Relational Courage

The 38th Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of El Camino Real

Come, elusive yet attending God,
Meet us in the unexpected places of our day,
And stir and disturb us for something daring, something crucial,
Something more than interesting, or entertaining, or thoughtful.
Let something real, something essential, speak and change us within —
Burn, tremble, heal, explode us into tears, or laughter,
Or love that throbs, or screams, or keeps an awe-filled, cleansing silence.
Make us bold -- to hold those in power accountable,
To model generosity to the wealthy,
Humility to the arrogant,
 Mercy to the self-righteous,
Compassion to the indifferent.
And make us glad in our tilt towards justice and joy, in our families, our work, our churches, our communities, our nation,
And with this precious earth and human family you love so much
That you press us closer and closer to your kingdom
With love and hope.

Terry Gleeson, paraphrase from Ted Loder, Guerrillas of Grace

This is my 12th diocesan convention in El Camino Real. We have enjoyed a wonderful journey together, and as always, I am honored to be your bishop. You are Beautiful.

Each year at convention, we have launched a theme: Wonder, Churches Without Walls, Thou Mayest, Walking the Way, Cubits: Found in Translation, Living the Questions, Be the Church, Values, Learning Together, and Identity. You may not remember which year we engaged each of these themes, or what the content was (I have had to be reminded myself), but they have created a path of learning
through discovery, urging our practice of the Christian life. It has been a way to focus our attention, our energy, our prayer, our action. Each year we have grown in knowledge, courage and experience in becoming “the church that does not yet exist.”

This year we launch the theme of Relational Courage. Having spent a year pondering Identity, perhaps becoming more articulate about who we are, and at least recognizing the importance of knowing who we are, it is time to step out a little more boldly with our beautiful Episcopal self.

I did not develop this title on my own; I asked permission to borrow it from Jennifer Baskerville-Burroughs, Bishop of Indianapolis. Jennifer preached a sermon at the House of Bishops’ meeting last spring, with relational courage as her theme. She shared her personal story of coming to Christianity through The Episcopal Church. Jennifer grew up in an inner-city, dangerous neighborhood, from a non-religious background. She notes in her sermon that she would love to say she came to The Episcopal Church through her neighborhood church and that people had reached out to her, but she did not. No one from that congregation reached out to her, even though she walked by it every day. Bishop Jennifer came to The Episcopal Church through her neighborhood church and that people had reached out to her, but she did not. No one from that congregation reached out to her, even though she walked by it every day. Bishop Jennifer came to The Episcopal Church through an 8th grade teacher, Mrs. Horowitz, an Orthodox Jew, who had her class read out loud the book, “Life With Father”, by Clarence Day.

Over the years Jennifer did not forget what I imagine to be rather foreign images she encountered in that story: white, New York City Episcopalians bearing the social elitism, theological elocutions and worldview part and parcel of such a location in life. In high school Bishop Jennifer followed her friends to all sorts of churches, and one day remembered the story of “Life With Father”. She found her way to St. John’s Lafayette Square in Washington DC. There she had a conversion experience. Subsequently in college she discovered The Episcopal Church as her place of belonging and was baptized shortly after graduation.

Bishop Jennifer: the first African-American woman to become a diocesan bishop in our church, the first woman bishop to follow a woman bishop. She is bright, talented and wise. We would be less as a church without her. What a loss if she had not found The Episcopal Church, both for the body and for her. What a
beautiful story that we the body of the church and Jennifer found one another and became one.

In what ways are we impoverished by the absence of others? In what ways are they impoverished by not belonging in the body of Christ?

I invite you into conversation with the person next to you. Share your story of how you came to The Episcopal Church, the ways it has made you rich and the ways in which you have enriched the church? Take about five minutes.

The earliest definition of the word “courage” is to speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart. From the Old French, it includes the notion of sharing one’s innermost feelings.

I have continued to say in recent months as we have welcomed Kelsey Davis, our Curator for Emerging Communities, and launched our Leadership Innovation Fund, that “we are the asset we most need to develop.” Not the institution, but we the body of Christ, followers of Jesus, Christian-Episcopalian in El Camino Real. We can offer programs, make our worship as slick and performative as can be, offer the best and brightest sermons, the most moving of liturgies, and the greatest hospitality practices ever. But ours is an incarnational faith. If WE are not present, then the essence of Christianity is not present.

The Church is first and foremost the Body of Christ but is also a religious institution. It has the capacity to provide structure, flow of information, works of justice and gathering spaces. It can download from the churchwide level and upload from the local level. No matter the location, WE are the church and relationship with Christ is our essence.

Perhaps though, when we are not sure what to do, and in these days of so much change and decline, we might hope, or assume, that the institution will carry us into the future. It will not. It can share in the movement, but we the Body must bear the burden of vulnerability required to share the grace and love of God in the world. And we do not have to invent anything or make stuff up. The answers are in our stories, in the ‘telling of our heart.’

Courage: to speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart. This is what it will take.
So, here is a question: “What do you really want?” I don’t mean a trip to Hawaii, or a car, or even “world peace.” But what is a deep desire of YOUR heart today? I was in a small group recently and we were invited to share with one another our responses to that question. One of my conversation partners said, “I really want my son to find his purpose in life.” I said, “I want to discover what the second half of my life is going to be.” What do you really want?

I invite you to share with the person on the OTHER side of you (i.e., the one you did not share with last time), a response to this question. “What do you really want?” You have 3 minutes.

That took relational courage, didn’t it? It was vulnerable, wasn’t it? Transforming perhaps, and sort of dangerous, to have those few minutes of focused listening with your neighbor to share something truly meaningful. Did you not share sacred space as you ‘told your heart’?

It was a different way of using your power. It was a non-institutional use of power. There was no program, nothing scripted, no Book of Common Prayer. Nothing dropped from above; rather, something came across, one to another.

It was an act of partnership. I have come to believe that partnerships are the highest form of love. When scripture tells us to “love our neighbor,” I think it is inviting us to be one with another; having an intimacy that might, in fact, feel Eucharistic. To engage as partners in conversation about deep things and to act together on relevant matters is to listen, argue about, confer, and live with intentional, disciplined, relational and sacred love. This is to incarnate the grace of the great commandment.

So today, how do we do we scale the power of relationships, of partnerships?

Here is a TED Talk video by Jeremy Heimans titled, “What New Power Looks Like.” Let’s watch it together and see if there is some food for thought here, as we consider how to use our power to be in partnership with our neighbors in ways that are more effective, efficient and relevant.

Video:

Heimans and his partner Henry Timms wrote the book, “New Power.” As we just heard, it is their framework for how they make sense of today’s world. And, I know they may feel they have discovered something. I would suggest to you, however, that every Biblical story where the Spirit breaks through with a new thing, is a story about power moving in unexpected, un-institutional ways. Nevertheless, these are good and helpful ways of thinking about how power can move in today’s world.

“New power is the deployment of mass participation and peer coordination to create change and shift outcomes.”

“Old Power is held like a currency, new power works like a current.”

“Old power is held by a few. New power is made by many.”

“Old power is all about download and new power about uploads.”

We live in a world where it is unwise to pursue one or the other -- old OR new. We must find our way using both. This will continue to require our learning together. As a church our ecclesiology, our theology is very open to this sort of relational way of growing. We are blessed with a broad tradition.

Currency and current.

Power held by a few and power held by many.

Download and upload.

As we heard last night, the camp program at Episcopal Church of the Almaden figured out it could reach about 300 kids a year in their neighborhood with the good news of the gospel. They let go of the singular paradigm of Sunday School on Sunday morning as the only relevant way to be present to kids and embraced a model that was supportive to families, including their gifts, talent, and presence. This is an example of how power can work for greater effectiveness, efficiency and relevance.

In the profile of the diocese for the last election in 2007 when I became bishop, the line that drew me into the search process was, “we seek a bishop who is
willing to learn to be a bishop while we learn to be a diocese.” I heard that as an invitation to partnership, and an invitation to explore how power could move between us in ways that would be different than the movement of power with previous bishops. Indeed, that is what we have had: a partnership of vulnerability and transformation that has even felt, sometimes, dangerous. A relationship where we learned together how to be a diocese.

In this partnership we have discovered reconciliation of the brokenness of years past, we have discerned our relevance as a diocese both locally and globally, and we know the experience of resurrection. We have learned the rhythm of dying and rising and followed it into new life. We have loved and argued, laughed and cried. It has most definitely required relational courage; “to speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.”

The institution alone could not have done what we and God have done together. The institution gives us theology, ecclesiology, the framework of holy orders, and a multitude of resources. But it has taken all of us and our courage to explore and practice new ways of exercising power: power held by many, discovering new connections of energy, and ‘uploading’ more gifts and talents from more relationships, locations and sources. We have, in fact, practiced a “stewardship of episcopate”, oversight, that has been highly communal.

Relational courage will be required again as the diocese and its new bishop come into relationship, into partnership, together. Here is an image we are playing with to convey the “stewardship of the episcopate” that we exercise in our diocese. The ecclesial office of Bishop may be embodied in one person, but the one person is part of a community that shares in the oversight of a diocese. Taking to heart that we all matter in this work of sharing good news is the way we will become the church that does not yet exist.

This phrase, “becoming the church that does not yet exist” has emerged over the last few months as we discern our commitment (and financial giving!) to the Leadership Innovation Fund, as we have welcomed Kelsey Davis, our Curator for Emerging Communities, and as we have welcomed Filemon Diaz, our new church planter in King City, Soledad and Greenfield. To live into something that is ‘not yet’ requires our hearts to be open; both giving and receiving.
Note in these photos that Filemon is meeting with people for Bible Study outdoors, where they gather. He is speaking Spanish. He is listening – seeing – their heart, and they are listening and seeing his. They are meeting one another right where they are, physically and spiritually. This is church. And we, the body of Christ in El Camino Real are with them as we support this budding community.

Let us together say ‘yes’ to the invitation to ‘tell our heart’ -- ‘to see with our heart’ -- as Kelsey noted in her sermon yesterday. Let us be in partnership with our neighbors as new currents of opportunity emerge.

I end by saying thank you for these years of dwelling, growing, working and partnering in Christ together. I look forward to our last year together in this shared ministry of episcope. You are beautiful, and you are a blessing.

As we end this time, I invite you to one more conversation that I hope you will continue when you get back to your church context. From the book “Leading From the Emerging Future” by Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer comes this table outlining ways of being in relationship, or partnership. On your tables is a paper with this same image.

On the screen (and on the other side of that same sheet) are three spectra of old power and new power. These levels of relationship, or partnership, are all found in institutional settings. On the sheet you have, there is a characterization of the emotional depth at which those partnerships function. All of the levels will be present in church, institutionally and relationally.

I invite you to have a conversation about where and how you see the levels in your ministry context. Inherent in this exploration is the question, ‘how is the power working here?’

Currency or current? Power held by a few or made my many? Download or upload?

So, for example, how do your vestry meetings work? 1.0 – 4.0? How about your engagement with the neighborhood, or a given ministry? At which level does worship reside in your congregation? Is the level appropriate to the task? How do old and new power relate or partner together? Is it fruitful? What stories come to mind? Take about 7 minutes.