



Synod 2014 Opening Eucharist The Rt. Rev. Melissa M. Skelton

John 15:12-17

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

“I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends....I am giving you these commandments so that you may love one another.”

It seems that all I have done since coming to the Diocese of New Westminster is to preach on the Gospel of John, in particular, on passages from the Farewell Discourses. The Farewell Discourses are chapters 13-17 in John, in which on the cusp of his arrest, crucifixion and death, Jesus teaches, comforts and challenges his disciples because, of course, he will be going away, he will be leaving them. One way to look at the preponderance of these kind of passages in my preaching events is that this is simply a function of the time at which I entered the Diocese and the kinds of events at which I have been asked to preach. Another way to look at this would be to imagine that our God has a message for us in this, that God could be saying something to us about beginning our time together with the end in mind.

And, of course, this is apt, isn’t it, for I will be your bishop for only seven years, a relatively short time in the world of Episcopal terms of service. And so, thinking about

this, I understand a bit about why Jesus said so many important things to his disciples as he felt the time grow short with them.

But beginning with the end in mind is not the only thing we should or can do as diocese and new Bishop We must also begin with the past in mind as well.

One of the things I did in preparation for this Synod was to make a visit to the diocesan archives. My motives were two—to learn about this Diocese and this province, about its times of great inspiration as well as its darker times and also to learn more about the episcopacy of David Somerville because, well, I've become interested in him.

And so I sat at a table and stared at the photos taken by Violet Silitoe, Violet being the wife of the first Bishop of this Diocese: these were photos of trees and mountains and water and aboriginal people and little churches in the wilderness. I also stared into the faces of Japanese families sent to internment camps and the faces of a few lay Anglican women who insisted on going along with them. I then stared into the faces of aboriginal children in residential schools and then read a letter written by one of the heads of school describing how one aboriginal child died of disease. And finally I looked into the face of David Somerville, a bishop who traveled to different areas of the diocese staying with clergy and their families for a week at a time getting to know people and who was not only a champion for women's ordination but was also an early advocate for the inclusion of children in the Eucharist after baptism. I looked and I looked. I stared and I read.

Yes, we begin with the end in mind...but we cannot make a right beginning without an awareness of the past that we bring with us and the claim that the past has on us.

And so we bring both of these to our first Synod Eucharist today. We bring our stories of mistakes and brilliance, and we bring an urgency to get on with the new even as we perhaps bring an anxiety about what that new thing might be. And in all of this we also bring a desire to know what the word of God is for us today, what Jesus has to say to us today as, once again, we begin again, as we always begin again.

And, not surprisingly, the words of God are simple and direct, words that we have heard before but that, if we let them, can claim us anew now with the opportunities and challenges before us:

“I choose you as my friends,” Jesus says. “And as your friend I mean to speak directly and plainly to you for, I, myself am God's own direct speech of love and challenge. And, oh, by the way, because in me and through me, God has chosen you and loved you, you are to choose one another, to love one another as friends.”

In some of my early non-liturgical speaking engagements in the diocese, I was asked to say some things about myself, having been told that “people want to get to know you.” And so at two of those occasions, I pretty much told people who I was, some of which was communicated in quite a plain and direct manner. When I did this, I wondered if I had said too much. So at a social gathering when I met a man who had been to one of

those events, I introduced myself in this way: “Hi, my name is Melissa. I’m the American who shares too much!” He laughed as if his secret thoughts had been found out. “Oh yes,” he said. “Cards all face up!”

And so, plain and direct, cards all face up from your new Bishop who, whether it is realistic or not, does want to be your friend and wants you as friends. These are the things I want you to know about what I’ve learned so far here and what I bring to this office, this office that at its best is supposed to be for you and, this office, if it has any integrity at all, is supposed to point beyond itself to an incarnate God who yearns to draw us into God’s own community of loving friends with the aim of extending that very love out into a world that will forever be craving it.

I have learned that this Diocese has a unique vocation—a vocation born of its place in the West and its raggedy, pioneer beginnings, a vocation shaped by that same pioneering spirit in its laity, and clergy, and, in many of its bishops. I have learned that this vocation has been marked by a kind of boldness and at the same time has been marked by wounding and woundedness. It is a vocation now deeply tied to aboriginal people and their experience and the truth-telling and reconciliation that our lives as Christian people are all about. It is a vocation tied to the difficulty of being trailblazers: on women’s ordination, on the significance of baptism, on the blessing of covenantal relationships. And it has always been and will probably always be connected to the range of mountains that separates us from Eastern Canada and from the Eastern United States and all their more settled ways as well as the sheer scale of the natural beauty that surrounds us on every side. .

I have also learned that somewhere along the way for whatever reason many in this diocese have lost touch with the confidence that their parishes, that our parishes can grow and thrive. At times I feel as if parish leaders have actually fallen asleep to the possibility of growth that is right before them. And what I want to say about that is this: while not every parish can grow, many can. And as many of you know, I believe with all my heart that we as a tradition have everything we need to grow among those looking for a way to be Christian in a particular way—a way that values freedom, beauty, liturgy, living tradition, mystery, the practice of prayer, a Christ-centered earthy spirituality, tolerance and open-mindedness—and that’s just to name a few.

And so this leads me right into what I want to bring to you, what I have to bring to you.

I was sitting in my office with a priest of the Diocese who had come to see me just to have some time with me and to pitch some ideas to see if he could get my participation in them, and, in a sense, my personal and official sponsorship of them. He made his case and it was a good one, and I was so enjoying the time just getting to know him, for, lo, he was an amazing person, a person who would only have been here on the West Coast. At the end of his pitch, though, this is what I said: “John, (let’s call him this even though this was not his name), John, do you know what has been the secret of any success I have every had (Even as I said the word “success” I cringed). The secret of any success I have every in the parish or in the diocese is focus, focus on congregational development.”

And so this, friends, is what I know how to do and what I bring to you. It will not be the only thing I or we will do, of course. But it will be at the center of what I as your Bishop will do my best to focus on. I will focus on it with no distinction between so-called liberals and conservatives, with no distinction between so-called Anglo-Catholics and evangelicals, and it will be with a zest for growth in general and growth among the many cultures and ethnicities here in the diocese as well as among younger people. I believe that all can have a vibrant life within the big tent of what I understand to be our Anglican heritage. What I am about now and what I will be about until the day I leave office is congregational development—praying about it, figuring out how to train people—clergy and laity—in it, finding ways to resource it with money, setting up coaching and consulting systems related to it, shaping formation and engaging in deployment with it in mind, and more that we will create together as we go.

And why will I do this? I will do this because I believe that it's in communities of faith, that it's in parish churches, that people experience the beauty, the mystery and the loving friendship of God. I will do this because I believe that it's in communities of faith, that it's in parish churches that people learn to befriend others, especially those who are not like themselves. I will do this because I believe that the peace and justice making we do begins with those right next to us. And I will do this because I believe that our Anglican identity is an identity that can uniquely hold all of this with its power to express, to integrate, to heal, to connect, to inspire and to adapt while staying true to our ancient Christian roots.

“I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends. I am giving you these commandments so that you may love one another.”

As David Somerville approached the centennial celebration for this diocese, the 100 year anniversary of the consecration of Acton Windeyer Sillitoe, the first Bishop of New Westminster, he was interviewed about the decade since his own consecration. These are some of things he said about the Church that he so loved. His words, I believe touch on what is before us as we begin our life together, as always we begin again. They describe a community of love in parish churches and in the diocese the aim of which is the renewal and transformation of the world.

“Our relationship with people at its best is expressed in love... The theme I have promoted in the diocese for 10 years has been one of a loving community... What are some of the specific things the church can do to make the world more human, more caring? That's the business we're in. Christ didn't die for the church. He died for the world.

Jesus said his friends—us—were to be in the world like salt. Salt was in those days a preservative and a disinfectant—preserving what is good and preventing infection. He said we were to be like light and to let it shine. Light drives away darkness, banishes fear

and illuminates truth. He said we were to be like a city set up on a hilltop—a model, a pattern—to set an example of what a loving community would look like.”