

Bishop's Address – GA Diocesan Convention 02/05/10

The Right Reverend Scott A. Benhase, 10th Bishop of Georgia

A Preacher is in the pulpit and right in the middle of his sermon a young man down front gets up and starts to leave. The preacher stops and says: "Son, what are you doing leaving in the middle of my sermon?" The young man replies: "I'm going to get me a haircut." "A haircut?" The preacher says. "Son, don't you think you could've got yourself a haircut before I started preaching?" The young man replied: "I guess I could've, but when you started preaching, I didn't need a haircut!"

That's a not too subtle hint to y'all that I could be up here a while this morning. There's a lot we need to talk about. After lunch, we'll be in small groups where we'll have a chance to discuss and discern among ourselves some of the challenges and opportunities I'll raise in this address. And then each small group will report back to the entire convention. We'll have forms at each table to make that as easy as possible. Your Diocesan Council and I need your guidance and direction for how we're to move forward, so we need each table to return the form as well as verbally summarize your conversation to the Convention. A summary of those results will be placed on the Diocesan Website soon after our convention is over.

What I want to do this morning is make some observations about what I have seen and heard in my short time in the Diocese and then, based on those observations, offer up some *guiding principles* for how we might move forward embracing the mission of Christ in our Diocese. I say "guiding principles" rather than goals or directives, because no one person, not even the bishop, has a monopoly on the discernment of the Spirit. We will discern together what God is calling us to be and do. My leadership, as I understand it, is to lead in such a way that the dreams we dream together become a reality in God's time and in God's economy.

So, let me begin with **some observations**.

I used to think that the old Will Rogers line about him not ever meeting a man he didn't like, was, well, ridiculous. I don't know about you, but I have met more than a few people in my life that I didn't like. I know Jesus has compelled me to love them. As Christians, it is not an option for us not to love someone. But that doesn't mean I have had to like everyone I've met. Well, I now have to admit Will Rogers had something going, at least if he had spent any time in Georgia. I have met quite a few of you and I can truly say that I have liked every last one of you.

I have been not only moved by the gracious way in which you have received me, but also by your genuine desire to be the Church of Jesus Christ, by your heart for the Gospel, and by your desire to humbly serve God. Besides that, you're great company. Maybe I spent too long in Washington, DC where relationships are all too often calculated equations based on ambition and power? It is now good to be home.

So, **my first observation** is that we have the most important ingredient we need to become the church God is calling us to become, and that is, we have one another. We know we have a God who loves us. We know we have a Savior who has redeemed us. And we know we have the Spirit who has promised to guide us into all truth. You are a gifted and committed group of church leaders. Of that I am convinced.

And that leads me to **my second observation**. I also sense from listening to many of you that you do not necessarily believe that you are gifted enough. And maybe you think your commitment to serve Jesus is not as strong as other people that you see in other places. Such negativity can be contagious. We can start believing what we say about ourselves; that we are not as gifted others or committed enough to the ministry of Christ.

Awhile back, I saw a documentary about the French Resistance during WWII. The director of the documentary interviewed men and women who were now in their 80s and asked them about their struggle against the Nazis. During the war, most were mere teenagers. The director asked them what they did in the Resistance, but it was one particular question that caught my attention. He asked: "You were a small, under-resourced group with few weapons at your disposal. You would disrupt a supply line here or delay a movement of soldiers there. But did you really think what you did mattered? Did you really think you could stop the Nazis?" And, you know, each one of them answered in basically the same way. They said: "Of course we didn't think we could stop the Nazis. We knew we were only fleas biting at an elephant. But we had faith that one day a great invasion force was coming across the ocean and we were just making things ready."

Please never believe that your service to Jesus and his church does not matter, or that it is not important enough, or that you are not up to the task. It does matter and you are up to the task. You and I can do our small yet great things for God because we know that one day a great heavenly invasion force is coming and we are just making things ready.

I want us to move forward confident that the great invasion force of the Spirit has already arrived. Jesus may be calling us to change the way we do things, he may be asking us to be open to a different way of being and doing church, but he is not asking us to do anything that is impossible, for I have heard it said somewhere that with God all things are possible.

Two more observations before I get to the *guiding principles* I promised to share with y'all.

We have a system of funding the ministry of our diocese that is, in my judgment, broken. It is a system that *can*, and I stress the word *can* here, lead to resentment and distrust. We have an "asking" that is graduated based on the size of a parish's budget. So some allegedly contribute a lower or higher percentage than others based on their respective size. I say "allegedly," because not every congregation meets its full asking. So, the percentages do not mean that much except to potentially create resentment. I know what clergy do. I have sat in those chairs like you for 26 years. You get the convention report and you know where your parish stands, so you check to see where the other guys are. And if your parish has met its full asking and some other parish has not, you are resentful. It is hard not to be.

And often the larger parishes resent the fact that they contribute a higher percentage than the smaller ones do. And since there are no consequences for not contributing what you are asked, the system is set up to be fundamentally distrustful. A few years ago some leaders of the Diocese improved the formula and it is definitely better now. But that improvement did not fundamentally address the brokenness of the system.

My friends, we must create a system that makes sense and is fair to all. It has to be a system that requires a sacrifice from all of us for the good of the Body. It has to be a system that is not onerous in its percentage. It has to be a system with mutual accountability. It has to be a system that leaves no room for resentment and mistrust.

If we do not address this soon, we will not have the resources to fund diocesan ministries. Ministries we need in order to be a healthy, growing diocese. The Diocesan Council and I met a few weeks ago and struggled with our financial reality. We recognized that some of the financial challenges we face are due to the larger economic recession our country is experiencing. However, we concluded that the seeds of this problem were present long before this recent recession.

We've been drawing on past financial reserves to fund current ministry. This must stop. The budget we'll adopt this afternoon is our budget. We need to avoid the use of words like "yours" and "theirs" or "you" and "they" as if the diocese were some foreign entity existing in some other space-time continuum. We

are the Diocese of Georgia. This will be our budget and it will be a reflection of what we believe is important. It is, unfortunately, a budget that will cause unavoidable reductions in staffing for important ministries of the diocese as well as our support for national and world mission. So, it will have a real affect on people and ministries we all care about. I'm convinced we can get beyond this current state of affairs, set things right, and build a solid foundation for the future. But we're going to have to get more comfortable talking about money with one another.

A preacher was just getting warmed up in his sermon when he proclaimed: "This church needs to get up and walk." And the *Amen Corner* in the back said in unison: "Let it walk, preacher, let it walk." With this encouragement, he got a little more fired up and after a while he said: "This church needs to not only walk, it needs to run." The *Amen Corner* in the back excitedly said: "Let it run, preacher, let it run!"

Now he was really getting into it, so he shouted: "This church someday is going to fly, but to fly we'll need money." The *Amen Corner* in the back replied: "let it walk, preacher, let it walk."

The reason some of us find that to be funny is that we recognize how closely it hits home. Like I said, we need to get over our reticence when it comes to talking plainly with one another about money. Some of you may already be tired of me staying on this subject so long. But I applied the *Jesus Test* to this address. I've spoken about money in this address much less than Jesus spoke about money in the Gospel. So, if you have a problem with such plain talk about money, take it up with Jesus. He is far more concerned about it than I am.

My last observation has to do with the way we train, deploy, and support our clergy, and by extension their spouses. There's been a sea change occurring in the church for some time. It's indicative of the economics of American culture. The cost of sending someone to seminary for three years now stands at over \$100k. Many young people considering such a call already have debt from their undergraduate education. If they have added debt from seminary, then they cannot afford to serve in our parishes and also pay off their debt.

This reality coupled with the rising costs of operating our parishes means that for a growing number of our congregations having a full-time seminary-trained priest is not possible. Wishing it were not so will not change anything. I don't believe, however, this means we have to lower our standards or our expectations for our clergy. It merely means we have to change some of our expectations and find new, creative ways of training and sustaining our clergy for parish leadership. We have had a good experience and solid results from our Deacon School for Ministry. We have developed and maintained high standards for deacon's formation and training. And we are going to strengthen those standards even more.

So, we need to start a *School for Pastoral Ministry*. But we cannot do it cheaply or we will get what we pay for. When it comes to priestly formation, I believe we can prepare future priests and support current ones with a combination of resources, utilizing our seminaries through distance learning, the gifted clergy we already have in the Diocese, and led by a strong educator who can oversee such an innovative program. In some areas, we may even be able to surpass the quality of training one would get in a seminary.

We also need to address the spiraling cost of health care for our clergy and lay employees. We can do that this year and we will. The Southeast officer for the Church Medical Trust is already planning to be with us in March so we can get this done soon.

Ok, those are my observations. Let me now turn to the *guiding principles* I would invite us to hold as we live into the challenges and opportunities God has placed before us.

This first guiding principle I offer is the straight-forward **Proclamation of the Gospel**. No church can claim to be the church of Jesus Christ if it does not clearly and unashamedly proclaim the Gospel – the Gospel that says: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son;” the Gospel that says God was “in Christ reconciling the world to God,” the Gospel that says “Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him.” We’re humble ambassadors of this Gospel. Salvation is God’s property, not ours. We’re in no position to tell God what to do or who God must or must not save. Even as we humbly admit we don’t have all the answers to every question, in the end, we’re still constrained by the Gospel to witness to the singular truth we have received in Christ. This is our core identity and it can never be debatable.

The second *guiding principle* I offer is the clear Gospel call for all of us to **serve the lost and the left-out**. This, too, is an issue of core identity. The Church is only the church of Jesus Christ when it is engaged in being Jesus’ Body in the world. As Teresa of Avila prayed so powerfully: “Christ has no body now but yours.” Our congregations should look like Jesus. When people in the communities in which we serve see what we are up to, they ought to recognize Jesus in the picture our actions paint. When they look us over, they should say: “those Episcopalians are up to their Jesus stuff again.”

The last *guiding principle* I offer is our call to be **Excellent Stewards** of the resources with which God has blessed us. In the Gospel, Jesus always connects discipleship to stewardship. As a diocese God has blessed us with many resources like our church buildings & properties, as well as diocesan properties like Honey Creek. You’ll be hearing from the Honey Creek Commission about the good work they have begun in the last year, so I’ll not steal their thunder here. We have all these amazing resources. But they are just that: resources. They are not ends unto themselves, but rather they are a means by which we proclaim the Gospel and serve Jesus in the people and circumstances of our lives.

Excellent stewardship requires that we employ all our resources wisely and not forget why God has blessed us with them. The church is not a museum or a preservation reserve. While we honor the past and the great saints who have gone before us, we follow a Lord who said: “the foxes have their holes, the birds of the air have their nests, but the Son of Man has no where to lay his head.” We must take great care to insure that our resources do not become false idols that we worship, but rather they remain a means by which we live out our vocation as the church.

Those are the three *guiding principles* I offer: unashamedly **proclaiming the Gospel**, humbly **serving Jesus**, and being **Excellent Stewards** of the gifts God has given us. As your Bishop, it is my expectation that when I visit your congregation, I will see clear evidence that these *guiding principles* or *core identities* are present in your common life. If they’re not present, I’m not going to harangue you or try to make you feel guilty for their absence. What I will do is roll up my sleeves and help you figure out how to provide what is lacking, as St. Paul would say. You have a right to expect that of me just as I have right to expect that of you. That is what mutual accountability in our church is all about.

At my first visitation to each of our congregations, I will ask the Priest and Wardens to sign a mutual covenant with me around these three guiding principles. That covenant will anticipate that on my next visit the congregation will have developed clear goals living into these three guiding principles. And since the covenant will be mutual, it will state clearly what my office will provide in the way of support for those goals. I firmly believe that the only way we will grow and thrive as a diocese is if we have high expectations for one another. That has not been true for much of our church’s history. But we live in new times.

One of my favorite old routines of Bill Cosby came out of his amazing imagination. He imagined what it would’ve been like if the Revolutionary War were fought like a football game. I’ll not do Dr Cosby justice in its retelling, but I’ll do my best. The scene is set when the two football captains, General Washington and General Cornwallis are called out to the middle of the field for the coin toss. The referee flips the coin

and General Washington wins the toss. So, that means the colonial army gets to wear any color clothing they want, hide behind trees, and shoot when they want to. Since the British army lost the coin toss, they have to wear bright red coats, march in straight lines, and only shoot when ordered to do so.

For too long in the Episcopal Church we have behaved like we are the British army. We thought we could march into town, open our church doors, and people would come right in by the hundreds, *but only if they truly deserved to be Episcopalians.*

Well, I'm not sure those good old days ever existed, but if they did, they are no longer with us. God has placed us in this new day with new challenges and opportunities. And we have some hard Gospel work to do. It will demand our best efforts. It will require our continued sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. It won't be enough for us to be just a little nicer to our neighbors or to be just a bit more generous with our time and treasure. It will mean that you and I will need to ask God to give us the very heart of Jesus. And like St Paul prayed, we will need the sword of the Spirit and the breastplate of righteousness if we are going to thrive.

As my children would say: "I'm up for that." We have nothing to lose that's not worth losing anyway. I do not know how many more years I have left on this earth. It could be only one, or twenty, or forty. I do not know. But I do know one thing: I want to spend whatever time I have with you proclaiming the Gospel, serving Jesus, and being good stewards of God's blessings.

Now is not the time to shrink back. Now is not time to circle the wagons. We worship a Lord who fed the 5000 so we are up to any challenge we face in the Diocese of Georgia. If this diocese sold stock, I'd say: "It's time to buy!" Come to think of it, that's a good idea for the next finance committee meeting.

Yes, we're facing serious challenges. And yes, we're about serious business. So, let's take God very seriously. Let's take the Gospel of our Savior very seriously. And, let's take our mission very seriously. But in the process, we should never take ourselves too seriously. When we do that we tend to become rigid and self-absorbed. There is absolutely no reason why we can't have fun as we live into our common mission.

In conclusion, I just want you to know what a privilege and an honor it is for me to serve as your Bishop. Like you, I am well aware it is always a privilege to serve Jesus in the people, things, and circumstances of my life. Thank you for your willingness to join me in this adventure.