

Bishop's Convention Address, November 21, 2009

I Corinthians 13:1-13

"Faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

Back to the basics. While I was on sabbatical at the beginning of this year, and as I held the Diocese, all of you, in my prayer each day, a sense began to rise up from within that as bishop and people it was to time to start again, to reorient. Perhaps the central theme throughout the scriptural story is God's continual offering of the possibility of re-creation; the new; raising up what is old, lost or even dead, to new life and new possibility.

Please do not misunderstand me. This does not mean that the resurrection power of God is not already among us and doing amazing things in the mission and ministry you offer to God's world. As I travel around the Diocese I see plenty of evidence of God's transforming grace. I saw it in Dorothy Pierce's ordination to the diaconate this past Saturday. I see it and hear it in the stories of confirmands almost weekly as they share how their participation in a faith community has brought them life, even restoration and new wholeness. I see it in a Diocesan Board that is working very hard and has recommitted itself to living into a deeper and broader ownership of the leadership of the Diocese. I see it in districts discovering new ways to cooperate in ministry and develop strategies to be a more vital presence as "the passionate presence of Christ for one another and the world we are called to serve." I celebrate these initiatives and marvel often at the faithfulness I see in you and among you.

My focus is that I want those Kingdom realities to be more clearly reflected in the very structure of the Diocese, in our relationships, in the ways we are accountable to one another, beginning with me at the center. Back to the basics. I want it reflected in all we do in diocesan committees and commissions, strategic planning, staff, vestries, programs – all we are and all we do. I Corinthians 13 is about the basics of Christian community, St. Paul's call to the church in Corinth, so I want to return to that reading we heard this morning.

More often than not we hear this 13th chapter read at weddings. In this way the chapter stands on its own. If, however, we read it in context, we realize that St. Paul is still speaking of spiritual gifts from the previous chapter. The great gift of love is not ordinary or general. The love spoken of here is specifically the love of God poured out in Christ. This Christ-love is the very basis of faith and hope. It is the reason we can have faith and hope. So let me re-read parts of the chapter with this in mind, substituting the word "love" with the phrase "the love poured out in Christ."

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have "the love poured out in Christ," I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal ...If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but I do not have "the love poured out in Christ," I gain nothing.

"The love poured out in Christ" is patient, "the love poured out in Christ" is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude..."The love poured out in Christ" bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things,

endures all things. "The love poured out in Christ" never ends...And now faith, hope and "the love poured out in Christ" abide, these three; and the greatest of these is "the love poured out in Christ."

It is only by loving St. Paul is telling us that the Christian exists authentically. And rather than define love, Paul personifies it with the use of fifteen verbs, all involving another person. He seems to be indicating that the future Church he was envisioning must give supreme importance to the virtues of faith, hope and love, the love poured out in Christ. Furthermore, it is always exhibited in our relationships with another. Back to the basics.

During my sabbatical I had the opportunity and privilege of serving an entire week with our medical mission to El Salvador. Picture this: as we arrived early in the morning in a different village each day we had as many as 200 people waiting in line for medical attention. Many of them had walked for miles, often with small children. As they arrived for the first step toward diagnosis and treatment, I was responsible with a helper to record the person's weight and height. In order to get accurate measurements, I found myself saying over and over again the words, "No zapatos, por favor" – no shoes please. I must have said this several hundred times before I suddenly realized that the doorway where I was receiving people had become for me holy ground, a place where shoes, when people had any, were removed for a purpose greater than I first imagined. I had moved from the practical to the place of "the love poured out in Christ." Every person we meet in El Salvador is Christ. And every one of you is Christ. And as we approach one another, always, "no zapatos, por favor." It is the holy ground we share between us and on which we stand as we engage God's world in Christ's Name. Everywhere is holy ground, including right here.

Perhaps you can see this in another way. At Grace Church, Syracuse, there is a beautiful stained glass window of John Pendleton Oakerhater (O-kuh-ha-tah) blessed and dedicated there in 2005. His feast day on the church calendar is September 1. He became an apostle of Christ to the Cheyenne people and exercised a lifelong ministry of peace. He was at Grace Church, Syracuse baptized in 1878 and in 1881 ordained a deacon also at Grace Church, sponsored by the Diocese of Central New York.

There is a curious thing about the window, however. A deacon's stole is typically worn across the left shoulder, gathered or crossed on the right hip. If one gazes upon the window from inside the church, Deacon Oakerhater's stole is on the left hip. Only if the window is looked upon from outside the walls of the church is the stole on the right hip. Isn't that as it should be? I have no idea if this was purposeful or not, but it doesn't matter. The point is, the church's servant ministry as incarnated in the role of the deacon, is best personified as the church faces and engages the world in which God has placed us. It is about mission and our mission is born from the place of "the love poured out in Christ." "Righteousness and justice are the foundations of God's throne" as Psalm 89 reminds us. Back to the basics. "No zapatos, por favor."

The gift of "the love poured out in Christ" is how we are called to approach each other and God's world at all times. Even as I say that it is my desire that everything we do as Diocese, our structures and our relationships in those structures, reflect the Kingdom reality of God's love poured out in Christ, I am aware that "diocese" is often at best abstract. We get a sense of it gathered at a convention, but even

this view is rather limited. Let me tell you of how I have experienced “diocese” this past week, a way in which in the words of poet Seamus Heaney “the light and wildness of God’s love catches the heart off guard and blows it open; our sober grip on reality is shaken loose and we are delivered up into love’s full flare” (from “Postscript” by Seamus Heaney).

Many of you know the tragedy of Saturday a week ago of the death of Father Jim Jensen, rector of Grace Church, Utica and dean of the Utica-Rome District. His funeral was Thursday evening. Our hearts break for his wife Kathy and the family, and for the people of Grace Church. Many of us are hurting at the loss of this good man and good priest and his leadership in the Diocese will be dearly missed. When Jim became ill last Saturday just before the ordination liturgy at St. Mark’s, Chenago Bridge, unbeknownst to me at first, a clergy person immediately tended to him and went with him and Kathy to the hospital. We held Jim in prayer as we awaited news of his diagnosis and treatment to take care of whatever it was that was going on. Most people had left the reception when we got the terrible news that Jim had died. Immediately people gathered round and ministered to each other. Tears were shed as shock overwhelmed us. A priest and I held each other. Several clergy went to the hospital where I anointed Jim and commended him to God’s love and mercy, “the love poured out in Christ.” A Standing Committee member showed up afterward to check on us. This is Diocese.

That same night diocesan staff went back to the office in Syracuse and got on phones and email letting people know about Jim. More tears were shed and prayer offered. The rector and people of the Church of the Resurrection in Oswego, where I was supposed to be on Sunday morning, graciously and fully without hesitation understood that I needed to be with the good people of Grace Church, Utica, and not with them for confirmations. Sunday morning, Diocesan Board members showed up at Grace Church. Clergy from the district, retired and those without an early morning liturgy came to the 8AM Eucharist to support the people of Grace Church. Young people at Grace Church whom I had just met at the Happening closing the week before re-connected with me that morning. All week long people have been sending emails and calling, even showing up unannounced at the diocesan offices, all to offer prayer, support and assistance in any way possible. A prayer shawl for Kathy Jensen was blessed in one of our parishes Sunday morning as prayers were offered for Jim and the family and the people of Grace Church. Almost five-hundred people including at least fifty clergy were able to be present for Jim’s funeral, to share in “the love poured out in Christ.” This is Diocese.

In his wonderful book Come and See, David Keller recounts the story of a person who was concerned that her baptism “did not take” because she did not comprehend much of Christian doctrine. The story ends with a spiritual mentor saying to her, “You don’t have to understand the mystery of God to be a Christian. But you have to practice.” We do practice here in Central New York. As your bishop I am recommitting myself to working with you to provide oversight and a structure that assists us in keeping grounded in the love of Christ and to be even more faithful in our practice. The love of God poured out in Christ is not a mere feeling. It takes specific shape on a cross and explodes in resurrection hope. We are called to make that same love specific in our day, in this Diocese: in all of our committees and commissions; in all of our strategic planning; in budget processes; as we develop new formation opportunities; as we respond to the challenges of shrinking resources; as we seek to be creative in new models of ministry not only for the ordained, but for all the baptized. It is the quality of that love that I

want us to be able to see in everything we do. Even more – it is the quality of that love that I want the world we serve to see when they are touched by the people of the Diocese of Central New York. It starts with me as servant of all.

My clarion call will continue to be formation and mission, formation and mission, formation and mission, in order to live more fully into our vision “to be the passionate presence of Christ for one another and the world we are called to serve.” I want you to know what I have been offering to God in my prayer for a while now. As it should, the scriptures from the Daily Office shape my prayer. Some weeks ago the reading from the Hebrew scriptures was from I Chronicles 6 and became my prayer for all of you each day in these words: “Let your priests (and deacons) O Lord God, be clothed with salvation, and let your faithful rejoice in your goodness.” I pray this with love for all of you as we are held always by the love poured out in Christ.

More recently, I have added another offering to my daily intercessions as informed by Psalm 80: “Restore us, Lord God of hosts.” Restore us. I trust, for us, the love poured out in Christ. It is the root of my faith and my hope. Back to basics. “No zapatos, por favor.”

I now offer you what I will call a “choral amen” of a different variety. It is my firm belief that God is already present everywhere we go. God is present in the culture and we are called to name where we see resurrection presence and hope as we go forth in mission. It will not surprise many of you to know that one of the main places I find God present is in music of many genres, even in the group “Sugarland.”

“Faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is the love poured out in Christ.”
Back to basics.