

*Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana + Convention Eucharist Sermon + Propers for Social Service  
St. Luke's Church, Baton Rouge + March 1, 2008  
The Rt. Rev. Michael G. Smith, Bishop of North Dakota*

It is a joy to be with you this morning as we gather for this Convention Eucharist. I thank you for welcoming me into your midst. I am especially grateful to Bishop Jenkins for the opportunity to assist him in this diocese and for the resulting mission partnership between Louisiana and North Dakota. My travels in Louisiana have led to some rather interesting pastoral experiences.

Back in October, I was called upon to bring a message of hope to St. Alban's Chapel on the LSU campus the morning after the Tigers were defeated by Kentucky. In an attempt to find some good news, I was able to testify to the fact that back in 1951, Kentucky had done the same to one of my alma maters, the University of Oklahoma, upsetting the Sooners and knocking them from their No. 1 ranking. However, I was also able to share that OU rebounded in the following years and was able to win not only one, but two national championships. Am I a prophet or what? (I must confess to a little doubt after LSU's second loss, however)

Within the past month, my wife and I were able to participate in a cultural immersion experience when we took part in our first Mardi Gras. There are rumors, but don't believe them, that I am to be featured in an upcoming segment of the series, "Bishops Gone Wild." I have signed no releases and have denied everything.

But now to the word of God... The theme of this year's convention is "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20) and our scripture readings this morning are taken from the propers appointed "For Social Service" (BCP 931).

The prophet Zechariah proclaims to us words from the Lord declaring a restoration of those scattered among the nations. God promises to return and once again to dwell in the midst of his people. Once more the streets of the city will be a safe place for the elders to sit and a place for the children to play. "There shall be a sowing of peace," says the Lord (Zech. 8:12).

With God, the Holy One of Israel, we are called to share in the divine mission of restoration. The familiar words from the Catechism in our Book of Common Prayer teach us: "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ" (BCP 855)...to restore all people to unity with God in Christ; to restore all people to unity with each other in Christ. This restoration of unity, this reconciliation, is focused in two directions: towards God and towards one another. Remember the teaching of Jesus: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and [you shall love] your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

The restoration of unity, the reconciliation of our relationship with God is why we are called to engage in the mission of evangelism. Simply put, we are called to introduce people to Jesus whom we know as the reconciler, the restorer, the healer of our estranged relationship with God. One of my favorite descriptions of evangelism is "one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread."

Bartimaeus, in this morning's gospel, is one such beggar, a blind beggar at that. St. Augustine notes in one of his writings the fact that Bartimaeus' father, Timaeus, is mentioned at all must mean that Bartimaeus was at one time a person of means, a man who had enjoyed prosperity. And yet now he is reduced, as a result of his poverty and blindness, to the humiliating status of a beggar. St. Augustine sees in the blind Bartimaeus a type of our fallen humanity (*The Harmony of the Gospels* 2.65). With Bartimaeus, we cry out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us! Have pity on us" (Mark 10:47). And we hear Jesus say, "Your faith has made you well" (Mark 10:52). Our sight being restored, we follow Jesus on the way.

Along this "way," we are enjoined to serve others as Jesus has served us. We are to work for the restoration of unity, the reconciliation of one another in Christ. The First Letter of Peter (4:7-11) instructs us "to maintain constant love for one another... to be hospitable to one another... to serve one another with whatever gifts we have received." Why? "So that God may be glorified in all things."

Sisters and Brothers, chosen and gifted by God as ministers of reconciliation in the world, we are challenged these days to take a good look at ourselves. For if we are unable to reconcile with one another in the church, how can we possibly hope to serve as reconcilers in the world?

While reconciliation is at the heart of our mission as a church, we know that reconciliation can never be forced. Rather, it must always be accepted as the gift from God that it is, received with grateful humility. In our own day we are experiencing a fragmentation, a splintering of our portion of the body of Christ, which must surely grieve the heart of God who has called us to be reconciled with one another.

And there is enough blame to go around in this present situation. Convinced their cause is a gospel mandate, the far Left has forged ahead, despite pleas to refrain from doing so from the vast majority of Anglicans and Christians worldwide. In reaction, convinced their cause is a gospel mandate, the far Right has begun to breakaway and form new churches, attempting to take their property with them. The willful and deliberate actions of both sides, admittedly conscience-driven, are resulting in precious financial resources, intended to be used for the mission of the church, being squandered in the courts and rounds of litigation. The Gospel is not being furthered. Surely there is a better way.

I stand with your bishop in what is sometimes referred to as the "diverse center." We try to listen to both sides, testing what is said against the Scriptures, through the lenses of tradition and reason. As so beautifully expressed in the Collect for Richard Hooker (Lesser Feasts & Fasts, Nov. 3), I understand the "diverse center" to be "the middle way, not as a compromise for the sake of peace, but as a comprehension for the sake of truth."

Your bishop and I are committed to remaining both in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. We believe the way forward for the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion is through the Windsor process and an Anglican Covenant. I invite you to stand with us for I believe it to be the place of reconciliation.

But I need to warn you that it is not a pleasant place to be. You will be attacked and criticized by both sides. Some will label you as ignorant, fundamentalist and homophobic; others will call you institutionalist, revisionist and apostate. Your motives and the quality of your commitment to Christ and the Gospel will be questioned. You will be accused of having no spine or backbone and of burying your head in the sand.

But that's OK. These are small prices to pay for the One who "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). To him be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.