

**Bishop's Address**  
**155th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh**  
**October 17, 2020**

*A transcript of the remarks to Convention delivered by the Right Reverend Dorsey W.M. McConnell, VIII Bishop of Pittsburgh:*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Before I dive into this address, I want to give particular recognition to the staff and the convention planning committee, who together have been so important in our work running up to this: Andy Muhl and Rich Creehan, Kathi Workman, Marlene Rihn, Canons Kim Karashin+, Natalie Hall+ and Jay Geisler+, our chancellors Andy Roman and Sue DeWalt, and Jim Shoucair+, Bonnie-Marie Yager-Wiggan, and last but not least, the Dean of the Cathedral, Aidan Smith+. Can we give big [virtual] hand waves to them?

I'd like to begin by asking you how you are this morning. I mean it. Can we take a few moments right now to stock of the state of our souls. We are now barely two weeks away from an important election. We are still in the middle of a pandemic. And so I ask you just to think a little bit, and feel a little bit. What do you hope for? What are you afraid of? What losses have you suffered in the past few months? What have you gained? Where are you grateful, right now, right here?

For my part, to be honest, I am a little wobbly this morning, a little sad because this is my last regular convention as your bishop, and a little awestruck by the privilege of having shared these years with you. I don't like feeling wobbly. I tend to push it away, but I know when I do, it just comes back, so I might as well go down into it and meet Jesus again there, since I know it is at the bottom of all my wobbliness that He always meets me.

And I trust I'm not alone in this. I wonder if COVID has shown us all how much we need God; because, it has made us so afraid and anxious. And when we're afraid and anxious we respond by trying to re-assert control, by planning, anticipating, managing, instead of going deeper into the place where we know God always meets us.

So, suppose we just begin there this morning, in our wobbliness. I have called this address "The Road Ahead: Loss and Peace in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ." For the next few minutes, I will try to describe where we are in this time of pandemic and upheaval, of fear and possibility, both as a society and as Church. I will point to the road forward as we see it opened for us all in the Holy Scriptures, particularly in the 24th chapter of Saint Luke (*Luke 24:13-35*), The Road to Emmaus, where we meet two wobbly friends of Jesus. Finally I will outline a few specific landmarks on the road, things we are already doing and things you might hope to do, which I believe will be a gift for the world and especially for your next bishop.

So where we are now?

It's tempting for us all to believe that, if we can just get through the election, and get a vaccine, we can all go back to being the good people we always were. Right? It's human to think that way. We are programmed to want security, and we can't stand not knowing where we are headed and when we will get there. But that's where we are at the moment – not knowing where and when. Beyond the pandemic, we can hope there will be elements of our lives that will look a lot like what we remember as “normal.” We will, perhaps, be gathering with family and friends, three dimensionally, hugging one another, seeing each other's faces fully revealed. We might be bold enough to hope for these things. And yet, in ways that are impossible to predict, the world will be utterly changed. The world of the videoconference, for example, with all its blessings and annoyances will be normal to us in a way that would not have happened for decades, perhaps. Some businesses will simply no longer exist, while others spring into being. Our entire political, economic and social fabric will have gone through an enormous period of challenge and re-shaping, but into what? And there is so much more that we know will be different, but we don't know *how* it will be different, a great deal more that we cannot see, and won't be able to see until we are nearly there, wherever “there” is.

The same dynamic is operating within and across the Church. In many ways we as the Body of Christ have been thrown forward. Nearly all of our congregations have not only implemented virtual worship through streaming of their services, but have used Zoom to meet with their vestries. Governing bodies of the Diocese – Standing Committee, Trustees, and Council, as well as Social Justice and Outreach, the Commission on Ministry, and the Commission on Race and Reconciliation – all have learned to conduct their business online. The clergy of the diocese have met with their bishop since March for a weekly Zoom call. Collectively, we talked through safety protocols and worked with the Emergency Preparedness and Response Committee to craft re-opening plans appropriate to each parish context. We continue to meet every week to check in with each other, to give news and get news, to hear prayer concerns and best practices, and generally build one another up for the work of the Gospel. There is, at this point, no desire among my colleagues to see this end. So in all these ways, we are reimagining our life and work by means that might otherwise have taken us ten years or more to embrace.

But in other ways, my friends, we are not sure what the future holds. What will be the long-term effect on our congregations, on in-person worship (a phrase I never thought I would use), on the economics of churches with buildings, on strategies for planting, for new starts, for evangelism and mission, even on our polity – the mode and frequency of our gatherings, and the canonical structures necessary to frame them? We know that more gift and more loss will come, but we have little idea what form they will take, or when they will appear. So while we do what we can, to achieve the work directly in front of us, we too are in the position of straining to see a horizon we cannot see, an end known to God alone, while walking the road God has set for us, from a past we cannot go back to, toward a goal we strive to imagine.

Now this should, in fact, be normal life for the people of God. As Christians, our horizon always ought to be nothing short of the day of the Lord. Our lives are bounded not by temporal occurrences – things we fear or hope for, like Election Day and the arrival of a vaccine – but by the mystery of Christ's Cross and Resurrection. We live in the realm of the impossible that is also true. Our home is in Jesus Christ – truly God and truly human. Our time frame begins in the impossibility that is the Resurrection of Christ and ends in eternity, and all the actions of

human beings in between, both small and great throughout history, are significant only for the way they reveal both the beauty and the ugliness of human nature and the steady determination and tranquil plan of God to redeem us and perfect us. We have been saved from the terrible prospect that our destiny – whether as individuals or as the people of God – hangs on the outcome of particular events. We are, rather, asked to look beyond them, to set our minds on things above, not on things beneath. None of this means God wants us to be detached from ordinary reality. Actually, it means we need to dive more deeply into the affairs of the world for which Christ died. But it also means that the significance of any moment – whether gift or loss, crisis or joy – can only be grasped in the shadow of the Cross and the light of the Resurrection.

So if all of that is true, then how come I am always looking on my phone, scrolling for the latest polls or the latest news, and what is it I'm looking for? I think I'm actually scrolling for hope, as strange as it sounds, for something more than a promise, something solid to hang on to now, some evidence that somehow this is all going to get better soon. And at the end of all my scrolling all I have left is an embarrassing graph showing a steep increase in screen time, along with no hope at all that my anxiety will be over anytime soon. I find that what I most dearly want will not happen, at least not in the way or at the time that I want it to happen, and I am left with that sort of blank feeling you have when your plans have gone up in smoke, or you've suffered an irreversible loss, and you can't imagine what will fill the void, and you say to yourself, as many of you may be saying to yourselves, "Now what?" And I hear the answer from Saint Luke:

*That same day two of the disciples were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him (Luke 24:13-16).* Friends, we have no idea how long these two had been following Jesus, whether they had been with him from the very beginning, or if had joined him later, but they were obviously in the thick of all the hopeful and terrible events from Palm Sunday through Good Friday, from the cries of "Hosanna," to the shouts of "crucify him," and from their point of view, it was over. Their Lord was dead. Their hopes were dashed. And the best they could hope for was to go back to their home village, and return to what they remembered was normal. It wasn't a very exciting horizon, but it was at least familiar: a seven-mile walk, a modest supper, a night's sleep, and tomorrow? Tomorrow, get up and begin again, and the next day the same, and the next, and so on, until eventually they hoped the sadness would pass. Aside from the seven-mile walk, they could be any of us, since we closed our doors in March.

It's no surprise then, that, when Jesus asks them what they're talking about, they just *stand still, looking sad (Luke 24:17)*, and no surprise that their account of the last few days is bereft of hope. How they had believed in Jesus, how his glorious career had come to a shocking end, how the women in their company (it's always the women, isn't it?) were coming unhinged, not finding the body of their dead Lord, babbling about angels who said He was alive, while all the concrete evidence clearly pointed to loss and disappointment. It's almost a negative creed, all the reasons why you should never believe that anything in this life will really ever get better.

And Jesus – alive, loving them, walking next to them – gives them a gentle reproof: *Oh foolish men and slow of heart (Luke 24:25)*, and then begins teaching them, the way He always had, that the Messiah must suffer, die and rise again, opening to them *in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:27)*. And, as we learn later, their broken hearts slowly begin to be healed, because that is what Jesus does: He loves. And because He loves, He teaches. And as He teaches, He heals.

We aren't sure when, but surely somewhere along this road it began to be clear to them that they were headed for somewhere besides Emmaus. That would have been the case in any event, even if they hadn't stopped in that village. When they got there, Luke notes, Jesus appeared to be going further, so they could have just kept following Him and who knows where they would have wound up. But even though they restrain Him, invite Him into their home, sit Him down at the dinner table, it becomes clear very quickly that their real destination is beyond that room in that house and that village. The climax happens in a nanosecond. *He blesses and breaks the bread. And they recognize him. And he vanishes out of their sight. And they say, 'Did not our hearts burn within us, while he walked with us on the road?' (Luke 24:32)*.

You see, friends, in a flash their entire geography is changed. Yes, they go back to Jerusalem; and, yes, they will find the same streets, the same houses, the same people, just as we will on the other side of all of this; and yet, everything is changed. They have no idea, now, where they are going, but they do know that the boundaries that had hemmed them in – the guilt, the grief, the resignation and despair – all these had been lifted. The horizon of the Resurrection burned brightly right in front of them and stretched away from them farther than they could see. It almost didn't matter, from that moment on, where on this earth the Holy Spirit took them, whether they wound up in Rome or India or the southern coast of France (my favorite story) as the old stories tell us some of them did, or whether they stayed in the same place where they had been born and had lived all their lives. Everything was changed, because there was now nothing that would separate them from the love of God, nothing that would be impossible; they saw in front of them that a new world was swallowing up the old, and they were called to act as though they already lived there.

This horizon, this view, beloved, is now ours as much as it was theirs. Do you see how such a perspective completely changes the questions we regard as most important? No longer is the foreground crowded with the urgency of our Twitter feed, of who will win the election and how will we get through it or when will there be a vaccine and will it work, or even what will happen to my job, my family, my church. The urgent questions become instead, these: Do you know Jesus Christ? Do you know his love for you? How deep, how broad is his love for you? Do you know it is stronger than sin or fear or death? Will you let him draw you more deeply into his life? Will you joyfully share his Cross? Will you open your heart to His Resurrection? Above all, will you share the good news of His justice and His mercy with others? Will you seek them out, especially those who are so bowed down by the weight of the world that they cannot even lift their eyes? These are the questions that lie underneath all the other questions we ask in our Christian life, from the questions we ask candidates at the Baptismal font, to the questions you will ask your new bishop on the day he or she is consecrated. And as Church, it is unthinkable that we should answer anything but “Yes. I do. I will,” and not “I'm not sure. Can you give me a moment? Can we circle back to this?” Only “Yes” will do, only “Here am I, send me.” And

then a further question comes: Where are the signs that you are so willing? How will the world, how will your next bishop, know that in the midst of this time of anxiety and upheaval, the Diocese of Pittsburgh has our eyes fixed on the horizon of hope in Jesus Christ?

Beloved, I believe there are nearly as many signs that we are already doing this, as there are hearts among us – thousands of witnesses in our churches, each with a story, and some day we will have time to hear them all, but not this morning. For today, let's content ourselves with three of these signs.

The first sign of the rising of hope is *Deeper Life in Christ*. The Love+Teach+Heal Academy continues under the guidance of Canon Natalie Hall+, even under the strictures of the pandemic. Our university chaplain Dan Isadore+ leads virtual Bible studies with students and faculty from Pitt and Chatham. The Anglican Concentration and House of Study at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary has now been formally launched, with a view to helping Episcopal candidates for degrees integrate into their hearts and souls what they are learning in class, through deepening prayer, deepening comprehension of the mystery of Christ in word and sacrament, deepening understanding of what it means to care for the people of God. So, these are all good things. But beyond these, there are signs of a new awakening to life in Christ across the diocese. You may not be aware that God is raising up saints and evangelists among you at an impressive rate, but God is doing exactly that. I see it nearly every Sunday, in nearly every congregation and in many other ways during the week. I invite you to look at the multiplication of virtual “houses of study” and prayer that have been springing up in parishes across this diocese – people gathering via Zoom to study Scripture, pray the daily office, practice contemplative prayer, or read great works from Christian tradition. Compared to such gatherings prior to last March, the number of such groups and the frequency of their meetings have multiplied. My own Wednesday Bible Study at the Cathedral has gone from meeting twice a month, to every week, with a marked increase in folks at the table. If we keep this up, friends, something quite alarming could happen. The Holy Spirit could multiply the gifts of the spirit, which in turn, in a sort of cascade effect, might exponentially unleash the fruits of the spirit, suddenly releasing into the world a pandemic of grace, a flood of *love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control*, beyond all measure.

And I ask you: Do you want to be responsible for such a thing? I hope you do, because it is the only way to guarantee the life of the second sign of our hope, a sign that is just beginning to be seen among us, the sign of the *Beloved Community*.

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, and with the help of Calvary Church, we launched the Beloved Community Initiative, under the direction of Canon Eric McIntosh+ and with the assistance of Shanaz Alam-Denlinger. We launched it because I was cut to the heart by the sudden conviction that, in spite of sporadic efforts during my tenure to address racism in our Church and in our region, nothing had broadly changed for the better, and in the last four years particularly, much had grown worse. The relative paucity of clergy and laity of color in our diocese, as well as the full ugliness of racial bias and racial hatred, long a sad feature of our history and culture in southwestern Pennsylvania, came into view for me in a way that I could no longer ignore. I saw with my heart opened as if for the first time, the terrible failure of the Church to live up to her first calling – to be the full Body of Christ, who with *His blood has*

*redeemed for God from every family, language, people and nation, a Kingdom of priests to serve our God, truly to be in every locality the household of God in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, where all distinctions of race, and class and clan, have been eradicated, where every distinction but one, is gone – the distinction of being the beloved children of God in whom Christ is all in all. So, we commission Eric+ and Shahnaz, and we set them on the road to help us find the way from the Church that we are, to the Church that we can be, the Community Beloved of God.*

Our growth into this beloved community can only happen through the first sign, the deeper life in Christ. Friends, racism is not a new sin; it is actually an amalgam of all the old sins: pride and envy, anger and greed, to name a few. The domination of one people by another is as old as human history, and the domination of Blacks by Whites in this country is an evil so entrenched in American history and culture and in the history and culture of the American church, that we must see it, not as a political failure, or even a moral failure, but as a profound theological error. The Hebrew prophets convict us. Saint Luke the Evangelist and Saint John the Divine convict us. Perhaps, above all, Saint Paul convicts us. In the power of the Holy Spirit, that apostle planted one community after another, in which that first generation of saints found true freedom in Christ, communities in which there were no distinctions such as those we now lament. But, as you know, as soon as Paul left, other teachers would arise, some from outside, some from within, and whether it was the legalists in Galatia or the super-spiritualists in Corinth, the result was always the same – a church that added a few words to their mission statement, that some Christians are more equal than others. And in every case, when he writes to them, Saint Paul does not tell them all they need is a little equity and inclusion training. No, he tells them they are committing idolatry; they are worshipping the wrong God, because the “Jesus” *they* are worshiping is an amalgam, a projection; he is the “Jesus” who is compatible with the way they want to be anyway, along with some features that look curiously like those who are bowing down before him. And Paul says, what Luke says, what the prophets say: Repent, return to the Lord your God, bring your worship to the foot of the Cross, look at Christ as He is, and only then will you be able to see one another as Christ sees you, to love one another as He loves you, only then will you be moved to seek out one another and hold on to one another across your differences, as if your lives depended on it, because they do.

Now friends, as we launch this Beloved Community Initiative, some of what we will be doing is more of what we have done, like our anti-racism training called Seeing the Face of God, which will be offered again next month; or continuing to embrace and nourish any folks at risk of being marginalized, such as people in recovery houses pastored by Canon Jay Geisler+, or the emerging LGBT community in and around Saint Mark’s, Johnstown . We will keep encouraging this work. And beyond it our principal thrust will be to advance the hope of the Beloved Community in every congregation. It is a tall order, and it will take a concerted effort over a long time. Don’t look for thunder and lightning, at least not right away. We are beginning steadily, quietly. Yes, we will be sending out a survey – you know the Kingdom of God will not come without a survey – with a few simple questions for you in every parish, important questions, like, “Have you heard of the Beloved Community?” “Have you ever talked about race or racism?” “What do these words evoke in you?” “What is your desire or your fear in relation to them?” And then we will move to conversation, you see, to study and reflect together, and then to action in building ourselves up so that the community we become reflects the fullness of the

Body of Christ. And God will show us how to do this, and empower us to do this, every step of the way.

And the result will be, well, the third sign of our hope, which is the sign of *A Healed and Healing Church*. We know something about that, don't we? Think back, those of you who were around if you can bear it, eleven or twelve years ago when this diocese lay shattered in the wake of schism. And look at us now, not perfect, but surprisingly, beautifully whole, sound, together. We shouldn't be surprised. That is after all what God does with his wobbly disciples on the road. You remember it was only three days before the Emmaus story, that Jesus's friends were scattered, broken, off on their own. They all had forsaken Jesus and fled. But by the end of the story, they have come together again, not in sorrow, but in joy – Clopas and his friend, back in the room with the others in Jerusalem, hearing the witness of Peter who has also seen the Lord and is back as well. And they are healed. As they are healed, they gather, then they are sent to heal and gather others.

But the Church in southwestern Pennsylvania could hardly be said to be gathered or healed. It would be hard to find a more sectarian Christian environment than we have here, at least until recently. Think back. We began by bringing all the religious divisions of old Europe and planting them here, then we created fresh divisions of our own and compounded that with segregated churches of black and white. Finally, religious divisions multiplied in the Black community until the only thing Christians had in common was a profound mistrust of other Christians. But I see signs that this historic tragedy is beginning to be reversed. Here and there, Christians are acting with urgency to come together. We enjoy a rich fellowship and full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and we are beginning to share ministers and pulpits. Under the leadership of the Reverend Liddy Barlow, the Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania its completing its first 50 years with a new phase of vigor. The bishops of the Catholic, Orthodox and Episcopal dioceses enjoy an unusual level of friendship and cooperation, which extends to our Protestant sisters and brothers. And beginning with the Presiding Bishop's visit here, on a pilgrimage for repentance, reconciling and renewal back in 2017, this fellowship began to be enriched by the leaders of African American churches most of us had never known: Dr. Daryl Canady of Rodman Street Missionary Baptist; the Reverend Glen Grayson of Wesley Center AME Zion; Pentecostal Bishop Loren Mann; Antiochian Orthodox Father Paul Abernathy; the Reverend Earlene Coleman, and many, many others. As a result we launched the Church without Walls in fellowship with Dr. Canady and Rodman Street Baptist, which created nearly two dozen multicolored study groups focused on the biblical call to racial reconciliation, which thrived for over two years, with some continuing to meet to this day. And this is just a sign of a greater, broader movement under the sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit.

Beloved, as I move toward the end of this address, please, I beg, I exhort you – do not let this broad movement of the Holy Spirit falter. I am crazy enough to believe that among the callings of the Church in the future will be the healing of this nation. But God will not heal a divided nation through a divided Church. Of course, I'm not expecting organic or institutional unity, at least in this life: I believe that to be a mighty work of God that will only be completed in the Lord's day. But honestly, beloved, we can surely cross the street and begin to know one another. Surely, we can pray with one another. Surely, we can work with one another for the healing of

our neighborhoods. And that is the third sign I am talking about, a church that is visibly being healed of her wounds, becomes a church that is visibly healing her neighborhood, and reaching out even beyond the bounds of the body of Christ to build other partnerships with Jews, Muslims and many others, for the common good. It is happening now, in growing relationships with Temple Beth Shalom, with the Tree of Life, with the Jewish Federation and Jewish Community Center, with the Center for Loving Kindness, and the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh. I beg you pray about this and please join, expand and continue this work. As we grow in such ways as a healed and healing Church, Jesus will be proud. Fred Rogers will be proud. It won't be that hard, not with the Holy Spirit and the Communion of Saints all behind us, and around us, and calling us forward.

So there are the three signs of our horizon of hope: *deeper life in Christ*, which will let us become the *Beloved Community*, and so give birth to a *healed and healing Church*. I cannot imagine a greater gift not only for your next bishop, but for the world that God loves and for which Christ died.

As for me, this time next year Betsy and I will be praying for you all from our home in New Hampshire. It's a little hard to contemplate what that looks like, frankly. I trust we will have another opportunity sometime before I leave to celebrate and reminisce and tell stories. Earlier this week, Betsy and I sat together and read the excellent profile your Bishop Nominating Committee has put together. I turned the last page. We were quiet for a little bit. Finally, she asked, "Well, what do you think?" Feeling a little wobbly, and with a little sob, I said, "They'll be fine." She took my hand. "Yes," she said, "they will be fine." When I told our consultant, Judy Stark, about this, she said, "Well, that is why the lappets on your mitre (those two strips of cloth that hang down at the back) are so long, so you can use them to dry your tears." I expect I'll be wringing out my lappets more than once over the next 12 months. But I must say, now, as I contemplate the signs of hope among us, of *deeper life in Christ*, of *beloved community*, of a *healed and healing Church*, I'm more joyful than wobbly. I am more excited about your future, and I more grateful than ever to be and to have been your bishop. So, beloved, my joy and my crown, keep on the road. Let your hearts continue to burn within you, and your light shine in the world. And we all know that the Lord Jesus will bring you, together with all those whom He has gathered, safely home. And all God's people said... *AMEN. AMEN!*