring out what you can do with ten thousand extra dollars? What could we do with a little extra money? What if it was \$50,000, or \$100,000? What if we all gave enough of the treasure that you and I have been entrusted with as God's stewards to the work of the Church, so that some budget committee somewhere had the magnificent challenge of imagining the incredible things we could do in God's service for God's people, if we had too much money?

Surely it must be more faithful on our part to Increase the Income instead of automatically Reducing the Expenses. A budget meeting like that, even I would enjoy.

The third Uncomfortable Word in the Episcopal Church is not really like those first two, it's not really a church word at all. I'm talking about **Change**. We choose to Evangelize or not, and how we want to Evangelize. We choose to do Stewardship or not, and what approach, what idea we will use to do that. But Change is beyond our control, something that many of would never willingly choose in any form.

Yesterday Bishop Parsley said that there are three kinds of people: those who work to make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened. I don't know this for sure but I bet you a nickel that you know somebody that worked pretty hard to make sure that nothing at all happened. I believe I have been one of those people from time to time.

Change is inevitable, constant, and uncompromising. It's a simple fact of life for the world. Our choice as a Church is whether or not we will remain part of the ever-changing world our Lord came to redeem.

In 1988, I was the rector of All Saints' Episcopal Church in Grenada, Mississippi. Miss Ethel George turned one hundred years old while I was there, and I went to talk to her about the plans the parish had to celebrate her birth and her life. She lived in a big old house on Main Street, where she had grown up and lived her whole life. I sat and listened to her tell stories about how the world had changed while she watched, about one hundred years on Main Street.

She remembered some men at church when she was a kid, who had fought in the Civil War. She remembered the first electric light bulb in Grenada, at the Town Hall; the first telephone, at a friend's house; and the first television, at a store downtown. She told me the story of how she heard a report that two young men in North Carolina had invented a flying machine. Her father thought that indoor plumbing was an unnecessary extravagance, and was she angry at him for years that he wouldn't let her ride in one of

those newfangled automobiles. He said they were dangerous and foul-smelling, an expensive passing fad. He might be forgiven for that, as he had made his living selling and trading horses and mules.

Before Mr. Ford began selling his Model T's in bulk, Miss Ethel's father had been doing very well, well enough to have a big house on Main Street, well enough to join the Episcopal Church. He watched as automobiles replaced buggies, tractors took the place of mules, and gas stations and garages were built on corners where stables and blacksmiths had been. And he continued to sell horses and mules. Proud, stubborn and short-sighted, he died with very little money.

Miss Ethel didn't get out much by the time I got there. Some of it had to do with her knees and hips, I think, although she very rarely missed worship on Sunday morning, played bridge every Wednesday afternoon, and got her hair done every Thursday. I think the world had just changed so much that she hardly recognized it any more.

Now the world is changing more quickly than ever it did in her lifetime. The world continues to spin whether we approve or agree or like it or not; society evolves, technology develops, and history is updated.

But the mission of the Church, the great gift we have to share with all people everywhere, remains the same: to show and tell the love of God in Jesus Christ. It's not enough for us to be content to be left behind. It's not enough for us to look for new ways to sell mules. For us the question must be, "How can we continue to offer the Gospel to the world today in an engaging and inviting way?"

We love and revere our traditions and customs, as well we should. But we can also be bound by them, trapped by them, if 'The Way We've Always Done It' becomes our truest creed. And just between you and me, we haven't always done it that way. We've always been changing. We have to remember, in a changing world, that our mission comes first. If we are to offer God's love and redeeming grace to people who desperately need it, we may have to re-consider and re-imagine how we are going about it.

Now I'm almost ready to close, but first, I actually do have a couple of quotes:

In his inaugural address in 1994, Nelson Mandela said:

"Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our greatest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God."

There is no limit to what people of good will can do, given strength, courage and imagination by the power of the Holy Spirit of God. There is no limit to what people of good will can do, by the power of the Spirit. How dare we claim that we can't do something that we think we ought to be doing in God's service. We are the children of God. We are a community of believers who have received the love of God, witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Who are we to say we can't invite our friends and

neighbors to God's altar to share God's grace and love? It's absurd to pretend we can't put enough money together in our various budgets to do the work we believe we are called to do. It's silly to think that we are unable to adapt to the changing world because it conflicts with "The Way It's Always Been Done."

Who are we to say what is possible, or beyond the reach of the children of God? There is no limit to what God can do through us, if we open our minds, follow our hearts, use our imagination, trust our faith and walk with Jesus.

The other quote comes from St. James Buffett, American singer and songwriter, novelist and, I would suggest, philosopher. The name of the song is Breathe In, Breathe Out, Move On, written by Jimmy Buffett after Hurricane Katrina took the heart out of New Orleans.

I bought a cheap watch from the crazy man
Floating down Canal.
It doesn't use numbers or moving hands,
It always just says "Now."

Now you may be thinking that I was had.
But this watch is never wrong.
And if I had trouble the warranty said:
Breathe in, breathe out, move on

And it rained
It was nothing really new
And it blew
Seen all that before
And it poured
The earth began to strain
Pontchartrain leaking through the door,
tides at war

According to my watch, the time is now
The past is dead and gone
Don't try to shake it, just nod your head;
Breathe in, breathe out, move on

Don't try to explain it, just bow your head;
Breathe in, breathe out, move on....

We are blessed, you and I, and we are grateful. Whether we were born into this part of our Lord's Church or whether we found it later, it has touched us, nurtured our faith, comforted us when we've been scared or lonely or discouraged, infuriated us from time to

time, invited us to come more and more deeply into the faith that has been passed down from generation to generation for two millennia.

We are blessed, and part of our being grateful is to take our place in the long parade of saints who carry the Church. Now it's our turn, to pass along the faith we have received to our friends and neighbors, to our children and to their children. Now it's our privilege to share the Good News. Now it's our responsibility, to make sure that the next generation comes up going to Sunday School and church, in healthy parishes with well-prepared leaders and well-kept facilities, that we have youth groups and an Episcopal summer camp, college ministries and other programs to teach them about the love of God for all of God's children. Now it's our turn, now it's us.

“Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our greatest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.”

“According to my watch, the time is now. Don't try to explain it, just bow your head. Breathe in, breathe out, move on.”

We are the children of God, witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now it's our turn, now it's us. Now.

Thanks be to God.