

Diocesan Convention 2024

Welcome to our 44th diocesan convention here in El Camino Real! We are on-line, and this sermon is recorded so that congregations will be able to use it tomorrow or the following week.

At Diocesan Convention, it is our practice to rejoice in what we have done this past year, and to hear some reports from our diocesan leaders.

And while it is true that we have done much, what is in our hearts and minds as we think about our country and the world is highly important.

What I want to talk about today is the particularity of the church as an institution. For it sits in a place that is both in the world and apart from the world. And we, as its members, live in this liminal space.

Let's be truthful: anticipating the outcome of a general election in a country as divided as we are has been a tough place to be. As Christian peoples, though, grounded in scripture, our church year itself invites us to experiences of advent and lent--times where we walk a path of holiness through a hazy landscape. This is our pilgrim journey.

In recent months, I have been asked anxious and also practical questions about how the results of the general election could affect the work of the Episcopal Church and more specifically our ministry in the Diocese of El Camino Real. And it is a question that I want to address clearly today and as we go forward.

Let me speak to you directly from my own experience.

As a child in Peru, I grew up in a place of political unrest and uncertainty. At that time, governments were democracies and oligarchies, and then came military coups and dictatorships. I had a front row seat to both the complexities of the political situation, and the ways in which the faithful continued to serve. Yes, emotions ran high, but the work of the faithful was little altered.

Certainly, God's people did not ignore what was going on in the world, and each had their own opinion about a particular leader and their form of government. Even my parents did not agree politically, and my front row seat included the discussions at our family dinner table. Things did not end with discussion, for my parents chose to engage in ministry differently from each other. Yet, in hindsight, I can see how each was following the Baptismal Covenant and living faithfully. This experience imprinted itself on me and on my siblings.

During that time I came in contact with the great theologian Gustavo Gutierrez. He said repeatedly of his own experience, “I believe in order to understand.”¹ By this, Gutierrez meant that belief was the lens through which he gained understanding of this complex world and how to live in it.

As Christians, and we should be unafraid to claim that title of “Christians,” our personal belief in Jesus’ ministry and our hope in the Risen Lord inform how we go through life. Our work as Christian people becomes shaped and reshaped every day by our understanding of the gospel.

The primacy of our focus on the gospel does not mean that we turn our attention away from what goes on in the political situation either here in our country or elsewhere in the world. What it does mean is that our belief grounds us in terms of our words and actions in the world in which we live as it is. People are hungry, imprisoned, sick and strangers in a strange land. We know what to do.

We know that interacting with people on a very simple level to provide the basics of life is hopeful. We know that God brings hope, and we are messengers of that hope. No one can take that hope away.

Hope was palpable last Saturday, as our new Presiding Bishop, Sean Rowe, was invested in a ceremony that was viewed on livestream.

While I was watching, I was reminded that it used to be that the Episcopal Church would be characterized as place where people went to “see and be seen.” That unfortunate saying was challenged by the simplicity of this investiture, and the directness of Presiding Bishop Rowe’s charge to the Episcopal Church. As he told us, we need to unbind ourselves from that which holds us back and keeps us from living into our calling. I would add, if we want to be seen, really seen, we need to be seen as followers of Jesus. We need to be known as communities that follow Jesus.

Christian community cannot exist on the basis of exclusion of others. As followers of Jesus, in our case as Episcopalians, we belong, not because we all agree, or have the same understanding of God, or voted for the same people. We belong because we connect through faith, sharing joys and sorrows, and always broadening our sense of community to include those who seek to learn and share their own stories of faith.

In Biblical terms, belonging has a deep meaning. It means “being fully known and fully loved by God and one another.” And that belonging is what we each hope for—to be known and loved in ways that are limitless.

You probably remember that the Apostle Paul took issue with the Corinthians on their understanding of what it meant to belong to a community. He learned some Corinthians claimed to belong to one leader or another: Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or Christ.² Paul reminded the Corinthians rather forcefully that their sense of belonging was not a product of an allegiance to any one human leader, not even himself. Rather, Paul tells them, they are baptized into Christ, and that baptism tells them who they are and whose they are.

The Corinthians belong to God and to their ever-expanding community. So do the Episcopalians.

Now, the Corinthians lived along a major trade route, where people from everywhere came along--and some joined the Jesus movement in Corinth. Diversity was both their blessing and their challenge.

We in El Camino Real live in a very diverse place as well. We are a diocese of many races and cultures; our diversity is one of geography, socioeconomics, education, age, theology, politics, and so on. I love our diversity. I talk about us to anyone who will listen. We are proud of our diversity, and with that diversity comes challenge. For the gift of diversity keeps issues of race, gender and language at the forefront, and compels us to address our personal issues of prejudice and bias.

This requires that not only do I know myself as God's beloved, I also recognize you as God's beloved.

Love, with a capital L, God's love, is way beyond what we can imagine or expect, which is very good news. For being beloved by God exceeds the limitations of our humanity. It extends beyond natural disaster, elections or personal strife.

As people who belong to the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement, when we use the phrase "God's beloved," we are including in that circle those toward whom we may not particularly feel love.

As a follower of Jesus, I am to cope with my own judgments, resentments, and biases, and have the courage to step into the place where my heart can seek the heart of one with whom I profoundly disagree.

Remember that our former Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry said constantly, "if it's not about love, it's not about God." This is a good guide for us all. Let it be about God. Let love drown out hate. Let gratitude overtake scarcity. Let our fears be behind us.

At the investiture of a Presiding Bishop, this question is always asked "How do you come among us and with what confidence?"

The response given by the Bishop is: “I come knowing nothing except Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. I come as a pilgrim to be in prayer with the people of God in order to be strengthened for the journey ahead.”³

This authentic statement is at our foundation. For there is no program that will save us, no panacea that will cure us, nothing other than this: we are on a journey together, and we have work ahead of us--all of it rooted in our Baptismal Covenant.

This work is not new to Christians, for as followers of the Risen Lord, we were made for times such as these. God created us and formed us for this world. Believing, belonging and beloved, we are people of faith, in community, and deeply, deeply loved by God.

May God in his mercy lead us through these times; but above all, may he lead us to hi'mself.⁴

¹Gutierrez, Gustavo. We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), p. 36.

²New Revised Standard Version. 1 Corinthians 1:11-15.

³“The Investiture of the Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church,” The Greeting and Welcome.

⁴Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. Letters and Papers from Prison (Denver, CO: Touchstone, 1997).