Almighty and everliving God, source of all wisdom and understanding, be present with us as we take counsel in the 183rd Convention of the Diocese of Alabama for the renewal and mission of your Church. Teach us in all things to seek first your honor and glory. Guide us to perceive what is right, and grant us both the courage to pursue it and the grace to accomplish it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP 818)

(Y’all might want to get comfortable; this is the longest address I’ve ever given. The word count on my computer says it’s perilously close to five thousand words. Well, I use some of them more than once, but still, that’s a lot of words, and a lot of listening, and I thank you in advance for your patience.)

Every year when I write this, I am reminded of how very much we have to be grateful for in the Diocese of Alabama. The best part of our convention will not be this bishop’s address, it never is – as it is every year, the best part is us coming together as the family of God, and all those reports that people hear and see about what we are doing and what we will do by God’s grace. From Camp McDowell to Episcopal Relief and Development to Sawyerville Day Camp to the surprisingly un-boring report from the Diocesan Council, and many more, we continue to tell the story of the love of God through Jesus Christ.

There are far too many people to thank for the work of our church in this past year, and as sure as I start naming names I’m going to forget somebody we’ll all wish I had remembered. But still, I can never thank my brother Santosh and our diocesan staff enough for all the work they do and the loving, patient and joyful way they do it. I thank God for all of them, for all of their work and support. I also thank Miss Tina and our children, for their love and patience and for helping to keep me real. One of our children is here as a delegate this year, but I’m not naming names because I’m not sure she’s ever forgiven us for singing her Happy Birthday when she turned sixteen.

I want to thank Norma McKittrick, the editor of the Apostle and the Alabama Episcopalian, who is leaving that position after seventeen years of faithful service. And again, I want to thank Denise Servant for putting up with all of us for thirty years: seven bishops, hundreds of priests, thousands and thousands of greetings, cheerfully given on the phone and at the door, and all with a genuine smile that shows us the love of God – just incredible.

There are way too many things that I need to bring to your attention, dates for your calendars, events for your consideration, and I won’t remember all of them, either. But I do want to promote the Invite-Welcome-Connect Workshops coming up – you have this stand-up tent brochure on your tables with all the details. It’s an exciting way for us to welcome and incorporate visitors and newcomers.

I want to call your attention to the upcoming ONE Conference; they also have a brochure on your table with all the details. This is a cooperative venture between the Department of Christian Education, the Parish Leadership Training Event and the Commission on Spirituality to offer a weekend for people to come together and learn about Christian education for adults. There will be speakers and activities for young and old – a Grand Time Will Be Had By All.
I want to welcome, and I hope you’ve seen, the Rev. Barry Vaughn, who served several congregations in our diocese before moving way out west to Las Vegas, Nevada. We’re glad Barry is here, and that he brought with him copies of his history of the diocese.

We are stewards, you and I, of a wonderful part of God’s holy Church, and it’s appropriate to count ourselves blessed. Still, there are things we need to do better, there always are. I recently heard somebody say that Stewardship is always about more than money, but it’s never about less than money. If it is God’s work we are about, we can’t afford to be bashful about giving our people the opportunity to give. And we can’t afford to be bashful about expecting the parishes to support the diocese. We have to do our best if we hope to be good stewards of God’s Church.

We are at a point in our Church where we are holding fast to that which is good – and we have so much to hold on to – and at the same time we’re striving to sing to the Lord a new song. This is the challenge for the Episcopal Church in the decade to come. How can we be who we are, and be more than we are?

The Commission on Ministry has reinvented the discernment process for people who feel a call to ordained ministry, so that it’s richer and fuller, and they are working on a new process that will train people locally to become nonstipendiary or bivocational priests. I’m grateful to the Rev. Russell Kendrick, the chair of the Commission on Ministry, and to the good people on that commission who have committed their energy and enthusiasm to these projects.

We are starting a new ministry in Birmingham, aimed at offering a fresh expression of our faith. It’s called The Abbey – there’s a booth out there, we’ll see a video shortly. It’s a place for people to gather, a coffee shop, a bookstore, a place for faith, for exploration, conversation and community. We have received a grant from the Episcopal Church, a First Mark of Mission grant, and I think it’s very exciting that we’re doing this, a new way to offer the grace of God through Jesus Christ to the 21st century. We’ll hear much more about The Abbey as it continues to develop, but for now I want to thank the Rev. Katie Nakamura Rengers for her vision and energy and leadership, the Rev. Rich Webster and St. Luke’s for their generosity with her time, making it possible for her to do a lot of leg-work, and Worth Stewart for his good help and support. More to come – stay tuned.

We’ve also received a grant to help start a program called Be the Change Alabama, a cooperation with the School of Theology at Sewanee and the Leadership Development Institute to empower and train parishes and seminarians to find systemic changes in local communities to address the needs of the economically disadvantaged, not just treating the symptoms but addressing the causes. More to come on this as well.

As we get closer to our Diocesan Convention every year people start asking me if there’s going to be any excitement – meaning, do we have anything to fight about? I remember asking bishops the same question when I sat out there with y’all, not that I wanted to be a part of any hullabaloo, but because all those disagreements and all that sparring was just more entertaining than statistics, more interesting than pieces of paper filled with numbers in columns, as much as we love those.

Now I’m standing up here, and it seems clear to me that we ought to be able to find better ways to entertain ourselves when we come together, a way that doesn’t have winners and losers, a more loving way. So this year, in an effort to Sing to the Lord a New Song, we are greatly reducing the number of resolutions. This might be a dumb idea – it won’t be the first dumb idea I’ve ever had, and I hope it won’t be the last dumb idea I have. This year we will gather in groups to worship this afternoon and to
have conversations, conversations in which our best efforts will be to listen to each other, to really try to hear one another, without spending a lot of time and effort trying to win the conversation or figure out how to amend an amendment to the substitute resolution. I’m not sure this is going to work, and we may never do it again. But I am very sure that fighting as a form of entertainment is not the best expression of the love and faith that makes us God’s holy Church.

(Let the minutes reflect that I got an unsolicited ‘Amen.’)

As Santosh said last night, we’re in the second year of a three-year progression of themes for our diocesan conventions: Invite, Inspire, Transform. Last year, as a way for me to engage your imagination as we talked about inviting and being invited, I told you the story of the first time I went to summer camp, in 1971. I flatter myself to think you might remember something I said, but just in case you weren’t here – I was fifteen years old, a friend talked me into signing up to be a volunteer counselor at the Episcopal Church Camp in Mississippi, my Dad dropped me off hours before the session began, and one of the cool kids invited me to play cards. (That’s sort of the Readers’ Digest version of the story, I don’t want to punish the people who actually did pay attention.) That game of cards included me, and changed my life.

Now I want to use your imagination again, and tell you a story about being inspired. For me this is the story, of my being inspired. After that inclusive, life-changing game of cards, the camp session I’d volunteered for went off just as they planned it: the training session got us all set; the campers came and had a great time, and so did I. For the first time in my fifteen-year-old life, I felt like I was part of something other than my family, part of a loving community. It wasn’t theological, or especially deep – I just felt for the first time in my life that I wasn’t a misfit. What a gift it is to be accepted; what a gift it is to have a place to belong.

Toward the end of that session, the older counselors started talking about another session coming up, a session for people with mental and physical disabilities. They needed more counselors, they said, especially guys, they said. As they talked about the session, and the campers who would be coming, they told stories. If they told stories about how sweet and loving and wise and wonderful these campers were, I don’t remember them now. The stories I remember were about the people who were scary and difficult and nasty. They told a story about a man in a wheelchair who had one arm that was withered up, but his other arm was as big as your leg, and if you got too close he’d reach out and grab you! They told another story about another camper, whose name was Marion, who was standing next to someone who’d caught a fish in the lake, and in the excitement of the moment, he took the fish and bit it – on the dorsal fin, on the back, so that his tail was doing this – bit it so hard it broke the skin of the fish. They had to remove the fish scales from the guy’s mouth!

And now they were looking for more guys to be counselors, they said, looking at me and asking what I was doing in a couple of weeks. Yeah, right – sign me up for that!

But then one of the college students who worked there all summer long, one of the lifeguards – I still remember her blue bathing suit – and behold, she was fair to look upon. She invited me to come and be a counselor at the Special Session, and I was powerless before her. I was surprised to hear myself agreeing to come back in a couple of weeks.

That first Special Session I was scared to death. By the time the session director, whose name was Ralph, had gone through all the training and planning, we’d talked about Down’s Syndrome, epilepsy, cerebral palsy, spinal bifida, various other challenges and limitations. The word among the
experienced counselors was that if a counselor got two or three campers, those campers would be relatively high functioning and not much trouble. But if a counselor got only one camper, that camper needed some experienced care and attention. It was my first time; I was actually a little too young to be there – the old hands guaranteed that I would be given easy campers.

The night before the campers arrived, the director handed out our assignments. It had been clouding up all afternoon, by the time we came together after supper, the wind was blowing hard. It rained, there was lightning and thunder, the lights went out, adding to the drama of the moment. Ralph the director met us in the rec hall, a big screened-in porch kind of building, holding a candle from the chapel. The wind gusted through the screens, threatening to put out the candle and leave us all in the gloom. Ralph called out each counselor’s name, and called out the campers that person was assigned, and gave the counselor the applications. By the time he worked his way down the alphabet to Sloan, it seemed like he’d been up there doing this for about a week. There was lightning, there was thunder; it could not have been any more frightening.

Finally he called my name, and read out the name of the camper that I had been given, a young man named Neal. One camper. My imagination remembers a clap of thunder right at that moment. I might have embroidered that memory a little. He handed me the application form.

Neal has Cerebral Palsy, and uses a wheelchair. The application showed he was seventeen years old, difficult to understand, needed help eating, needed help in the bathroom. If you want to see a fifteen year old boy tighten up, just pucker up, tell him he’s going to be spending a week with someone who needs help in the bathroom. One of the other guys told me I’d have to pick him up and put him on the bed, or in the chair. I was frantically trying to figure out what “help in the bathroom” might mean. More than anything else, I just wanted to go home.

One of the experienced guys saw my distress and asked me who I got. I couldn’t look at him; I was afraid I was going to cry. I whispered, “I got a guy in a wheelchair.” He looked at my application, he said, “Naw, man, you got a lot more than that. Neal’s been here several times. He’s a great camper; he’s as smart as you or I. He’ll take good care of you.”

He convinced me to stay, and he was right: Neal took good care of me. He taught me how to drive a wheelchair, and after a couple of days I could tell what he was saying when most other people could not. All the girls on staff loved Neal and gave us much more time than they would have ever given me. They would come over and flirt with Neal, and I would just sort of lean into it.

After a while I relaxed, and joined the wonderful and unique community that was being formed around me. There were about sixty campers, maybe thirty counselors, and around fifteen adults: nurses, priests, other old people – each of us with our own set of disabilities. The guy with an arm as big as your leg was not there, but Marion was – the guy that bit the fish. He was very energetic, but he was actually a pretty good guy. It was an odd gumbo of the human condition, with a wide variety of different zesty spices, but after we simmered in the July heat for four or five days, we melted and blended together into a strong, delicious dish. Neal taught me how to look past disabilities to find abilities; he taught me about dignity and respect. And I learned that there are no disposable people.

On the last full afternoon of the session, it was storming again, and we were all in the Rec Hall. I was sitting with Neal, watching everybody else as they tried to play dodgeball in a crowd, or did the rain dance, or did the Hokey Pokey, as if that’s what it’s all about, or just enjoyed hanging out. Somewhere in there Neal needed something, ice or a paper towel or something, and I stood up to get
it. I saw the whole camp together – just as I’m seeing you now – and it occurred to me that it wasn’t worth the effort to sort everybody out into all those categories we use to understand each other. In that moment, everybody there looked and smelt and sounded just the same. It didn’t matter who drooled, who went to college, who had seizures, who played high school football, who had trouble talking, who was a cheerleader; it didn’t matter who was a camper or who was on staff, who was old and who was young, who was white and who was black – it stopped being them and them and them, and became for me us, all of us celebrating the love of God in this remarkable community. Right then and there I thought “This is the Kingdom of God.”

Well, that’s pretty heady stuff for a fifteen year old kid. Now, more than forty years later, if you could line up all the days of my life and point to the one that has the most to do with shaping and forming me, it would be that day, when I first saw the Kingdom of God, surrounded by ‘all sorts and conditions of men’ and women, in the most wonderful, diverse, unique, peculiar, frustrating and loving community I’d ever been a part of.

I came back the next summer, and the next, all through high school and college. When I came back from seminary I was invited to be on adult staff. When Ralph the director left the diocese, he asked me to direct the session, which I did for eleven years. I met Miss Tina at Special Session in 1986, and my life changed again. It was the last thing we did before she and I moved to Alabama in 1993. There are hundreds of Special Session stories; when the people of St. Thomas in Huntsville had heard enough, they were ready to help me start a Special Session at Camp McDowell. Now we’ve done fifteen sessions there, each one bigger and better than the one before. It’s been a great privilege to pass along the gift I was given when I was fifteen to my children, and to yours. Every session before the campers come, we tell the staff to look for that moment when all the labels and categories and diagnoses don’t matter anymore, when we can see that we’re all sisters and brothers. We call it Gumbo: when we’re all cooked and simmered together so well you can’t pick out the okra or the oysters, it’s the Kingdom of God.

I have been inspired since then, but this precious moment has been the principal inspiration for most of my life, this recognition of the family of God that has so much to do with making me who and how I am. It pushed me to seminary, and pulled me through, and stayed with me through happy times and sad, finally leading me to St. Thomas in Huntsville and guiding me through my time there. And now, for better and for worse, and I pray by God’s grace, I am the Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Alabama. (It’s still real weird to say that out loud.) And I’m still looking for the Kingdom of God, still hoping to bring others along to see it with me. I hope you’ve had such a moment. I hope you have seen and felt God’s Kingdom.

A couple of years ago a high school kid who was a counselor for the first time came up to me after I’d told the story of seeing the Kingdom of God and asked me a remarkable question: “Did anybody else see it?” I didn’t catch on right away so she spelled it out for me: “Did anybody else see the Kingdom of God that day when you were fifteen?” I’d never thought about it like that. It’s not enough to be in the Kingdom of God – you have to look for it. You have to want to see it. So …

…look around. Look at these people you’re sitting with. Look at them. Look at this wonderful, diverse, unique, peculiar, frustrating and loving community around you – and let go of your need to sort us into categories, who’s better or not so good, who’s successful or not so successful. Look around. It doesn’t matter – please don’t let it matter for just this precious moment – who’s white or black or old or young, who’s conservative or liberal, who’s poor or rich, who’s straight or gay. These are God’s children you’re looking at, your brothers and sisters in Christ – look around, at the Kingdom
of God. Are some of these people more conservative than you are, or more liberal? Of course they are! That’s what makes us wonderful, diverse, unique, peculiar, frustrating and loving. But they are still God’s children, every bit as much as you or I.

Now in the Diocese of Alabama we are embarked on a huge ambitious enterprise to build Bethany Village, inspired by several visions coming together, including this incredible idea that we are all God’s children no matter what our abilities or disabilities. I am deeply grateful to the people who’ve done so much work in bringing these dreams together and helping them to become reality: thanks to my friend Mark Johnston, Pam Parker, Danielle Dunbar, Rich Webster, Ricky Bromberg, Phyllis Hall, David Meginniss and the other people that I should have named and forgot – many others who are helping us to raise the money. Thanks to all the people who have already made contributions and to those who haven’t but will; thanks to the parishes who have already pledged their contributions and to those who are still thinking about it. Bethany Village is being built now, to include all people regardless of ability or disability; it will make Special Sessions much better in many ways, and it will improve and enhance and expand our abilities to have Environmental Education programs, the Alabama Folk School, our capacity to host many other gatherings, small and large, and other things we have not yet imagined.

We’ve raised a bunch of money, and we’re going to raise more. I believe that Bethany Village will show us how the world should be. My concern now is that you and your parish will want to be able to say that you helped make this place, this place we are going to be proud of for generations to come. I hope you’ll give a lot, or a little; I hope you won’t choose to be left out. We are building Bethany Village on this holy ground that we own together. This is common ground for us, ground we can invite others to come to and look up from the busyness of life, and see the Kingdom of God.

Now in the Episcopal Church we are embarked on a huge ambitious endeavor to welcome and honor all of God’s children. In our Baptismal Covenant, at every baptism and confirmation, we declare before God and each other that with God’s help we will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and that we will respect the dignity of every human being. There are no disposable people.

At the 2012 General Convention, The Episcopal Church passed a resolution authorizing the blessing of same sex unions, with the guidance and permission of each diocesan bishop. I am on the Commission that wrote and presented that resolution, and I voted for it. I know that angered some of you, and people we love left our church because of it. I cannot adequately tell you how much it grieves me when somebody leaves our church because of something I did or said, or how I voted. It is so contrary to my principal inspiration, to bring all people into the Kingdom of God. Before that General Convention, I wrote a letter to you, to the whole Diocese saying that I expected this resolution to pass, and that I thought it would be damaging to the fabric of our Diocese for me to give permission for our priests to offer these blessings at this time. I know that disappointed some of you, and people we love left our church because I withheld permission. It is deeply painful to me every time.

This is an incredibly complicated and difficult issue, and has the potential to tear us apart. It’s a dispute that seems to bring out the worst in us; it quickly becomes a fight that we all want to win, so that we insist that we are right, and that people who disagree with us are wrong. And worse than wrong: stupid, unfaithful, unchristian, mean-spirited, homophobic, revisionist, liberal, conservative. All those labels, all that choosing sides and putting God’s children into categories – this is not the way to seek and find God’s Kingdom. This is not the way to be God’s Church.
So, just for the record –
I am more liberal than some of you, and I am still your brother in Christ.
I am more conservative than some of you, and I am still your brother in Christ.
It’s right there, in the first prayer most of us ever memorized:
“Our Father, who art in heaven…” Our Father.
We are all of us sisters and brothers in Christ because we all have the same Father in heaven.

How can we love all the children of God, and bring them more fully into God’s kingdom? How can we love, include and respect people who think we should bless the unions between people of the same sex, that we should have already done it long ago, and at the same time love, include and respect people who think we should never do this, and who believe that homosexuality is a sin?

With God’s help, we can do this. We are the children of God, and there is no limit to what people of good will can do together by God’s grace and in God’s mercy, if we follow Christ and offer ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit. There’s no limit to what the Children of God can do by the power of God. As long as we really believe what we say we believe, we can love and include each other even though we disagree. We can do this without fighting, or name-calling, or running people away from their church, from our church, from God’s Church.

We need to design a process to consider how we as a diocese can allow for and bless loving and committed relationships between all people, while at the same time allowing those who find blessing same sex unions immoral or unethical the freedom to not participate. I am proposing the beginnings of such a process, which will be discussed and reviewed by a commission of people from across the diocese and from across the spectrum of theological assumptions, and which will be the subject of conversations open to all members of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Alabama in each of our convocations.

We Episcopalians are not set up so that the Bishop rules by fiat, praise God; we left that part of the Church behind. We work best when the bishops consult with clergy and lay people. To that end, we are going to form a commission of twelve people, the Bishops’ Commission on Generous Pastoral Response. It will be made up of one person from each convocation as nominated by the convocation deans, and five others selected by the bishops. Every effort will be made to ensure that we have a balanced group: lay people and clergy, traditionalist and progressive, female and male, and so on.

We’re not interested in gathering people from way over there to toss words at people who are way over there. We’ve tried that for years – it doesn’t work, it’s not the Church. We want to gather people who understand that the unity of the Church is an obligation of ours, and who want to find a way forward.

After the process is more fully designed with the help of this Commission, we’ll have something to talk about in conversations across the Diocese. We have some questions that we need to answer. Are we willing to love our neighbors as ourselves when we disagree? Are we willing to put aside our need to have it our way for the sake of the unity of the Church? How can we do something new and still be who we are?

I believe that the end result of all this will be a way forward, so that we will be able to bless committed, monogamous unions among people and in places where they believe it to be just and proper, and that other people and places will not be forced to do something they think is wrong. We are
not able to agree about same sex unions right now, but we can agree that we are all called to be one in Christ, to love God and love each other – we can agree that this is something that we must do.

When I was fifteen, I was inspired. The wonderful, diverse, unique, peculiar, frustrating and loving community I had fallen into became the Kingdom of God right before my eyes. I had already thought that I wanted to be a priest, but after that day I started to get an idea of what I wanted to do, what I want to do still: to bring people into deeper and fuller awareness of God’s Kingdom where we are. It doesn’t matter who drools, and who’s a cheerleader – there are no disposable people. If it is our Father who art in Heaven, these are God’s children you’re sitting among, God’s children we’re talking about: our brothers and sisters.

In the moment I was first inspired to see the Kingdom of God, I saw through labels that divide us. We all looked and smelled and sounded the same. I look out at you this morning and I see the Kingdom of God in us: in this wonderful, diverse, unique, peculiar, frustrating and loving community. Surely as God sees and smells and hears us, we are all just the same: all of us sinful, all of us forgiven, all of us redeemed by our Lord Jesus Christ, all of us precious and beloved in the eyes of God our Father – all of us. All of us.

There’s a lot that I don’t know about this, a lot of questions to answer, a lot of details to work out, a lot of anxieties to ease. Our Church has authorized the blessing of same sex unions, not marriages but unions, blessings, and we ought to be able to consider how the Diocese of Alabama can do that without tearing ourselves apart. This will not be easy, I think, for some of us, but I believe it is the right thing for us to do, a good way for us to move forward together. I remind you, and will continue to remind and implore, and encourage, and insist and beseech you, that we are each of us and all of us God’s children committed with God’s help to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

Lord, teach us in all things to seek first your honor and glory. Guide us to perceive what is right, and grant us both the courage to pursue it and the grace to accomplish it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.