



**The Bishop's Charge
to the 146th Synod of the Diocese of Niagara
by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell**

Saturday, November 7, 2020

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

Well, let's begin with a prayer.

Loving God, because you've loved us,

We are not people of fear:

we are people of courage.

We are not people who protect our own safety:

we are people who protect our neighbours' safety.

We are not people of greed:

we are people of generosity.

We are your people God,

giving and loving,

wherever we are,

whatever it costs

For as long as it takes

wherever you call us.

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, it's been quite a year. There we were sailing along from last synod minding the Lord's business, working at the Mission Action Plan, our MAP, just generally being the Church and then along comes a pandemic and the next thing you know, our churches are closed, our society is in lockdown, we're worried for everyone's safety and missing each other beyond all measure. And the months stretched on and on with all their attendant worry.

So. The first thing I want to say to you today – or rather the first thing I think Jesus wants me to say to you today is: “it's going to be alright.” It really is.

We are going to be okay. The Church is going to be okay. The diocese is going to be okay. We have been and will continue to do our very best to support our parishes to come through this time in as healthy a way as possible.

The second thing I want to say is that things will be inevitably different – I think we all know that. I don't yet know exactly how because none of us does. But I know that this time will change us as a Church in good ways and less good ways. Crisis is an accelerator – and this time will speed up many processes that were already in play.

I know that these months have been deeply stressful – the increase in workload, the financial strains, the creativity – which although wonderful, necessitates extra time and effort, the need for pastoral ministry and yet the impossibility of providing it the way we are used to for funerals, weddings, baptisms, let alone through regular worship – all changed by this virus; the isolation, the endlessness and boundarylessness of this time – all of this has been SO hard. It has demanded that we dig ever-so-deep into the faith of our baptism to find the inner resources to meet this time.

I wish that I was able to tell you when it will all end – because that would help, wouldn't it? But I can't; no one can, really.

But this is God's Church and I know that God is leading us through COVID-19 to be something new and something shriven and something beautifully different and yet at its core, the same.

Those are the first and most important things I have to say today as your Bishop. I say them with full confidence because of your tremendous commitment to the work of the Gospel, your incredible gifts and emerging skills, and the diligent work of all our efforts to steward our resources.

I suppose this is why I chose some words from St. Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus for us to think about as our theme for synod.

St. Paul speaks into a time that feels a little reminiscent of our own: into a multi-cultural and multi-faith context. He speaks urgently and intensely about church unity – trying to draw the new and fragile communities that he and others have established together. He's calling people together from many different backgrounds and cultures and traditions and he keeps holding the vision of this new family, this new community, bound by a new belief so strong and so dynamic that it would transform the world and almost more importantly – it would transform their world.

So Paul says he prays for the people of the church that because of their new faith they would begin to see life differently – with the eyes of faith – with the eyes of their hearts enlightened – so that they could begin to see the riches that a life with God offers them.

Maybe you can see where I'm going with this - because these words are about hope – specifically, seeing hope and possibility and seeing those not someday in the future, but now.

This letter is about the now of the Church – not the someday. He’s praying that right here and right now God will give them special sight to see hope.

And not only that, but Paul makes it clear that God is putting God’s power to work in us, also not for someday, but now: that this hope is active in our lives right now. That Jesus has come to unite heaven and earth – and that in our hands – if we choose - lies the potential for us to be the means to transform lives with God’s love.

That’s the hope he’s writing about.

Now let’s talk about this thing called hope, because hope is not always comforting or comfortable. Hope asks us to open ourselves to what we don’t know, to imagine what is beyond our imagining, to bear what seems unbearable. It calls us to turn toward one another when we might prefer to turn away. So, this thing we call hope is as much a discipline as it is a gift. Hope does draw our eyes and hearts toward a more whole future but it also anchors us in the present, where Jesus waits for us right now to work with him toward a more whole world.

So I guess we might ask: what are we hoping for right now? Right now, in the midst of a pandemic?

Well, let me be honest and tell you of my own struggle during these past months. I have wrestled with waiting. You see, I love our diocese and I have loved the exciting conversations that we’ve been having over the past couple of years. I have loved the urgency of them and the expectation that they’ve created. By nature, I am generally optimistic and future focused. I am always looking forward to something.

And then the pandemic hit. And our future was suddenly foreshortened for the simple reason that we can’t predict what will happen next week, never mind next year, or five years from now. And I suppose that was manageable for a month or two – or even six. But the reality of not knowing when this crisis will end has forced me, like everyone else, to my knees in prayer – knowing that I needed another way forward because everything has changed, at least for the medium term.

So, in addition to prayer, and soul friends, I went looking for spiritual resources and met with a gem of a book that might well have been written for this time. In fact, it was not. It was written in 2005. It’s called *Seven Spiritual Gifts of Waiting* by Holly Whitcomb.

Now Whitcomb says that the seven gifts of waiting are: patience, loss of control, living in the present, compassion, gratitude, humility, and trust in God. It’s quite a list and I found it a helpful reflection on where we – and I have been.

The book helped me make sense of a feeling I'd been having that despite the fact that many parts of our common life have been put on hold indefinitely and we are in a prolonged season of waiting. But instead of this being a flat or empty space, I think that God is at work in it sorting our priorities, making us think again who we are and what is important, while stoking our expectation, and honing our focus.

Which is all to say, after the initial shock of these last months, I am finding a tremendous amount of hope in this time of waiting that we find ourselves in.

And this waiting has revealed a faithfulness beyond our honest expectations. You, for instance, have all been so faithful.

What I think is that it's amazing that we have really seen what and who the Church is during this time. You know all that stuff we've been saying for a decade or more about the Church not being the building – but rather, it is the people?

That has been a certain hope – we have hoped that without buildings, our community would still thrive – the love of God would still stir us to take care of the widow and the orphan – that we would still give generously of ourselves – of our commitment, of our time and our individual talents to the whole. And do you know what? By God, it's true. By the grace of God, it's true. We have done all that and more. Well done. I mean it, well done.

Through the diocesan Pandemic Response Fund, we have been able to collectively support food programs, meals-to-go, and grocery deliveries in every corner of our diocese, from Niagara Falls to Waterdown to Acton; we've supported the rest and hygiene centre here at our Cathedral; the migrant farm workers project throughout the Niagara peninsula; the merry mask makers at Church of the Apostles in Guelph, and the global pandemic relief efforts of the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund.

A good friend of mine said something at the beginning of this crisis and it stuck with me. He said, "wouldn't it be great if people said at the end of this time, we couldn't have got through it without the Church?"

Well, the folks who have been part of these and all your many ministries are surely saying that. And of course, Jesus is the one who says, "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

And that we have; creatively, compassionately, and profoundly.

One of the ways we have shown this love is by continuing to contribute to the mission and ministries of the Church beyond our parishes.

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for all the Diocesan Mission and Ministry contributions you have shared with the Church so generously, to the best of your ability. This has allowed us to carry on with our ministries that take care of the whole diocese. It's also allowed us to meet our diocesan commitments to support the important provincial, national and international ministry that these funds represent as we share them from structure to structure to build up the one holy catholic and apostolic church through this Anglican Communion of ours. In a time when these ministries are more important than ever, your generosity and faithfulness is so appreciated.

This time of waiting and sorting our priorities is calling some additional things forth from us. This time has given us time to consider everything from our sacramental theology and praxis to how we resource, support, and oversee ministry.

Now our polity – or the way we organize ourselves – has proven to be a huge strength in this crisis. That's no surprise because it's time tested. But what it has proven is that we are actually in this together. For instance, the application for and the reception of the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy would not have been possible without this polity on several fronts – Canon Jody Beck our deeply capable, hardworking and tremendously conscientious treasurer to whom we all owe a deep debt of thanks for her management of the diocesan finances through this uncertain period, is a member of our diocesan staff and servant of us all. Through her good works, and by organizing things like payroll and employment centrally, we have been eligible for the support that has ensured our financial security through these difficult months. It is because of the way we are organized, with the smallest unit of our Anglican polity a diocese – and not the parish as many assume, that we have consistently benefitted from the subsidy, thanks be to God. We really live into our polity in Niagara.

Now the way we organize ourselves isn't a secular way of doing things. But that's good and right. We are the body of Christ and our governance structures look different from the world because they are based on Scripture, tradition and reason. We're pretty unapologetic about that because it's core to our identity and I believe in these challenging times that we have had cause to embrace who we are even more; to give thanks for our dynamic structures. I also believe that we are will be well served by living into those tried and true processes even more. So, if you are unsure about process – lean on and live into our diocesan structures. Ask questions, and above all trust the processes. We have been blessed with many generations of wisdom in creating our canons and policies and they are a deep well of certainty to draw from in uncertain times.

Here is something else that is being called forth from us, and it relates to three of those spiritual gifts within the waiting: loss of control, humility, and compassion: This time has been exhausting. Change is exhausting – that's a fact.

And we have been given an almost constant diet of change for the past eight months. And not only have we been coping with constant change, we've been expending huge amounts of energy doing it. We have been running a race – sprinting really.

And in addition to that we have all been carrying around a lot of grief. There's been so much loss for us all: relational loss – the loss of community, of rhythms of worship and fellowship. And because we've been running this long race, we haven't had time to grieve all this loss. And ungrieved loss is a burden which we carry that weighs a million pounds.

Because of these things that we are carrying around with us, we must remember very intentionally – and honestly – who we are. We are not those who can give in to the unresolved anxiety of this time and visit that upon each other. We are people of peace – siblings - made in the image of God. And therefore, we self-consciously care for the image of God in each other - loving each other – and especially at this time of strain and stress, loving our leaders – both lay and ordained.

It's times like this that the fruits of the spirit are truly meaningful: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

This is a challenging time to lead; I know that. But you, along with our wardens and treasurers, have done it with heart and soul and with real conviction.

We're doing so well. But the fact is, yet more still will be asked of us this year.

So, I ask you – and pray that God will give you the resources - to care for our leaders and be patient and gracious while they cope with change and stress - because it's all really quite exhausting. I ask that we would all be gentle in our expectations. Our goal now is to adjust to a sustainable pace for the remainder of this pandemic so that we can come through it ready to meet the future with genuine excitement and with the energy and resolve to action all of the plans we've made while we've been in this season of waiting.

We are all experiencing a loss of control in this time. That's a reality. But maybe that just means we have to trust, to lean on and lean into God's love for us and our love for our neighbour a little more fully that we've been accustomed.

Remember that we are called to life – and compelled to love. That Mission Action Plan vision was providential and so very consciously determinative of our diocesan culture in this time. Who could have known except the Almighty that those words would become so important to us?

If those are the things that are being asked of us in the waiting, what other gifts do we discern are there?

Well, I am so very grateful that the Mission Action Plan Leadership team was so diligent in their work last year and that synod council approved the diocesan Mission Action Plan back in January because it's kept us focused and moving in a defined and focused direction of travel even in the midst of difficulty.

One of the planks of the MAP was the creation of a school for missional leadership in the diocese. Through our consultations, you told us that you wanted a school that teaches the broad range of missional skills that leaders both lay and ordained need in order to connect with our present culture. Well, as other things have moved off the agenda because they simply could not be done in covidtime, the school came into view as something that could continue to be planned in this time.

So, I invited a group of subject matter specialists to provide the framework for the school and to operationalize it. Mr. Michael Smith who has been a parishioner at St. Jude's and is now at the Church of the Incarnation is our skilled and diligent facilitator for the process which is well underway. The school is an investment in the formation of the skills and gifts for leadership in our time and I am very excited to be able to share with you that there will be three inaugural courses offered in February. I will be inviting a select group of students to partake in these first courses, as part of a soft launch of the school. Stay tuned for more details as they are available.

In order to garner the experience of the best practitioners in mission, we've adopted a unique approach to procuring faculty for our school. We will take full advantage of the possibilities of technology and invite people from across the world to join our team. Some courses will begin and remain online. Others will happen in person, as we're able. But this mixture will be a dynamic and exciting way learn from a wide range of people. To this end, I am appointing the Reverend Ian Mobsby as our canon theologian for mission. Ian is the Woolwich Area Mission Enabler with the Diocese of Southwark in the United Kingdom. And I intend to name more partners in mission as we grow in ministry.

We are making other crucial investments in leadership for ministry too. I have appointed Archdeacon Michael Patterson to fulfill the role of Archdeacon of Leadership. This is a half-time role and Michael will concentrate on creating a coaching network for clergy to support and mentor those in orders. He will also be working to help recruit new, missionally oriented leaders for our diocese and he will lend his own experience in teaching in our school. We're very glad to welcome Michael in this new role and look forward to working with him to support all our leaders to become mission-shaped at every stage of their vocation.

We are also looking forward to fully engaging the many gifts of our diocesan missioner, the Reverend Jeff Potter, in the New Year as we seek to resource and support new missional communities and church plants.

We continue to right-skill our diocesan staff to meet the demands of communicating the Gospel in our cultural moment.

As another plank of our MAP, Climate Justice Niagara, formerly Greening Niagara has a new name, underscoring the urgent need for collective action to address the global climate crisis. Renewed for ministry, Climate Justice Niagara will seek to equip us to live more deeply into our abiding commitment to care for God's creation, and to be strong advocates for local and global change through prayer, education, action, and advocacy.

And that kind of connection and response to our global circumstances has also led us to another commitment. In the wake of the tragic death of Mr. George Floyd and in response to the acknowledgement that racial inequity is endemic in our society, we have established an Anti-Racism Working Group. I've tasked this group with raising awareness about and working toward ending the systemic racism that is present in our diocesan and church culture. At the end of November our clergy and licensed lay workers will partake in anti-racism training, as an initial demonstration of our renewed commitment to eradicating anti-black racism and to the calls to action of the truth and reconciliation commission.

All of this planning and thinking and recasting of vision have been the gifts contained within the waiting.

We have been working hard to respond to the time we're in and this has also meant we have had to change our focus and defer plans – particularly plans that have needed substantial resources in order to achieve them, such as the MAP's plan for differentiated curacies.

However, providing wraparound financial support for our parishes and technology grants and forgoing interest payments on receivables is so much more important at this time than the equivalent amount of money for a curacy fund. The curacy fund will happen another year. This year we need to take care of each other – demonstrably, fairly, and generously.

And we'll continue to adapt the MAP as we go – that's a just a reality that we all are living with, as Canon Christyn Perkons will say more about in a bit.

But one thing will never shift in these uncertain times and that is our unwavering support for our parishes so that we come through this crisis together as much as possible. You'll have seen that the character of our whole budget is designed to be responsive to the needs we have heard expressed. It is an extraordinary budget for an extraordinary time. And although it is a deficit budget, we have stewarded our resources well, and have the funds available to support it.

As I have said, this is a challenging time to lead, but by the grace of God, it is a time that is also full of opportunities.

I - and we - are here to support you – as you continue to be the face and hands of Christ in your communities up and down this beautiful diocese. We are truly in this together. We’re going to be okay. Reignited by the love of Jesus, we are indeed called to life and compelled to love. That is the hope to which we have been called.

And now I would be remiss if I did not offer thanks.

I hope you’ll bear with me as there are many to give. I want to thank our clergy – our priests and deacons - as well as our licensed lay workers and parish staff for their dedication to their people, their diocese, their parishes and their God. You are quite honestly extraordinary. I could not have asked for more this past year. I pray for you every day and give thanks for you always.

I want to thank our archdeacons. As I tell them – I hope often enough – they are wonderful. They are a group of trusted leaders who care deeply for all the parishes and leaders within their areas. They are wise and experienced. And I am grateful for their support and counsel. So thank you David, Max, Michael, Peter, John, and Val.

Thank you also to our Regional Deans. They have done yeoman duty this year in particular with our COVID-19 policies and procedures. But they are just generally capable and dependable. Thank you to Ann, Jeff, Cheryl, Pam and Dan.

And thank you to the diocesan staff who make our diocese go round. I am more grateful than I can say for the ways in which you support me and are at the service of all of our parishes. It is a complicated system that we steward, and you do it with grace and devotion. A profound thank you to our directors: Christyn, Gillian, Jody, and Terry whose specialized ministries are undertaken with both skill and wisdom. We have an extraordinarily gifted senior leadership team.

I am also so deeply grateful to Mike Deed, our Diocesan Liturgical Officer. Mike has brought his considerable gifts as a liturgist to bear for our diocese and we have been blessed by the skill he’s demonstrated, and for the countless hours he has expended in support of our diocesan Sunday services in particular.

Thank you to Canon Alison D’Atri without whom I simply could not function. Her price is above rubies and I am grateful for the ways that she keeps this too busy Bishop organized and on track. That kind of support just cannot be underestimated and I’m truly indebted to her for it.

And my thanks to Archdeacon Bill Mous. The Lord was surely looking after us through his appointment. We collated Bill in February last year and a couple of short weeks later we were in lockdown. Bill has been my rock and our diocese is blessed by his omni-competence but even more than that by his

Godly leadership. I look forward to many more years of like-minded work with him for the good of our beloved diocese.

But my greatest thanks is to all of you. For your faithfulness to God. For your commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For your devotion to your parish families. For your love of our diocesan family and the good work we do together as the Body of Christ. For your dedication in being the face and hands of Jesus in your communities.

Because of all that – because you see with the eyes of your hearts enlightened by the love of God – we’re going to be alright, for all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well.

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