



Bishop's Address

143rd EDWM Convention November 3-4, 2017 Kalamazoo, MI

Good Morning! So glad to see everyone. So glad we can be together.

Thank you for being here.

Thank you for making the effort, for taking the time.

It is important we gather – to reconnect with each other, to pray together, to dance and sing together, to work together and to remember – (We, together- are the EDWM.)

And, let me take this opportunity to remind you how absolutely beautiful, priceless, gorgeous you each are. You are each, everyone of you, exquisite gems in the Crown of God – of immense value – irreplaceable – lovely – necessary. Want to see a glimpse of heaven, see a glimpse of the Kingdom of God come near? Look around the room – see your sisters and brothers – look and see the wonderful reflections of our living God in all their wonder and diversity, in all their uniqueness and quirkiness and know we are a blessed people, a Holy people, the very body of Christ.

Let us pray,

Stir us, Lord, to dare move boldly, to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery, where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes, and to push us into the future in strength, courage, hope and love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I would like to use a reading from the Gospel according to Matthew 14:22-33 to set the context for my address to you today. We heard this passage in August as part of our Lectionary, Year A, Proper 14.

Here it is.....

22Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. 27But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." 28Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." 29He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" 32When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God".

When I read this passage, back in August, I was immediately struck by how appropriate this story is for us in the EDWM at this time in our life together.

Look at our Diocesan shield! How cool is that?! We are disciples – in a boat – at sea – Perhaps an inland sea?! Shark and Salt-free for 10 million years, no less!

We are disciples in a boat, under a full sail filled with the Wind/Spirit of Peace, being driven perhaps guided even, by the Wind/Spirit of Peace.

What a lovely, hopeful image. I love it.

This is no boring diocesan seal filled with pointy bishops hats and crossed croziers and state flags. No, our seal has movement. There is action and drama. A boat on the water, where is it going? How long has it been there? Does it ever reach its destination? Who is that person? Do they have enough food?

There is purpose and direction. It appears to be under the power of the wind/Spirit of PAX the peace of God, directed by peace, guided by peace perhaps to bring peace.

It's all there. See it? Pretty cool huh?

No this is no boring, bland diocesan shield. It is a statement about how we see ourselves and what we are all about.

Now, imagine our diocesan shield is the boat the disciples from the Gospel according to Matthew are on. It's evening, the boat is far from land, the wind is blowing hard, sending battering waves against us. In the growing chaos, as the waves mount, you feel swamped, vulnerable, scared, out of control – afraid. And, with good reason, there is much to terrify and unsettle us in our chaotic, frightening world.

The truth is, we live in fearful times my friends. We live in an increasingly divided, angry and antagonistic world. We see it every day, there is growing civil unrest in Spain and continuing war in the Middle East and Africa. There is saber rattling and ugly threats coming from North Korea with ever-present threats of violence from terrorists of many stripes as we saw in NYC this week.

In our own country, we seem to be gripped by a kind of ideological or cultural civil war. Left vs. Right. Red State vs. Blue State. Conservative vs. Liberal. Democrat vs. Republican.

We have grown increasingly fractured and divided along ideological lines with no quarter given to anyone who holds a differing view, much less and opposing view.

Battle lines are being drawn all over the American landscape these days.

- We are battling over the legal status of refugees and DREAMERS and whether LGBTQ persons should serve in our military.
- We are fighting over the availability of healthcare and border security.
- We are slugging it out over how to interpret the 2nd Amendment and how to ensure the 1st Amendment actually provides free speech for all of our citizens.
- We are wrestling over how to understand: Climate Change, Tax Structure, Government Spending, Net Neutrality,
- And, even in 2017, we continue to struggle with whether a woman indeed, has the right to make healthcare decisions for herself, whether or not she should earn an equal wage to her male counterpart and whether or not when she says "NO" unwanted advances she really means NO!

It feels like we are fighting for the very soul of our country. Struggling over the American identity and who gets to name/claim and define that identity.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the disturbing and unsettling trend of growing racism seen recently in White Supremacy, White Nationalism, and Nazis marches as in Charlottesville, VA and Shelbyville, TN. There is nothing Christian about this type of hate filled racism, or any form of racism...PERIOD!!!!

Anyone who proclaims these ideologies and claims to be a Christian is mistaken and in error and in need of repentance.

In my Pastoral Letter in response to this hatred, I said,

"As Episcopalians, our mission is constantly to pursue unity and restoration with God and each other. Our Baptismal Covenant commands us to love all our neighbors and it commands us to respect the dignity of EVERY human being. All means ALL and Every means EVERY. There can be no compromise, equivocation, or rationalizing of these."

The growing divisiveness and ugliness of our national discourse is upsetting and frightening. We may feel like we are in a small boat at sea being tossed to and fro – Willy Nilly, out of control, vulnerable without any direction or security or hope.

Add to this chaos – any personal concerns you might have.

Struggles at work or at school. A floundering relationship. The loss of a loved one after a long illness. Feeling isolated, alone, unloved, under-valued, unheard, unaccepted. We all do from time to time.

And with all of these, the winds roar against us in hurricane strength winds, threatening the little boat – battering it, battering us.

All of this is to say, fear is an ever-present reality my friends. Especially these days in our very angry, divisive, selfish times. Prolonged fearfulness, being in an extended state of fear is physically and emotionally debilitating. Fear actually causes the brain to shut down-inhibiting ones capacity to process rationally – think clearly – respond - responsibly

When people are afraid, they seek security, comfort, protection, control. Fear often motivates people to build walls instead of bridges. It moves people to close and lock doors instead of throwing them open. Fear causes people to arm up, to lock things up so to preserve and protect against any perceived threat of violence often without realizing violence begets violence. Fear moves people to over simplify: issues, ideas, positions, views because it's simply too hard to process much complexity when we are absorbed by fear. Fear robs the children of God of the abundant life God intends for us.

Early in the morning he came walking to them on the sea, they were terrified, and cried out in fear, well YEA. And Jesus immediately spoke to them saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." (Do not be afraid)

I mean right, I know. That's really good advice Jesus. But my, brother I'm afraid, with all that's going on in the world, I'm seriously afraid. You probably are too – with good reason.

If I were to be honest with y'all, I'd have to admit, I often feel like good ole Peter. My heart is willing, I want to step out in faith – keeping my eyes on Jesus – trusting Jesus will take care of it. But when I go – when I take that step, make that leap of faith – I often start to sink into the waters of chaos – not because of a lack of faith – but because of an abundance of fear.

Today, the EDWM is that boat on the water, wrestling with how to best set its sail – wondering perhaps whether a sail reset is even a good idea. Let's call that sail resetting a diocesan restructure. The question we are asking today is: how might we adjust our course, reset our sail, so to best catch the Wind/Spirit's direction for us?

This is the primary question this convention will address.

Later today you will hear a report from the task force on restructure. It will present a plan for how we might better pursue God's will for us - as a diocese seeking to live into our emerging vision.

This proposal is many years in the making. It has been well considered and prayerfully engaged by the diocese as a whole. This is not a top down plan – out of a book – nor is it the wild musings of your crazy dreamer bishop. Yes, I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.

This has, from the beginning been a team effort led by the very competent and qualified Rev. Jen Adams, Grace, Holland assisted by her band of merry men and women. (Stand Y'all)

I'm not going to any great detail about the proposal itself. Jen, will later, as will our Chancellor and Treasurer and VP of Diocesan Council.

I do, however, want to say a couple things. First, this proposal would not be a potential reality without the generous financial gift from Mr. Carlisle Davidson from Trinity Church Marshall. Mr. Davidson left his entire estate to the diocese early this year. His attorney, Ivan Egnatuck, contacted me last year asking if we, the diocese might be interested in receiving his estate. I asked, well what are we talking about here? Meaning how much, you know, money, sorry, might we expect and what limitations might there be on its use? He said there are some specific ministry objectives Mr. Davidson would like to see the diocese pursue using only the earnings of the corpus but how these objectives are pursued is to be determined by the diocesan leadership. Nice! Yea? He went on to estimate the estate's value at around a few hundred thousand dollars. So yea, right, okay. Good news, thank you Mr. Davidson.

Well, here's the thing. When the estate was finally settled its value wasn't a few hundred thousand dollars or even a million dollars. The estate we received and now have invested with our other monies came in at 2.1 million dollars!! So, we have incorporated Mr. Davidson's Trust objectives into the job description of the proposed new Canon Missioner.

This was reviewed of our Chancellor and addressed discussions with Standing Committee, Diocesan Council, the Re-

structure Taskforce and the rector of Trinity Church, Marshall, so to appropriately honor this generous gift and to use it to help us further pursue our emerging vision.

2.1 million dollars! And we didn't even ask for it. Imagine, what might happen if we asked, started asking. What if we invited all Episcopalians in this diocese to leave some percentage of their estate to our ongoing ministry in the form of a diocesan wide planned giving program? How might this further our mission, further God's mission?

The other thing I want to say is, this Restructure Proposal seems to me, in my own personal discernment, like the next logical step in our movement as a diocese. I truly believe our engaging it is faithful to God's calling, God's direction for us. It is not a quick fix for the presenting challenges our congregations face in a rapidly changing world - there are no quick fixes.

I do however believe, this proposal will help us, as our convention theme suggests, get ahead of the game. It is my conviction this restructure proposal will help us take better control of our ministry, our resources, our message by helping get resources, leadership and skill out into our congregations so that we can do everything we can to create, maintain, and sustain vital, vibrant, thriving churches.

As you well know, our congregations face many challenges – decreasing attendance – decreasing revenue – decreasing human resources. We don't have enough clergy to provide pastoral care and sacramental support. We wonder how long we can maintain our buildings, wonder if we have the physical energy to continue much longer, wonder if we have any good news to share at all.

While this restructure proposal may not provide an immediate technical, quick fix, to any of our presenting congregational challenges it will help us function more proactively and positively in response to them. Frankly my friends, I believe it's time for us to stop acting and functioning like a diocese in crisis and start finding creative, positive ways to address the challenges we face. This restructure proposal intends to do just that.

We are at a pivotal juncture in our life together. We can keep going as we have, waiting for things to break, waiting for the next crisis, waiting for our resources to dry up as we waste away into nothing. Or we can take action, take charge of our ministries and callings, take control of our Gospel message and its proclamation. It's really just that simple. We have everything we need, truly.

This proposed restructuring plan might be frightening to some of us. It certainly represents a major shift in how we think about our work as the diocese of western Michigan. It represent a major shift in how we relate to each other, how we might engage each other, how we might see ourselves as one instead of 56 independent entities. Further, I must tell you, there is simply no way to know where this will lead us. There's no way to know which way the wind may lead us. This plan is not perfect, we will no doubt have to adjust along the way, changing direction as we tack sail to better catch the prevailing wind. (That's okay), at least we will be seeking to sail in concert with the wind/spirit guidance rather than sitting still in port tied to the dock. And, after all, we are, as our diocesan shield aptly reminds, a boat sailing the open (inland) seas. Amen!?

So, here we are sitting in our little diocesan sail boat. Waves of national discord and divisiveness pound against us. Ominous clouds of personal struggle and doubt swirl overhead. Hurricane force winds from a rapidly changing society threaten to swamp us and the church as we've known it. We are struggling to stay afloat. We are frightened, scared, perhaps crying out in fear. (All seems lost.)

Except, (it's not.) Not by a long shot.

For, Jesus, walks across the waters of our chaos saying to us, just as he said to Peter, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter steps toward Jesus but when he notices the waves he becomes frightened and sinks. Perhaps, engaging this restructure proposal is our stepping out of the boat toward Jesus. We might notice the waves and in fear begin to sink. Good. That's okay.

Because this story is not just about a disciples fear in the face of a storm it is also about the promise of God. God's promise to save us. God's promise to restore us. God's promise to lift us up and out the fathomless deep chaotic seas threatening to drown us, whatever they may be. See, Jesus immediately reaches out to Peter in his fear. Jesus grabs Peter, saving him from drowning and restores him to his vocation and calling. And if Jesus will do this for Peter, then he will do this for us too. He has, already, done this for us. And, He will continually do this for us.

My friends, God, in Jesus, will not let us go. Ever!

God is with us! God will not give up on us! We are not alone. We are never ever alone. No matter how deep the seas, no matter how fathomless our fears. Yes, fear is a very real and powerful thing, but, we should take care not to equate fear with faithlessness. God's promise is more powerful than our fear. It even overcomes the power of death. This truth might give us courage to cope with and eventually transcend fear. Courage, after all is what we need in these chaotic times. Courage is the ability to take our stand and do what needs to be done even when we are afraid.

So, let us not be overcome by the power of fear. God's promise to save us is more powerful. And as wonderfully hopeful as this is there is yet even more.

God's promise offers us a vision of ourselves in relationship to God. It tells us something about how God sees us, about what God calls us to be, about the hopes and dreams God has for each of us and our communities. God's promise tells us something about what we might yet become. Our stories are not yet over. There is more, so much more than we have yet seen. The past does not determine our future. The present does, what we do from this moment forward. Our faults and fears do not disqualify us from God's love and acceptance and hope.

So, then, we must take heart, despite the rough seas we sail upon. Take heart, my dear friends. Be of good courage, the future is as wide and open as the inland seas we sail. God is with us, God is for us and God is not done with us – ever.

And may the peace of God, which passes understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with you and remain with you always. Amen.