

Bishop's Address to Diocesan Convention

February 9th, 2019, Camp McDowell

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*(BCP p. 540)

It is a great privilege to serve as the Bishop of the Diocese of Alabama, and to address the 188th Convention of the Diocese. I probably say that every year; every year I feel it more deeply. I hope you feel that sense of privilege as well, whether you're serving as a delegate, alternate or visitor, or as a member of the clergy. It is a privilege for us to gather here at wonderful Camp McDowell to strengthen this community that holds us up and holds us together, as we address our theme of the Stewardship of Creation. We are more mindful of Creation while we are here, I think, and so we are called to be more mindful of our responsibility as stewards.

I think we see our role as God's stewards in different ways: as a duty, as a joy, as an obligation, as a habit, as a burden sometimes, as a way to make a living for some of us. It is all of those things, but that's not the whole story. And you know how I love me a story. So here's one you might not have heard.

Thirty-six years ago, I moved to West Point Mississippi to become the vicar of the Church of the Incarnation. I'd been out of seminary for two years, and had been delivered from thinking that because I had a brand-new Masters of Divinity degree, I knew everything I needed to know. But the bishop and the folks there seemed to think I knew enough to be in charge of a congregation, so I went. I was twenty-seven years old; they called me Father.

The folks in that congregation were kind, pleasant and patient people for the most part, and generally honest with me, whether it was pleasant or not. I learned a lot there: about being a good priest, and about being a good person. I met Tina at summer camp while I was there, in August of 1986.

In my first week in West Point, I met Miss Elizabeth, who could be kind and patient ... when she wanted to be. She was also that kind of honest some folks are because they can get away with saying things that others can't. In our first conversation she told me I didn't need to come in there and change things just to suit me – that it wasn't my church. She didn't say it, but I thought her message was pretty clear, that in fact it was *her* church. It turns out she was wrong about that part, but it was an important thing for me to learn: It's not my church.

She also told me she had been there long before I got there, and that she would be there long after I was gone. I didn't know whether to be offended at first, but after a while I found that to be oddly reassuring: no matter what I said or did, I wasn't going to run Miss Elizabeth out of her church.

After I'd been there a while and she'd come to trust me, she told me "There's only two kinds of priests for a little parish like this: the ones who don't stay long enough, and the ones who stay too long." She let it hang there for a moment, until I felt like I had to ask her which kind I was. She said wouldn't know until I was leaving, but that she'd tell me then. Which, of course, she did.

One of the families on the books there was the Colonel and his wife. I don't remember his name – nobody ever called him by his name; he was just the Colonel. He and his wife Jan were very regular in their attendance – they came regularly: twice a year, on Christmas Eve and Easter Day.

He had grown up in that parish, gone away to the Army as a young man, and decades later when he came back to the Episcopal Church, he found we'd changed the Prayer Book and started ordaining women, without even asking his opinion. I think he took it personally. He told me he'd felt obliged to go to Army Protestant Sunday services for years, and now that he'd retired, he just went to church when he wanted to. That was twice a year, and for the Colonel, that was enough.

He was married to Jan, who had followed him all over the world. She was even less interested in church than he was, and when they came to church it seemed like it was a disagreeable experience for

her, another duty, another obligation. Coming to church twice a year seemed like it was more than enough for her.

When the Colonel died, Jan came to see me, and brought the instructions he'd left in his will specifying how his funeral would be. He had directed that the funeral was to be at the Church of the Incarnation, and that the priest would conduct the service using the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. The sermon would be less than ten minutes; we were to read Psalm 130 and the lesson from St. John because the others choices were too long, and we would sing "My country 'tis of thee" without, as he put it: "dragging it out too much."

And he wanted a young person from the parish to be the crucifer. He had served as an acolyte at the Church of the Incarnation when he was a young man, he wrote, and it had always moved him to lead the stately procession into the church as the first words of the funeral service were spoken by the priest: "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live ..."

So I called our A Number One Top Acolyte, who said she'd love to help but couldn't miss school that day because she had a big History test. The second-best acolyte, not as reliable but still okay, was in the same class dreading the same test. That left me with Vinnie, who wouldn't have been the Colonel's first or second choice either. His bushy out-of-control hair usually hid his eyes and most of his face. He slouched – he was good at it. But the Colonel had stipulated an acolyte, and Vinnie was all we had.

He was a sweet kid, but easily distracted; I always had to remind him when he was supposed to give the collection plates to the ushers or close the gate at the altar rail. The whole concept of giving me the wine *before* he handed me the water was apparently beyond him. Still, this was the last chance for the family to follow the Colonel's orders. We had to have an acolyte, and Vinnie was our only option. He wasn't in that History class, he didn't have a big exam that day, and he was only too glad to miss a day of school for a funeral. Eager, even.

The morning of the funeral, I met their active duty son who'd flown in from Germany the night before: the Captain. He was as straight upright as a living human can be, and when we shook hands, he did so with effort and purpose, to let me know he was in control. I squeezed back, not to win a contest of gripping masculinity, but just to let him know that I wasn't the wimp he apparently assumed I ought to be, being a member of the clergy and all.

Then he saw Vinnie the acolyte. Well, mostly I think he saw the hair and the slouch, but that was all he needed to see. Vinnie represented everything the Captain and his father the Colonel found wrong with the young people of America today, and I think he was about to lodge a protest when his wife murmured: "Not now, Charles. This is not your watch." He relented, but gave me a scowl, to let me know he would hold me personally responsible if this shaggy acolyte ruined his father's funeral.

Vinnie led the procession down the aisle, just as the Colonel had all those years ago. If he was in any way moved by the moment it was completely hidden under all that hair. I followed the Cross down the aisle with all the dignity I could find or borrow, saying "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord..." The homily was brief, as per instructions, and we marched out singing "My country, 'tis of thee," just a bit up-tempo.

After the service, I told Vinnie he didn't have to go to the graveside, that he could go on back to school. When he said he'd like to go the cemetery, I assumed he just wasn't in a hurry to get back to algebra or chemistry or something. I chuckled a little, remembering that I'd done the same thing when I was an acolyte. I told him he could ride with me in the funeral director's car, just behind the hearse.

The service of committal at graveside is usually pretty brief, but at a burial of a member of the military it can get somewhat more complicated. I am always moved by the soldiers removing the American flag from the casket and folding it – slowly, precisely – and giving it to the family. Then there was the twenty-one-gun salute, always jarring for me, and then the bugler blowing 'Taps', which inevitably brings me to tears.

After the blessing, the family waited for the cemetery crew to lower the casket down into the concrete vault, and then each of them threw a shovel of dirt onto it. It took some time to accomplish this, and while they were still trying to coax some of the younger grandchildren to take up the shovel, Jan, the

Colonel's widow, made her way over to me. She said, "Thank you, Father. It was nicely done – the Colonel would have approved." I said, "Thank you, ma'am."

Then she turned to Vinnie, who was standing next to me, and whose mind was wandering, as was his way. She said, "And thank you, young man." I thought "Okay, here it comes – this is it – the moment for Vinnie to do or say something that will completely ruin the Colonel's funeral." I glanced across the gravesite to see the Captain watching apprehensively. Vinnie nodded his bushy head politely and said, "Yes, ma'am – it was my privilege."

She smiled and patted Vinnie on the cheek, and said, "You're a good boy. You need a haircut." To which he smiled a little bit and said, "Yes, ma'am."

On my last Sunday there at the Church of the Incarnation in West Point, I was surprised to see Jan in the congregation, since it wasn't Christmas or Easter. And I was relieved to hear Miss Elizabeth declare that I had not stayed there long enough; she went on to say that was much to be preferred over a priest who stayed too long.

Years later, Tina and McKee and I moved to Huntsville Alabama, where Mary Nell was born, and where I was privileged to serve as the rector of St. Thomas for more than fourteen years, whether that was too long or not long enough. Then in 2008, I became your Bishop Suffragan, and your Bishop Diocesan in 2012.

A few years after I'd moved from black shirts to purple, I was approached by a man I didn't recognize. I'd stopped at a fast food place for a biscuit and a cup of coffee, and was on my way out when he came up and asked me "Are you the priest at that Episcopalian church in southeast Huntsville?" I told him I had been, and he asked me the dreaded question: "Do you remember me?"

I told him I was sorry, but that I did not. He told me his name, which didn't help, and then he told me a story. And I do love me a story.

Years before he'd been a driver for one of the national delivery companies, delivering packages in Southeast Huntsville. It was a few weeks before Christmas, and they were busy. His personal life was difficult and painful for a lot of unhappy reasons, and he felt like he had no one to talk to, like his life was closing in on him. And then one dark wet evening, feeling sorry for himself, he was driving in Southeast Huntsville when he saw there was a light on at "that brick church on Bailey Cove Road," and he decided to stop.

He told me he pulled into the parking lot, and that I came to the door when he knocked. He said we sat in my office and he told me all about his situations and sorrows, and that I sat there and listened. I asked him – without much real optimism – whether I'd had anything intelligent to say that night, and he told me that he didn't remember me saying anything especially smart, but that I had listened to him. I had cared. And that was really all he'd needed.

"Now," he said, "my life is much better." He told me how things had all worked out, and that most of the issues that had gotten him so down in the dumps had been resolved. He said when he saw me at the counter, he just had to speak to me. I told him I was glad things were better, and he told me that I had really helped him that night, "More than you'll ever know."

And then he hugged me, right there in the middle of that Sunday morning busy fast food restaurant, and I hugged him back as best I could, with a biscuit in one hand and a cup of really hot coffee in the other. Then he looked me in the eye and said, "Thank you, Father, and praise the Lord." In that moment, the wisdom of Vinnie the Shaggy Acolyte came to mind, and I knew it was just perfect. So that's what I told him: "It was my privilege."

Now almost every Sunday I visit one or two of our parishes, and after the service as y'all are leaving, you tell me what you thought about the service or the sermon. Some of you thank me for coming or tell me you're glad I'm there. More often than not, if I'm paying attention to what I'm saying, I'll tell you: "It's my privilege."

It is my privilege to serve in this part of God's Church. And it is your privilege, too.

So here's my idea – and now, twenty-five hundred words into this address he finally comes to the point – if we persist in thinking of our work in the Church or in the world as a chore, as a burden, as an obligation, as something somebody else is making us do, we are doomed to fail.

It's not my church. It's not yours, either, in case you're confused – it's God's Church. We are *stewards* of God's holy Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; that is our privilege.

It's not our world, either – it's God's world. We are God's stewards of this fragile earth, our island home. Our focus in this Convention of the Diocese of Alabama is on this part of our stewardship, this part of our privilege. If we think of our being stewards of this part of God's Creation as a burdensome chore, we will not serve our Lord as well as we should. We will sit by and watch the ecosystem spoil, and the gift God has given us will be corrupted.

I hope the Episcopal Church will continue to take a lead in this effort, recognize the peril our planet is in, and be faithful in our role as stewards of the Earth. I am proud of the work we do at Camp McDowell to raise awareness of this growing problem, but we need to do more: we need to do everything we can. Being good stewards of God's Creation is a faithful response to the loving grace of God.

Even our lives are not our own: the Spirit of God puts life into us; we are stewards of God's life in us. As the Apostle John wrote: "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

This is a privilege we share: to be the stewards of God's holy Church, stewards of God's fantastic Creation, stewards of the lives God gives us.

It has been more privilege than I deserve to serve God's people as a deacon, as a priest, as a Bishop Suffragan, and finally as the Eleventh Bishop of the Diocese of Alabama. I am forever grateful to all of you for being kind, pleasant and patient people for the most part, and for your honesty with me whether it was pleasant or not. I thank you for your support, for your dedication to our Lord Jesus, and to this part of God's Church. I am proud of what the Spirit of God has done in us, and through us, and sometimes in spite of us, for the last eleven years, and excited to see what happens next.

As I believe I have proven several times in these bishop's addresses, there are far too many things that we're proud of for me to mention them all, and far too long a list of people I ought to thank to expect any of you to be listening when I'm finally done. But I am grateful, to our Lord, and to this part of God's holy Church. I am grateful to our incredible Diocesan Staff, amazing people who know what they're doing and do it cheerfully, lovingly and well. I am grateful to the clergy and leadership of the Diocese. I am grateful to all the clergy spouses and families, for all of your support, and for putting up with your spouse or parents' peculiar vocation. I will never be able to say often enough or well enough how especially grateful I am to Tina Brown Sloan, without whom I would be lost, and to our son McKee and our daughter Mary Nell, of whom we are very, very proud.

We are grateful and proud of many, many things in the Diocese of Alabama, and especially today of this place, the ministry we've done here for so long, and of the dreams and plans for more ministry to come. I am delighted that the Rev. Corey Jones has agreed to become the next Executive Director of Camp McDowell. It's a big job, and I am sure that he will do very well in it. I'm also sure that we will have several opportunities to be patient with him as he comes into this new and very different role.

I'm especially proud of the sense of community and love in the Diocese, and in our parishes. There is no limit to what the Spirit of God can do with people of good will who offer themselves into the love and service of God, but we sure can make it difficult, when the people of God are squabbling all the time and mistrustful of each other. It is a huge part of my privilege as your bishop to see the love of God shining in all of you.

And of course, it would be ridiculous for me to address the Diocese of Alabama and not even mention how proud and grateful we are for the Cursillo Movement – the best in the Episcopal Church; for our young people and the programs and ministries we have with and for them; for our college students, programs and chaplains; for the Special Sessions program; for the incredible ministries of Sawyerville; and for the Foothills Day Camp. And it would be especially terrible if I forgot that one other thing, that thing that you are especially involved in and proud of and are sitting there hoping I won't forget to mention – we're proud and grateful for that, too!

I can't even begin to brag about all the things we are doing in all the parishes, large and small, things that touch people near and far. We are doing God's work, and doing it lovingly, faithfully, joyfully.

We have so much to be thankful for, and proud of – the Diocese of Alabama is strong and healthy, united in the love of God in Jesus Christ, blessed with faithful people who hold a variety of opinions and assumptions, blessed to sing our various notes mostly in harmony.

We have challenges before us as well, of course. I expect I've said this to most of you once and some of you twice: the Church our parents and grandparents gave us will not be not the same Church we give to our children and grandchildren. We're not living in the same world we grew up in, and it's changing more quickly now than it ever has before. This is the tension of God's Church: even as we hold fast to that which is good, we have to learn to sing to the Lord a new song. That tension, that opportunity, is more pronounced, and more pressing, than ever.

We Christians have been given the greatest gift in the history of the world: the absolute assurance of the infinite unconditional love of God in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ our Lord. This assurance, this invitation into a life of faith, love and hope, has never been more needed than it is today.

As stewards of this part of God's holy Church, we need to find new and accessible ways to invite people to live in the Good News of Jesus. How can we be more inviting to God's children who have been turned away or turned off by the Church? How can we offer God's hospitality to people who expect to be bored with our form of worship, or whose assumptions of Christian theology dismiss the grace, mercy or compassion of God? How will the Episcopal Church be the same in five years, in ten years, in twenty years, and how will we be different? If we only guard and protect the way it's always been without paying any attention to the needs of the changing world around us, we are danger of becoming little more than a museum, a tribute to days gone by. And we will have failed our Lord as stewards of God's Church.

More and more I wonder if I am the right person to lead us in addressing this challenge. I feel myself protecting the way it's always been in the Church, and less aware or open as I would like to be to the changes that we are facing as the stewards of God's Church as we move into the future. Change looked more fun when I was one of the young priests, leaning into the new Prayer Book, supporting the ordination of women. It's getting to be time for new leadership for the Diocese of Alabama, new ideas, new energy, new approaches.

There are probably two kinds of bishops, too: those who stay too long, and those who don't stay long enough. I've known a couple of bishops who stayed too long, and I don't want to do that, to you or to me. It's time for this chapter of my life and ministry, and this chapter of the life and work of the Diocese of Alabama, to come to a close, so we can get started writing the next chapter.

So this morning I am calling for the election of a Bishop Coadjutor. It is my intention to continue to serve as your Bishop Diocesan until the end of two thousand twenty, when I will hand over the Crozier of the Diocese to the Twelfth Bishop of Alabama.

By that time, I will be sixty-five years old, and will have been ordained for more than thirty-nine years. I will have served as a bishop for thirteen years, and as your Bishop Diocesan for nine.

By that time, I will have been married to the woman of my dreams for thirty-three years, and it'll time to find some new adventures. I'm in pretty good health for a big old guy, and we want to travel around a little bit. I'm getting close to finishing book number three, and I've got a few ideas for book number four, and maybe number five after that.

Our Standing Committee will soon be meeting with the Rt. Rev. Todd Ousley, the Presiding Bishop's Suffragan for the Office of Pastoral Development, to begin the process of finding our next bishop. They'll appoint a Search Committee and a Transitional Committee, and I will do my best to stay out of the way. When the timeline for the search and election comes into better focus, we'll let the Diocese know. I'm hoping we'll have some time after the next bishop is ordained and before I step away, for the sake of continuity, and so that our next bishop isn't learning how to do some of this stuff by either sinking or swimming.

I realize now that I've said this out loud, I become something of a *Lame Duck* for a lot of you, and I want to say three things about that. First: the reason I am announcing this now is because it's important that we have an orderly transition from Eleven to Twelve, and the way we do this in the Episcopal Church involves an incredibly long, complicated and expensive process. And after the next bishop is ordained, I think it will be important for there to be some time when both of us are in the office. Second: I'm still the Bishop, and will continue to serve in this role until the end of 2020 – and don't you forget it. And third: I'd rather not have people everywhere I go saying goodbye every time I say hello for the next two years. There will be plenty of time for goodbyes later – before we say goodbye, we have a lot of work to do.

We have faced this challenge before, and as a Diocese I think we've done pretty well finding our next bishop. I still believe the best years of the Episcopal Church are yet to come, as we continue in God's mission of restoring all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

One last short story and I'll be done, for now. The night before I was ordained to the diaconate in May of 1981, I was looking over the service just to be sure I knew when I was supposed to stand or kneel and when I was supposed to say what. As I read through the service, I came to the end of the Litany for Ordinations where the Bishop would say that beautiful Collect which I read at the beginning of this address: "O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery ..."

In a moment of anxiety-driven Freudian dyslexia, my lying eyes had the Bishop referring to the Church as "that wonderful and *scared* mystery."

Now it's much later, and I have been privileged to be the bishop who leads the faithful in that prayer at many services of ordination. In the last thirty-eight years of my ordained life, the Church has quite often been wonderful, and almost always sacred. But far too often, we have been scared.

I've sat through a few Bishop's addresses in which the Bishop called for the election of a new bishop, and I know it can be a nervous, anxious time. Maybe it's because some of our clergy will inevitably be caught up in what Jimi Hendrix called *Purple Haze* ("*Scuse me while I kiss the sky!*") More likely, it's because we keep forgetting that it's God's Church, and not ours.

If this were my Church, we'd have good reason to be scared. If it were yours, or even Miss Elizabeth's, it would be understandable to be afraid. But it's not my Church, praise God, and not yours either. It's God's Church, just like it has always been and ever shall be. The Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Alabama is a wonderful, incredible, vital, imaginative, loving, generous, courageous part of God's Holy Church, and we're going to be just fine.

This is not time for us to be scared, but *sacred*; this is a time for us to recognize the privilege of being good stewards. Thank you all, thank you for everything. Let us pray.

Almighty God, giver of every good gift: Look graciously on your Church, and so guide the minds of those who shall choose a bishop for this Diocese, that we may receive a faithful pastor, who will care for your people and equip us for our ministries; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

(Collect for the Election of a Bishop or other Minister, BCP 818)