

Seek Ye First

O God, by your Holy Spirit you moved Teresa of Avila to manifest to your Church the way of perfection: Grant us, we pray, to be nourished by her excellent teaching, and enkindle within us a keen and unquenchable longing for true holiness; through Jesus Christ, the joy of loving hearts, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

“Grace to you and peace.”¹

“I always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in my prayers [by name according to our daily prayer cycle – every day around 10 o’clock Pacific Time,] constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

‘For I know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that God has chosen you, because the message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of person I am learning to be among you for your sake.

‘And you are imitators of the saints and of the Lord, for in spite of struggles you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Eastern Oregon and in the far corners of the Church; and servants of both believers and non-believers in all the world.

‘For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in your communities in Eastern Oregon but in places where your faith in God has become known – from New Orleans to Condega, from Haiti to Sudan, from Michigan to Kenya and other parts of Africa – so that we have no need to speak about it [although your bishop will – and most proudly!] For the people of those regions report what kind of ministry you have and how you serve a living and true God, how you have come to them to open your lives to transformation and grace, going out to meet his Son whom he raised from the dead-- Jesus, who is revealed in those we are called to serve.

¹ Adapted from 1 Thessalonians (especially first two chapters NRSV)

‘You yourselves know, my sisters and brothers, that our Diocesan visits coming to you were not in vain, but we were able to hear and learn of your ministry, and to speak with you in holy conversation about our ministry together – as congregations in partnership in the work of the Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Oregon.

We learned about a permaculture garden and of the many community gardens that feed the hungry and enable the hungry to feed themselves and their families. We learned that while few of us have as many children in our Sunday worship as we would like, we find children to serve in homework support, Friday Friends of Jesus, Vacation Bible Schools, in preschools and child care and at Ascension School.

We discovered that our good cooking and hospitality aren’t reserved for our congregations but are shared in community dinners, the Family Kitchen, Warming Places, and food pantries. One congregation began to gather food to be distributed via a medical clinic when they learned that the greatest danger to health in their community was malnutrition. Another congregation delivers baskets of fresh fruits and vegetables.

We wrapped ourselves in prayer shawls small and great and delighted in one parish hall decorated with shorts and dresses they have sewn for children and women in Africa. Makes your eyes pop with the wonderful colors.

Much of our ministry is (as one congregations calls it) up close and personal, reaching out to bring worship and Eucharist and/or to just spend time just listening to folks who live alone or in nursing homes. The creativity of our ministry will astound you – one group cuts, delivers and stacks firewood to those in need, another offers office and gathering space to non-profits who serve the least of these in their neighborhoods, still another takes its musical groups out into the community.

Almost all of you host Twelve Step Groups many of whom are blessed by extra mile generosity including providing coffee and cookies. And another offer summer services for tourists at the lake. That, my sisters and brothers is just a sample of the amazing ministry that is EDEO. There are so many others I’ve neglected to mention – please forgive me if I’ve omitted your favorite – there are too many to mention them all.

Many of you do these ministries as congregations but even more of you do them in partnerships – mission trips are often across congregational or even denominational lines, sewing and knitting groups are ecumenical, meals and homeless services are shared among congregations in various ways. Vacation Bible School dates are coordinated so that children have the opportunity for a full summer of day camps and love. Many of you partner with Habitat or other agencies to provide professional level care.

We have learned that there is value added to shared ministry. Not only do we have folks to help us carry the load and with whom we can develop ministries in ways not possible by ourselves, but in these partnerships we have found new friends, and worshiped and engaged in Bible Study with people who think and worship differently from us.

We have learned that there are some ministries we can't do locally – certainly our mission trips to places far and wide are examples of this, but I'm noticing our shared ministry at Ascension School. Some of you are counselors, resource staff, chaplains, clergy support and board members. Others of you recruit campers and raise funds to support them. Still others make the long drive to that far northeast corner to take campers or to go there yourself to deepen your faith, nourish your relationship with God, and delight in your friendships with one another. None of us could do all this in our congregation – we need each other and we need Ascension School.

Ascension School, as you know (and have just heard) provides a unique opportunity for our children, teens and young adults to be transformed by a residential, challenging, encounter with the Holy. You know, I've been thinking about how important our program is for our children: it's place where they hear the Story, learn about the world, and bring those together in action. Church camp can do more in a week than most Sunday Schools can do in a year – because it is a living, breathing, life-changing Christian community. And because it is all these things, think about how important it is our for resident staff – all those amazing young people who work for peanuts and give long days over long weeks to love and care for, challenge and delight, play with and teach our (and others') children and grandchildren.

They give a lot – and they learn a lot. At Ascension School, as resident staff, they have opportunities to do ministry discernment with others who know them, work closely with other Christians and pray with them regularly. They supervise small Christian communities in their cabins and family groups, they teach children what it means to make good choices away from home, and to live gracefully with people they hardly know. They do important and amazing ministry – then together they reflect on that ministry and change it and develop it and learn from it. They are the best critics and developers of our program. We don't see lots of young adults in our congregations, but there are some most excellent ones being trained in leadership at Ascension School. We do have Young Adult ministry! Oh yes, have you noticed our executive staff at Ascension School? Who's training those counselors? Planning camps? Running the school? Establishing an Annual Fund and Endowment Program? Young Adults! Pat yourself on the backs – this is ministry that makes a difference.

This weekend we celebrate Haiti & Here. Rebuilding the cathedral in Haiti isn't something any one congregation can accomplish, it isn't even something any one diocese can do. This is work that requires us all! The whole church – from Maine to Columbia, from Florida to Alaska, from Hawai'i to Europe – is necessary for this project.

And this is development work is beyond the scope of Episcopal Relief and Development, other relief and development organizations (think of our folks out there digging wells!) and our life giving mission trips.

Rebuilding the cathedral will help rebuild the community. Schools, training centers, a symphony orchestra, the arts and a central community center – these are just a few ways the cathedral reaches out to serve the people of Haiti. These are all part of the cathedral that we are helping to rebuild. And when there is actually enough money in hand to begin building, the work will be done by Haitians!

Locally, we hope that the Here part of this ministry will be central to our 2012 Diocesan Convention: that every member of the convention will have an opportunity to work together in one of several shared projects chosen by a special committee who will consider all your ideas, hopes and dreams.

Last night one of the themes we brought forward – and front and center— was doing more with less. But here’s what I notice: We may be doing more with less money, but we are not really doing more with *less*. We’re doing more with more love, more enthusiasm, more risk taking, more truth telling, more partnerships, more sharing of resources, more careful stewardship of all that we have. AND, we’re discovering new gifts and new possibilities.

Were you as impressed as I was with those fabulous presentations we heard and saw last night? The Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Oregon is a unique and wonderful community . . . and place. I’ve lived and worshiped in several dioceses now, but this is the only one that could have pulled off what we did last night. What does this say about our call and our gifts for ministry?

Our theme this year, *Sing a New Song*, comes out of my conviction that sustainable music programs are possible in every one of our congregations. We’re not only learning new music, but we are discovering new sources for music. We’re also learning to sing the new song of celebration that we discovered last night – as we move from where we have been to where we are going.

I was in conversation with a few of my brother bishops last month and we were talking about possibilities for EDEO. They asked me “Do these people love each other?” I was pleased to say, without hesitation, “Why yes they do.” That was hugely evident last evening.

We are in a wonderful place. We aren’t in the Promised Land, but we’re on our way.

We aren’t even at Mount Nebo yet.² The Hebrews marched around the Sinai Peninsula for forty long years before they entered the Promised Land, so our few years is really only a drop in the bucket. (I know that for some of you it feels like forever. Feel free to murmur and mumble!) We have spent a great deal of time talking about the models for the future of the diocese and the models for a future bishop. You have told us what you think and what you hope for . . . but there is not yet a consensus a straight path forward.

² Deuteronomy 34 was the Hebrew Scripture for the weekend.

We are called, I believe, to some more months of conversation and discovery. However, there are some conclusions I believe we can draw from our previous conversations and perhaps we can move forward a little by setting aside some of the baggage we have been carrying:

First, there is little enthusiasm for folding EDEO into other dioceses or reuniting with the diocese of Oregon. For a few of you these seem like the realistic options – finances being what they are – but for most of you there is a sense that we have a unique calling, and character to care for the *microi* that seems to mean we must be firmly planted here in Eastern Oregon.

Second, there is even less enthusiasm for building an endowment to support a full time bishop. While some believe the resources are there, and are willing to work on this, not many are willing at this time, to risk staking our future on that possibility.

However, there does seem to be support for some kind of Missional Bishop – but we don't really know what we mean by that. So, while I think we don't yet have a consensus on the way forward, I believe the signposts are out there. These several different understandings will give us clues about the direction we are called to go.

In Eastertide of 2000 I walked the Camino de Santiago in Spain. I had a map, but it didn't always help. Some of the terrain was farm country (sometimes when I drive in parts of Eastern Oregon I remember my trek through Spain) some of the paths were just that, paths, and sometimes one just has to walk cross country. What a pilgrim depends on when walking the Camino, are *flechas amarillas* –yellow arrows painted on fence posts, trees, the path itself, the sides of barns and pubs.

In our pilgrimage, I think we have begun to catch sight of the *flechas*. They're not as close together as we would like, but they are there.

They are . . .

Mission. We want to be a church in mission – proclaiming God's love to the world in word and deed. We want to make a difference in the place we are planted, and usually, in a less direct way, in the world.

Relationships. We want to love deeply, because we know that as we grow closer to one another and those whom we are called to serve, we will grow closer to God.

Integrity. We want to live in faith that takes God at God's word – knowing that God is with us, that God calls us. And as we were reminded last night, we want to live knowing that when God calls us, God gives us what we need to accomplish the work we have been given to do. We want to be people who take the gospel seriously.

Creativity. We know the old ways won't work the way they used to, so we're open to thinking out of the box. Sing a new song! I realized this week that we probably haven't seen the right model yet. It will be a new thing. That it will emerge out of the old ones as we die to our preconceptions that limited our wild and crazy possibilities.

However, when we started talking partnerships a question about whether or not we could be a truly ecumenical diocese/synod/conference appeared in the parking lot. I was intrigued.

In my reading of the comments, and my conversations with you, I wonder if the ecumenical dimension has the most potential even if it is the hardest one to pull off? One quarter of our congregations are structurally ecumenical – each in their own way. Others of you are vigorously ecumenical in your life and ministry

In South India, the Christians make up about 1-2% of the population. Forty years ago there were several Protestant denominations serving that 1-2%. They believed that not only was such competition unsustainable, it was moreover, and more importantly, a scandal to the gospel. So, with a lot of work, years of negotiations, and deep, deep prayer, congregations, dioceses, conferences, presbyteries, synods, etc., came together to become the Church of South India – or CSI. They are a vibrant church made up of what were once Reformed, Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist and Anglican congregations. In their goal to make the gospel more visible to those around them, they each let go of something that had once seemed essential, and created a wonderful, vibrant and fun church. I wonder, what can CSI teach us? What do our ecumenical congregations in all their variety have to teach us?

So, while it is clear we don't know clearly where the path is, we have a few *flechas*. Eric will, I am sure, give us a few more.

Perhaps we will begin to articulate what it is we are called to do together that we cannot do separately. Perhaps we will begin to see how our currencies are made more valuable by sharing them or pooling them with others or just by keeping them moving!

Perhaps as we have more conversations about what it is we hope to do and be, we will see how we should be shaped for ministry – form follows function.

So that is what I hope we will begin this weekend. I have asked Eric Law to help us with that process. His new work on Holy Currencies will help us expand the conversation. So far we have spoken primarily of the currency of cash or money and to some extent of the currency of relationship, but Eric will remind us that there are at least four other currencies that need to be considered as well: time and place, leadership, truth and wellness. And he will help us see how they flow together in God's Grace.

I believe that this work will help us think even more creatively than we already have. Following the *flechas*, inventorying the currencies, and taking seriously that perhaps our vocation is where our deepest passions meet the world's greatest needs,³ we will begin to articulate what the Promised Land looks like to us. We will be strengthened to meet giants and to plant vineyards.

The Episcopal Church is waiting for us to be more creative and adventurous. It's our turn to teach the church – we don't need to wait for them to decide what's best for us.

I believe hope and imagination are spiritual practices – disciplines that transform our souls. This will be our work for some time – perhaps it is more about becoming who we are than finding a structure. This unknowing may raise our anxiety, but we're people of the land, we know how to live with uncertainty. We know how to wait for the harvest to ripen . . .

. . . while we weed, and hoe, and water and prune.

³ Paraphrase of Frederick Beuchner quote (can't find it right now)

Discerning a call is more like that than it is like decision-making. In decision-making we list the pros and cons, counting them up and deciding which seems more reasonable. Discernment is listening to the Holy Spirit mediated through the Body of Christ – and very often it doesn't seem reasonable at all. It includes paying attention to the quiet voices as well as the loud ones, it consists of prayer and Bible study, worship and silence, questions and challenges. It will work incrementally until we – EDEO – have come together in a united vision that values one another and our life together as diocese, as church as the people of God. Until we discern a life together that supports mission and ministry, and that brings us to a deeper knowledge of God and God's call to us.

‘Now may God, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together—spirit, soul, and body—and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it!’⁴

‘And my friends, keep up your prayers for us all. Greet all the followers of Jesus there with a holy embrace. And the amazing grace of Jesus Christ be with you!

So let us sing a new song. A song of hope. A song of resurrection.
A song of new life in Christ.

***The Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all,
be with us all, evermore.***⁵

⁴ Paraphrase of the end of 1 Thessalonians – The Message

⁵ (*Singing Eric Law's version with the congregations*)