

Pastoral Address of the Rt. Rev. Matthew Gunter, Eighth Bishop of Fond du Lac, to the 149th Annual Diocesan Convention, October 21, 2023

Good morning 149th Convention of the Diocese of Fond du Lac “Fear not, for I have redeemed you.” “Peace be with you.” Fear not. Peace be with you. These are the most common first words spoken by God or God’s messengers. If you think about it, it makes sense. Aside from the fact that the near presence of divinity might be more than a little unnerving, humans are often fearful, anxious beings. Even when we mask our fear and anxiety with posturing and bravado or deny it, even to ourselves.

But the truth is we are, as Evelyn Underhill wrote, “fragile, fugitive things, faulty, clumsy vessels.” Humans are vulnerable to hurt and loss. We bruise, we break, we bleed. And sooner or later, we die.

It is no small thing to believe that the Mystery at the heart of it all has taken on this fragile, fugitive flesh with all its bruising, breaking, bleeding, and, ultimately, death. I said in a sermon recently that the only way I find myself able to believe in God is if the truth of what God is about is revealed on the cross. I can believe in a God who took on the reality of human sin and suffering and living in vulnerable love endured the worst humans can do taking it to the cross and overcoming it all through the resurrection. All other god-talk just sounds too sentimental and inadequate to me for the hard, awful, tragic realities of this world.

And if the words spoken from the cross, “Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing” ring from the Heart of all eternity, there is good news for us all. If such a God says, “Fear not” and, appearing the flesh, says, “Peace be with you,” I can take those words to heart and seek to live them.

These are words I want us to embrace as a church. Fear not. Peace be with you. These are not necessarily easy words to live. We live in challenging times. Challenging times for the world generally. Challenging times for the church. Declining membership. Tightened budgets.

We have been in a long season of declining membership and attendance as a diocese. Our Average Sunday Attendance in the Diocese of Fond du Lac has decreased 43% over the last decade. That rate of decline is about average for the Episcopal Church in the Midwest. In 2021-2022 we saw a post-Covid uptick of 24% which is a higher percentage than any neighboring diocese or diocese in a neighboring state. That is at least somewhat encouraging.

But, friends there are other encouraging signs. Time will tell if the bounce back in attendance was just rebound from Covid or something more. I have reason to think it is more. This diocese is in a good place. Our budget is lean and tight. But just about everywhere I go in the diocese I can feel change. Good things are happening. Attendance is indeed up in many of our congregations, including new members. There were several congregations that recorded adult baptisms over the last year.

And I can feel the new energy and good spirit in our congregations. We have recently installed three new rectors at St. Luke’s, Sister Bay; St. Matthias, Minocqua; and St. John the Baptist, Wausau. Attendance and participation are up in all three. That is not just about the new rectors of course. They have come at a moment when the congregations that called them are ready for change and growth. Last week we had the best attendance at the Walsingham Pilgrimage we have had in years, covid or no covid.

And it is not just attendance. There is more engagement in Bible study and other book groups and things like centering prayer. We are finding new, creative ways of serving our communities. Here are just a few examples:

- The Laundry Love ministry that was stated by a member of the Beloved Community that includes Intercession, Stevens Point
- The Joyful Noise worship at Ascension Merrill for those with mental disabilities.
- Trinity, Oshkosh's initiative to pay off millions of dollars of their neighbors' medical debt.
- St. Peter's, Sheboygan Falls partnering with The Production Farm.
- And LOVE, INC an ecumenical ministry in Sheboygan County which is supported by several of our congregations, under its current board president, Deacon Paul Aparicio of Grace, Sheboygan, is moving toward a partnership with the Episcopal Migration Ministries to support immigrants and refugees.
- Though it is not exactly new, our summer camp program is now a joint venture with the Dioceses of Eau Claire and Milwaukee and draws campers and staff from across Wisconsin. It has been rechristened, "EpiscoWisco" and under Erin Wolf's leadership, it remains a star in our crown.

These are but a sample of goodness that is going on across the diocese.

There are reasons for hope, reasons to trust that God is not done with us yet. God is not done with the Church. But we live in radically changing and discombobulating times. For many it feels something like exile. We long for a past we can no longer access. Many of us here came of age in a different century – before the Internet, before 9/11, before the invasion of Iraq, before the Great Recession, before Covid-19, before Jan.6.

Many of us also came of age in a time when many were marginalized and forced to live in the shadows. The world we live in now can feel strange and foreign. It was also a time when the church had a better reputation. And more people were inclined to participate.

It was a different time. And a different church. Not that the church of the second half of the 20th century necessarily reflected the faith of the ages.

In any event there is no going back. Like the people Isaiah spoke to, there is only going forward and trusting that the God who was faithful in the past we knew will remain faithful as we journey into an unfamiliar future.

God is not done with the church. "Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you. After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'" Jesus sends the Church as the Father sent him. The Church has been sent to be in some sense the presence of Jesus in the world. The Church is the Jesus Movement Jesus started. And he will not abandon it.

We need to reclaim a humble confidence that we have been sent to continue Jesus' ministry of reconciliation. The Church has been described as an ever-widening sphere of an ever-deepening reconciliation.

That means we are to be about our own deepening reconciliation, drawing closer to God through prayer and worship practicing an ever-deepening reconciliation among ourselves, and being a reconciling presence to the rest of the world.

We need to reclaim a humble confidence that the Church is where Jesus is most fully known and the forgiving, healing, transforming power of his Spirit is most fully known.

We need to reclaim a humble confidence that we have good news to share – good news worth inviting others to give their lives to. And inviting them to join the Church to experience Jesus with us – to be Jesus with us. I am encouraged by the evangelism workshop Fr. Chris Corbin led this summer. We need to do more of that kind of thing.

The reason I am convinced we need to consider reunion with the other two dioceses of Wisconsin is it will enable us to be about that better.

Reunion provides us with the opportunity to take a fresh look at how we are organized—to become one diocese not to create a bigger version of what we have been, but to reconfigure and organize ourselves in the service of mission. It will allow us to use our combined resources – human as well as financial – to share the joy of the gospel, create community and engage in ministry.

We have envisioned an Episcopal Diocese of Wisconsin that will confidently bear witness to the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ, while listening to and learning from our neighbors of all faiths and none.

Together we can be a diocese that will be better able to help congregations form committed followers of Jesus, equipping them with the spiritual resources to engage the challenges of life in our times.

We can be a diocese with congregations engaged in our communities and participating in ministries of reconciliation, restoration, and repair.

Together, we can realize this vision, participating more fully in God’s mission in Wisconsin; fostering the vitality of our congregations, both large and small; and finding innovative ways to adapt our ministry to the changing needs of the communities in which we find ourselves.

Together, we can cultivate communities of worship, practice, and discipleship, both old and new, and seek fresh ways to follow Jesus from the heart of our Anglican tradition.

Reunion will give us new ways and new energy for reaching people seeking hope and the promise of wholeness for this badly broken world.

Friends, God is not done with us. We have been given good news. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. But, if we want to engage this changing world with the good news of Jesus Christ, we need to adapt. We need to change. But hear the word of God, hear the word of Jesus. “Fear not, for I have redeemed you.”

“Peace be with you.”