

**Bishop's Sermon**  
**154th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh**  
**November 16, 2019**

*A transcript of the sermon preached by the Right Reverend Dorsey W.M. McConnell at the closing Eucharist:*

“And the Lord said, ‘I will build you a house.’” May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Oh, oh, David. David, David. You have to pity King David. Have a little compassion for him. He was dreaming. It was a good dream. Think of it, one night in his new house, safely ensconced in his new kingdom, God had brought him through so many dangers, toils and snares. God had preserved his life from an insane boss, King Saul, who tried to kill him on more than one occasion. God had saved him in the heat of battle and given him victory over his enemies. God had granted him favor with all Israel and Judah, with all the tribes, well most of them anyway, and he had built peace and prosperity. And now, here he was reflecting on all of this, in the privacy of his new and lovely home.

I imagine he invites the prophet Nathan to dinner with several friends. After a lovely five-course meal and several wines, the king lies back on his couch, maybe an apple in his hand, and thinks aloud to the prophet, “You know, Nathan, God has been good to me. No, I’m serious. God has been really good to me. I mean, look he’s given me all of this – the throne, the house, the wives, and what have I done for him? I mean, I live here and God lives in a tent, in my driveway. It’s not right. You know what I’m gonna do for God, Nathan, I’m gonna build him a house. That’s what I’m gonna do. I mean somebody’s given me a little piece of property, and there’s a family that will pay for the windows, and all we have to pull together the funds for a boiler and a roof, and it’s a done deal. So what do you think, Nathan, what do think God would think of my idea, Nathan?” And Nathan replies, “Well, your majesty, I don’t know, sounds good to me.” And the King says, “Yeah, that’s what I thought, too.”

And the evening breaks up, and everybody goes home and goes to bed, and sometime during the night, it is Nathan who dreams. The word of the Lord comes to him and says, “Go tell your boss he needs to get over this idea. In the first place, I have never lived in a house, but have always lived with my people, have always been with them; and because I made you their king, I have always been with you, and always will be, wherever you or they go, that is where I will live. And tell him furthermore, ‘I will make you a house, not of stone or cedar, I will make you a house of your descendants, a house of human flesh and God-breathed faith and deep human spirit, and I will live with that house forever.’”

And so Nathan, I think maybe trembling, brings the king this message, and waits for the explosion. But there’s no explosion. Instead, a miracle happens, and that is this – King David, already a proud and haughty man, is humbled. He goes into the tent and sits before the Ark of the Covenant, full of amazement and gratitude. He pours out his heart before God, saying, “Who am I, and what is my house, that you have brought me this far?”

So, I ask us all, sisters and brothers, just to take this moment and join with David’s prayer of gratitude and amazement. I mean, for those of you who were around a decade ago – or looking back even further in Pittsburgh and southwest Pennsylvania, through wars and depression, through bitter divides of race and religion – to sit here, together, in this place, in the presence of

the living God, hearing God's promise once again to us, as to David, a promise now fulfilled and yet continuing – that God has built us a house; the house of living stones, declared by Saint Peter and Saint Paul, whose foundation is Christ; the house of countless lives of faith and obedience from the prior generations into this one; the house into which we have been built, knit together – just look at one another and how beautiful this house is.

And, you know, the language of the temple in the New Testament almost immediately morphs into language of the Body – the stones become members, hands and feet, eyes and ears, sinews and heart of the Body whose head is Christ; that Body, and that house, we are. And if you think of this just for a moment, then I know that whatever challenges or worries, whatever needs or heartbreaks, whatever loss or fear of loss you have brought into the presence of God today, you will remember that God is more than up to the task of healing it all. Healing it all. And you will know here, that you are being filled by the same spirit of thanksgiving David knew. So we can all join with him and say together, “Who are we? Who are we? And what is our house, that God has brought us this far?”

You see, it is only when we remember where we started, that we can recall how far we have come. And only when we have that in mind, frankly, does following Jesus further makes any sense at all. I mean, He does phrase the invitation – to be built into the house of God, built into His Body as its members – in the starkest terms, again and again. We hear that getting through the door of this house involves dying – dying to self, dying to the world, dying to our own ambitions and desires and plans. I don't know about you, but I find it hard to hear, hard to take. It's no wonder Simon Peter tries to talk Jesus into a more upbeat marketing plan. You know that moment. “I mean, Lord...” Peter pulls him aside after Jesus predicts the cross once again. Peter can't take it anymore and says to Him, “Have you considered positive thinking? Or self-actualization? There's an idea. Those could be a great draw. You're such a charismatic figure.” And Jesus turns and sees these little ones, and says, “If you would be my disciple, deny yourself and pick up your cross and follow me; for whoever would save their life will lose it; and whoever loses their life for my sake will save it.” Sisters and brothers, if that doesn't scare us, then we are not listening.

But once we start to listen to Jesus, to the Jesus of the Cross, then we can also hear something else, a promise. You see, the good news is, that this house is not built on our death; it is built on His death. That is the rock Christ asks us to build our house on, not the sand of our own little dreams, but the rock of his death – the foundation, as Saint Paul says, on which everything depends. Jesus, the Son of God, has already gone through everything that so terrifies us, and He has done it for us, and not only for us, but for the world. Yes, for the whole world, the whole world – believers and non-believers, for everyone. Do you see, universal atonement?

Do you notice the banners at Steeler games, sometimes, you know, John 3:16? Does anybody still hold that up? John 3:16, which is what?” *God so loved the world, that he sent his only-begotten Son, that all anyone who believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.* Do you ever see a banner with John 3:17? *For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.*

And we need that assurance. Once you see the fullness of Christ's Cross, you can begin to be less terrified of your own. You can begin to pick it up, to know it, to carry it, to stand in the place of our own weakness and need. You can actually start to bear a confident testimony that God is stronger than any of this and, in fact, uses all of our emptiness as the vessel into which He pours His love for the sake of the world. Perhaps then, trusting in the power of His Resurrection, we

may be ready to receive the treasure He has prepared for us in the lives of those we do not yet know – because He has prepared a treasure for us in the lives of those we do not know.

When I was rector of the Church of the Epiphany in New York, we had had a homeless dinner program for years. The way this worked was that all the homeless would come into the nave and spend a half-hour in the church, before we let them through the “magic doors” to go down into the parish hall to receive their dinner. Some of them slept, some of them talked, and I’m sure there was more than one drug deal going down in the back. Finally, at one point, we said, “How about we give a service for them in this time?” The idea, you see, was that we were going to share the Gospel with all these people, right? Beautiful. Share the Gospel. Bring Jesus to the homeless – that’s what we were going to do. So we started this service. About three weeks into it, it started to dawn on us that at least half of this company already loved Jesus, believed in Jesus, and were so grateful, not because we were such great evangelists, but because they were just looking for someplace where they could pray and not feel ashamed. And we, who thought we were bringing Christ to them, discovered they – you got it – were bringing Christ to us. We helped them, [but] we did not give them a voice; we just loved them until they found it, their own. And as they found that voice, they began to speak and teach and love one another. In the course of it, they strengthened us, brought new life to us, brought Jesus to us. And that is the House of God. What a poverty it would have been had we not seen the fullness of His house.

In a moment we will commission a whole crowd of apostles: those who have accepted elected office; those who have completed or are beginning study in LTH, the Love.Teach.Heal. Academy; those who are going out to serve as chaplains in the world. I suppose one way to look at them is that they are doorkeepers in the house of God, greeters in the house of God; and their one commission is to keep the doors open, always. We have talked about re-envisioning the diocese, and if there is one move that would help us, it might be this: suppose we saw the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh – the house of God – not only as the people in our churches, but as those outside. Suppose we understood our calling not as bringing people to Christ, but meeting Christ with them on the road. Suppose we were pointing to the One who walks with them, and as we do, seeing that One through them. Suppose we began to understand that if we want to see Jesus in His fullness, we must see Him in the faces of those we do not yet know; and we can only know them, not by inviting them into our world, but by accepting Christ’s invitation to come into their world. I think as we learn to see the world in this way, and walk as though we believe in what we are seeing, we may be filled with the same spirit of humility of David, so that we are always saying, “Who are we? And what is our house that God has brought us this far?” If we get to that, let’s also hear God’s answer to that prayer – you guessed it – Jesus is everywhere and He is always there for us.