50th Convention Address

October 13, 2019

Bishop Dabney T. Smith

I took a telephone call last week from an elementary schoolmate. We were both members of St. John’s Men and Boys choir in Tampa during the mid-1960’s. It was both a catch up and pastoral care call in nature that reminded me how uniquely privileged I am to serve as the bishop of Southwest Florida. My schoolmate and I had not talked to one another in over fifty years.

Fifty years! That is a long time to remember relationships. It is so powerfully wonderful that we now enjoy the opportunity of doing exactly that as we celebrate the fifty years of the Diocese of Southwest Florida. As a first order let me offer the highest gratitude to my colleague, friend and bishop....and our Presiding Bishop, Michael Bruce Curry. What a great gift he is to us!

I also want to thank all of the diocesan staff for putting in so much effort and so many hours in producing this fiftieth diocesan convention. In particular, I know we are all grateful for the tireless work of Jan Nothum, Tana Sembiante, Marilyn Erfourth, Michelle Mercurio, and Garland Pollard and Convention Program Chair, Judy Stark. In addition, I am thankful to Michael Durning, for making himself available for an extended tenure following last year’s Hurricane Irma, and his helpful preparation for this Golden Jubilee. In particular, the soon to be retired Canon to the Ordinary has borne the unofficial title of diocesan historiographer. It has been a delight in working with Michael, Garland, and others in preparing a short history of the diocese that you now have in your possession. It is entitled, “The First Five Decades: A History of the Diocese of
Southwest Florida.” It is a tremendous gathering of information and photographs. Please enjoy it. I have a personal affection for the history of our diocese.

Some of you will remember when my mother was alive before I was seated as diocesan bishop. One Sunday she and my late wife went with me to a visitation at St. Andrew’s Tampa. I was greeted at the door by a parishioner with a photograph of my father, the Rector of St. John’s Tampa at the time of the photograph, holding an infant in a chrism gown. The parishioner said to me, “your father baptized me; and you just confirmed my daughter.” It was a thrilling moment enjoyed by my mother, and a historical experience representing the generations and the landscape off the diocese.

In speaking of the generations, it was my deepest and most special honor last November, to attend and participate in the funeral of Rogers S. Harris, the third Bishop of the Diocese of Southwest Florida. He was a good friend and colleague. I was proud to represent our diocese. We continue to hold Anne Harris in our prayers. At the twenty-fifth anniversary of the diocese in 1993, Bishop Harris spoke these visionary words in his address: “Imagine that it is the year 2001. The third millennium of the Christian era has begun. The capitol campaign approved by Convention in 1993 was successfully completed in 1994 and 1995. As a result, about ten percent of the congregations which were struggling under more debt than they could manage were helped to retire their indebtedness. Several congregations were given grants to enable them to move to more favorable locations as recommended by our Church Extension Committee. Grants of up to twenty-thousand dollars were given a number of congregations to provide consultants and leadership training, to enable them to achieve their goals for parish programs of evangelism, youth ministry, outreach, education, and stewardship. All congregations of our diocese are now in 2001 A.D., functioning well in their mission to their communities.”
It didn’t quite work out like that.

A decade ago I said this: “As we celebrate our mission in our 40th diocesan convention preparing to mark 40 years of life...I call upon this diocese to establish the Episcopal Charities Fund of the Diocese of Southwest Florida.” I further added, “I am asking 2009 Episcopalians of this diocese to each contribute $1000 to establish this endowment for outreach.” The number of Episcopalians was chosen to help us remember the celebratory year we were engaging. I concluded, “It is my hope that next years’ convention will see this request realized as an accomplishment.”

Well, it didn’t quite work out like that.

A longtime friend and colleague of mine who serves as the Dean and President of Berkeley Divinity at Yale, The Reverend Andrew McGowan, recently addressed the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes with an address entitled, Failing and Flourishing: A Tale of Two Realities. In this address he discussed some dismal numbers and some encouraging vital mission statistics coexisting in the Episcopal Church. He noted that congregational success is often equated with God’s blessing and yet clarified that, “success and God’s presence are both important, but they aren’t necessarily correlated.... the faith that God is present and active is not the same thing as claiming to know where and how. Even when good work is done in the church, admittedly, and Jesus is proclaimed faithfully, success does not always follow.... failure doesn’t tell us the spirit was absent or God was not glorified.”

Dean McGowan went on to say, “Augustine of Hippo would remind us that history itself must not be interpreted through the narrow focus of present experience, but from the prospective of eternity – which is not accessible to us by experience, but of which we are given a vision in
Scripture, and for which we are fed by the Sacraments...in the last analysis, we are called to be faithful; some of us may also be blessed with success.”

Life in our congregations and in our diocese is marked by the conditions of failing and flourishing ...or health and fragility. We find this reality in programs, in leadership, in campaigns, in congregations, in the diocese, in budgets, and in calendrical time frames. We find this truth right now, as it was in the past, and as it will be in the future. As we celebrate and congratulate ourselves for a glorious fifty years of life we will ask, “What will the diocese be like in its 100th year?” I believe that our future church will continue to find this same truth of failing and flourishing, and to quote my friend, “in the last analysis, we are called to be faithful.” Every congregation in the evolution of the Diocese of Southwest Florida: some that no longer exist and some that succeeded beyond their original dreams tried to be faithful. Even more so, individuals came to these faith communities struggling with their own personal questions of faith; and long-time members wrestled with the meanings of life with faith.

Practically any given week I am blessed with asking God’s people in the midst of the Confirmation service in every congregation: Do you reaffirm your renunciation of evil? And its corresponding question: Do you renew your commitment to Jesus Christ? People desiring to live faithfully answer, “I do, and with God’s grace I will follow Jesus as my Savior and Lord.”

I love the fact and teaching that Anselm, the 36th Archbishop of Canterbury, in the eleventh century explained, “Faith seeks understanding!” In other words, we try to live for God’s will at the same time that we try to understand who God is. More recently, and in our lifetimes, John Polkinghorne, a Church of England Priest and one of Britain’s leading physicist’s expressed that science shows us a universe that is deeply intelligible and rationally beautiful. Polkinghorne stated that Christianity is concerned about making sense of the world by saying, “faith is not a
question of shutting one’s eyes, gritting one’s teeth, and believing the impossible. It involves a leap, but a leap into the light rather than the dark.” Faith is motivated belief, based on evidence.” We are a Church that treasures questions and so we value the search of science; we value the insights of faith. We ask deep continuous questions. We seek profound, life giving answers.

The Book of Job in chapter 28 summarizes this search in Job’s wrestling with God in this way: “But where is wisdom to be found? And where is the place of understanding?” The perspective of eternity is that wisdom cannot be gotten for the search for gold, in the deeps of the sea, or in simple human understanding. The response is clear: “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.” Every individual, in every congregation, in every generation, understanding the compelling challenges of the baptismal waters that always seeks truth in life tries to live with: “Do you reaffirm your renunciation of evil? And, “Do you renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?”

So, we stand on the doorstep of the next half century. We wonder what our diocese will be like at the 100 year mark. We will be responsible, we will make good plans, we will attempt to renounce evil; and we will seek to be faithful to Jesus Christ. Yet it will not always work out like we think it should or would. But it will work out. So, how did it work out in the past? Bishop Harris envisioned one approach through a capital campaign that didn’t quite work out as desired. And yet, congregational indebtedness is significantly reduced. As I remarked at our recent Convocations, financial grants and loans of one year and multi-year types are offered and available through the diocese. The diocesan operating budget makes money available for congregational consultants in the operating budget. There are diocesan programs offered for leadership training, evangelism, stewardship, congregational vitality, youth programs and trainings that are growing. The Episcopal Charities Fund didn’t unfold like I expected. In fact, I was told a decade ago that it
was a crazy idea as the markets were crashing, And yet, now that endowment fund is closing in on a million dollars. Funds have been contributed every year to congregational outreach totaling now about $307,755 over ten years. It makes my heart glad to say that it will keep on giving for generations to come: giving for feeding the hungry, for clothing the naked, for caring for the homeless. What else is happening? The church plant in Wesley Chapel is beginning life and other church plants are being considered. The Dayspring Conference Center is functioning for spiritual vitality. People are still answering calls to ordained ministry and people are still bringing their questions of faith to all of our congregations and desiring to live faithfully by renouncing evil and following Jesus.

I already stated that I have a personal affection for the history of our diocese as we celebrate fifty years. As I look back from my childhood to now, that which gives me strength in trying to live faithfully in life are found in these words from Psalm 71 (verses 17 & 18)

17 O God, you have taught me since I was young,
   And to this day I tell of your wonderful works.
18 And now that I am old and gray-headed, O God,
   do not forsake me,
   till I make known your strength to this generation
   and your power to all who are to come.

I hold and hope this is a prayer for all of us in this diocese for generations to come. Living responsibly and expectantly in faith. Our plans and hopes will not always work out the way we expect but God’s strength and presence will always be with us working His purposes in the midst of our plans in failure and flourishing; in fragility and health...even ten years from now; even twenty-five years from now; even fifty years from now until Jesus comes again. In the Aramaic Maranatha, we claim as our own the prayer of the ancient Church: Come Lord Jesus!