Rector’s address - Annual Meeting - February 9, 2020

Rev. Elizabeth Molitoris

Yesterday morning, I spent some time watching a livestream event on Facebook. A colleague I knew from my time in Chicago - The Rev. Dr. Bonnie Perry - was ordained and consecrated as the bishop diocesan for the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan, the southeast part of the state. It was a beautiful and lively liturgy, made even better for seeing so many familiar faces in the crowd.

There were lots of great moments from the event, but two especially stood out for me, because they have some relevance for our time here today, at this annual meeting.

After Bonnie was ordained - after bishops from across the country surrounded her with prayer and did the laying on of hands - then began the vesting process. Various family members, friends, and colleagues brought her the different vestments that
comprise the official garb for a bishop. She put on the pieces, one by one, ending with the mitre - the pointy bishop’s hat. Then came time for her to receive the final symbol of her new role: the crozier - the staff (or stick) that a bishop carries, signifying her leadership in a community.

A new bishop receives their crozier from the retiring or departing bishop they’re replacing, in this case, Wendell Gibbs. Bishop Gibbs, who was the first African American bishop in the diocese of Michigan was going to be handing off his crozier to now-bishop Bonnie, the first woman bishop of that diocese. He started to hand the staff to her, evidently with some speech or prayer in mind, then he stopped. He got choked up and couldn’t speak, and so the two of them just held each other’s eyes for a few moments. Finally, Bishop Gibbs pushed the crozier into Bonnie’s hands and said, “You know what to do with it.”

It was such a hopeful moment, to see this emotional exchange and historic succession between people who were, who
are breaking new ground. It wasn’t that long ago - 1962 in fact - when the first African American man was consecrated as a diocesan bishop in the Episcopal church. 31 years later, in 1993, came the first female diocesan bishop. “Hope is the thing with feathers,” Emily Dickinson wrote. It’s that thing that focuses our attention on possibility, on the thought that if this wondrous thing can happen, then what else might be?

The second stand-out moment involved one of my dearest friends, the Rev. Beth Taylor, who served as one of the liturgy’s planners and organizers. She offered the welcome at announcement time, and then proceeded to give extensive and detailed instructions about how communion would work. It was a huge venue - an auditorium/performing arts center - not a church that was designed with the logistics of communion in mind. Every section of seating had different instructions they were to follow, a different way they were to move. The complexity of it got to be funny, and the crowd laughed along with Beth at the absurdity of it all. She summed up her
instructions by saying that the most important part of the process was trust. Trust the usher who’s leading your section. Trust that everyone will eventually get the bread and wine. Trust that it will all work out, even if there’s a little chaos along the way.

Hope. Trust. A little chaos. Those were my take-aways from yesterday that I bring with me here today.

I came to Trinity a little more than 15 months ago. They’ve been 15 full months, as you saw in the slideshow. We’ve celebrated two ordinations with Sarah Thomas, and welcomed her into the curate position. We’ve rejoiced in meeting James Hapke, who has become our Interim Director of Children and Youth, ably mentored by the generous team of volunteers who kept the children and youth programs humming after the death of our friend and colleague, Elizabeth Hess. We’ve hosted bishops four times in the last 12 months, including a visit from Bishop Diane Bruce for our Celebration of New Ministry. We’ve
enjoyed chili cookoffs and pie bakeoffs; piano duets and organ recitals; Trinity Backstage and choristers from across the pond. We’ve welcomed (in secret) Oprah, and said goodbye to far too many good and faithful parishioners. I buried my mother, and helped my father put together a new life in a new city. And along with all those big moments, we did the quotidian work of worship and prayer and study and service which binds us together, draws us deeper into Divine love, and transforms us into the people God wants us to be.

Lots of joy and laughter and connection, alongside some sadness and heartaches. But the throughline that carries through the emotional ups and downs of human life in human community are these gifts of the Spirit: Hope. Trust. And a little chaos.

The other day, on social media, Brian McLaren - did we mention that he’ll be coming to do a workshop on February 22nd and preaching on February 23rd? - Brian McLaren posted
this quote from the late Howard Zinn, noted historian and political scientist. Zinn writes,

“TO BE HOPEFUL in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.

What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

And if we do act, in however small a way, we don’t have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.”

That’s why we’re here. That’s the bigger why behind our annual meeting tasks of budgets and elections and reports. The future as an infinite succession of presents. Infinite chances to behave magnificently, with hope, trust, and a little chaos. You are
salt, my friends. And you are light. Together, we are enough. Together, we have enough. Together we can live and work into being all that God desires for us to be, in defiance of the junk swirling around us, in an attempt to send this crazily spinning world in a different direction.

I want to offer my thanks to the vestry - those retiring, those continuing, and those coming on - for taking on the mantle and responsibility of leadership. I extend the same thanks to the Parish Council - all those leaders (outgoing, continuing, and new) who make our ministries of welcome, hospitality, worship, justice and outreach, education of children and youth and adults not just ideas but real things. You are sacrament makers. Thank you to the wardens, Melinda Carey and Steve Thompson, along with our treasurer, Michael Dean, who offer wise counsel, honest feedback, and who keep the interests and mission of Trinity foremost in their minds. They are people whom I trust beyond all measure, and who give me hope. Thank you to all my clergy
colleagues, both active and retired (many of whom are still active in so many ways, even though they say they’re retired!) - I’m grateful for your voices, your collaboration, and your care of this community. Last, but by no means least, thanks to all of Trinity’s staff, who exemplify hope and trust, faithfulness, hard work, and commitment to this place that goes way above and way beyond just doing a job. It is a delight to come to work to be with you all.

And thanks to all of you, who gift me with your hope and trust, who have welcomed me into your hearts and lives with such openness that I’m overwhelmed. As I say every Sunday when I introduce myself to visitors at announcement time, my name is Elizabeth Molitors, and I’m proud to serve as the rector at Trinity, Santa Barbara.
And so, before Steve Gibson taps his wrist watch to tell me I’ve talked long enough, let me end with a blessing before we adjourn this meeting:

*Life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who make this journey with us. So, be swift to love, and make haste to be kind. And the blessing of God who made us, who loves us, and who travels with us, be with you now and always. Amen.*