

I would like to begin this morning by expressing my gratitude to the good people of Emmanuel Episcopal Church for hosting this convention – special thanks goes to Eva Horton, the Convention Planning Chair, and Father Matt Rowe, the host rector, and Cindy Huteson, Emmanuel's office manager, and the entire Convention Planning Team; thanks to Anna Wardlaw for last night's reception, and to Louellen Meyer, organist and choirmaster, and the Trinity Brass for the beautiful music at last night's Evensong.

I know I've introduced my office staff already – all of whom preceded me at the Hulse Center (Carolyn 36 years, Anna 7 years, Nancy approaching 7 years, and Mike off and on for 8 years). They are a blessing to me and to this diocese. I would like to publicly acknowledge my gratitude, respect, and true affection for Carolyn Hearn, Nancy Igo, Anna Mora, and Mike Ehmer.

Several people have completed terms or resigned from various boards, committees, commissions, and councils. I would like to recognize them at this time: from Youth Council, Jared Houze and Susanna Cates; from the Youth Executive Council, Allie Farmer and Taylor Dodson; from Constitution and Canons, Louise Cummins and Betty Gilmore; from the Disciplinary Board, Pat Russell and Lois Stickley; as Education For Ministry Coordinator, Katy Hoskins; as our United Thank Offering representative, Carole Wolf; as University of the South Trustee, Pat Russell; from the Executive Council, Todd Baxley, David Mossbarger, Britt Pharris, and Gary Sanford; from the Board of Trustees, David Stidham and Leon Swift.

Over the past few years the Board of Trustees has done some “heavy lifting,” making some difficult decisions as we navigated the closing of the Bishop Quarterman Conference Center, and as we provided support to Good Shepherd, San Angelo – both legal aid and the purchase of the new property from the Christian Science congregation. [I’ll say more about that later.]

David Stidham has served as a Trustee for twelve years. His family has deep roots in this diocese; his father built – among other things – the Altar in the Quarterman Ranch chapel – the Chapel of the Holy Spirit. I want to express gratitude to David for his faithful service to this diocese through the Board of Trustees during a difficult and emotional time.

The Standing Committee: David Perdue has served as both Secretary and most recently as President. The Standing Committee acts as the Bishop’s Council of Advice, and so quite naturally I have a close working relationship with the President. I am grateful for David’s leadership, council, friendship, and his prayers. Thank you, David.

Also rotating off of the Standing Committee is someone who has served on the Executive Council, the Commission on Ministry, as ECW President, the Standing Committee (more than once), as General Convention Deputy 9 times, on church-wide committees (such as the National, Social, and Urban Affairs Committee, and the Committee for Anglican and International Peace with Justice Concerns). None of this includes her service through her home parish.

She was a member of the First Christian Church in Abilene before she married Bob, and she likes to startle us by saying, “I was a Christian before I became an Episcopalian.” Now her close friends call her “Sister Mary Jacqueline.” You know she’s one of my best friends on this planet: Jackie Batjer.

I would like to recognize and thank two more people. The first is a person who knows how to get things done. As one might imagine, when a property with over ten buildings sitting on 240 acres is closed, there are issues around security, maintenance, and repairs. Dick Ford of St Andrew’s in Amarillo came to the rescue. When my staff and I see Dick, we genuflect, because he has saved us from untold mistakes and much anxiety. We are grateful to Dick Ford, who has been generous with his expertise, time, and resources.

And finally, I would like to recognize our Diocesan Youth Coordinator – Renee Haney. Over a year ago I went to Renee and her husband, Jim (y’all know Jim), and I said, “I need you.” I asked Renee (with Jim’s help) to explore potential sites to hold our various youth camps. After visiting 8 different sites in the Southwest, it was decided to hold camp for 7th Grade and younger at Ceta Glen near Amarillo, and hold camp for 7th Grade and older at Cathedral Ridge near Colorado Springs – a camp which belongs to the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado. I think our campers would agree that the scenery, hospitality, and the food were unsurpassed.

I was privileged to attend parts of both camps, and I cannot overstate what a wonderful experience it is for our children, our counselors, our clergy spiritual directors, and our support staff – and for me. We have Renee to thank for that.

And then, later in the summer, Renee took 3 of our young people to the Episcopal Youth Event in Philadelphia – an event which takes place every three years. I attended this event for the first time, and I'm never missing it again. It is profound, life-changing, and inspires the young leaders of this Church. If on the cloudy days you are in need of a "dose of hope," sign up as an adult chaperone. Over the course of the next two years I will be promoting the next event – probably to the point of annoyance. Thank you, Renee, for the youth events you plan and hold throughout the year; thank you for your work toward "Safeguarding God's Children"; and thank you for your service in and through this diocese.

There have been significant changes in three diocesan ministries in particular.

First, regarding our Outreach Camps: as many of you know, in the early 1990s the diocese started Happy Camp, a summer camp for the benefit of at-risk children. Promise Camp was added in 2005, and focused specifically on children of the incarcerated – of whom there are over 15,000 within our diocese. In 2011 Promise Project expanded its mission in order to provide more than a once-a-week experience for these children. At that time Promise Project applied to be incorporated as a "501c3" organization – separate from the Episcopal Church. Promise Camp is now in transition from a Diocesan budget funded operation based at Quarterman Ranch to Panhandle Promise Project, Inc.

The vision remains the same: breaking the incarceration cycle through education, mentoring, community activities, and more. This summer's annual summer camp – held at a Girl Scout camp – was a huge success, thanks to the support of this diocese. It was conducted very professionally. This year's enrollment was limited to 25 campers in order to have a superior staff-to-camper ratio. The staff was composed primarily of volunteer sociology majors recruited and trained by our Executive Director, Melisa Martinez. The entire staff was certified through Safeguarding God's Children.

Promise Project is expanding beyond the "camp only" concept to include monthly activities for the campers and their small group mentors, striving to build on relationships established at camp, and nurturing each child's self esteem. At camp, each child received formal individual recognition on awards night, ranging from "best smile" to "best swimmer." Episcopalians serve on this board, including Leon Swift, Mary Emeny, and Todd Baxley. Again, the vision remains the same: breaking the incarceration cycle.

Second. Regarding the Bishop Quarterman Conference Center, the Board of Trustees has enlisted Leon Swift as our broker to sell the property. At this point I can say that it is under contract to an outstanding Amarillo non-profit named Faith City Mission. The home page of their website proclaims that "Hope Lives Here," reminding me of our Quarterman Ranch proclamation that "Lives Change Here." Faith City ministries include addiction recovery, vocational training, food and shelter, and more.

Currently, we are in the process of surveying the property, as well as the standard ninety day feasibility and inspection period. Suffice it to say, this is not a “done deal,” so I cannot say much more. We do have cause for optimism. Once again, we are fortunate to have someone with the expertise and wisdom of Leon Swift as we move through this process.

Third. I want to speak to recent developments regarding the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, here in San Angelo. By way of reminder, Good Shepherd Church is living in their 8th year of exile from their church home. The long legal battle continues. We have excellent representation, and along with the Diocese of Fort Worth, we have made an appeal to the United States Supreme Court to hear our case.

During this 8 year period, the people of Good Shepherd have shared a joint ministry with Christ Church Lutheran – sharing worship with the Lutherans in their nave, as Celia Ellery has served as priest and pastor to both congregations.

And now, as many of you know, the Church of the Good Shepherd is meeting and worshipping in a new location. In July the Diocese of Northwest Texas purchased a beautiful church building in San Angelo from a local Christian Scientist congregation. I hope you will take the opportunity to drive by and see it. There will be an open house on Saturday at the conclusion of the celebration of the Convention Eucharist at Emmanuel. You will hear more from Celia Ellery today.

Now, on behalf of the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, I am asking for your financial support. I want you to know that they are grateful for the support you have given them in the form of legal aid, apportionment relief, congregational contributions, personal contributions, emotional support, and prayer.

They are grateful. They operate out of a sense of gratitude. They give sacrificially as they participate in God's mission. They have talented and experienced lay leadership, and they love the Episcopal Church.

Today marks the beginning of a diocesan wide appeal to raise funds for the people called Good Shepherd as their journey takes them to this new location. As you might imagine, they have renovations to make (many have been made), a nave and sanctuary to appoint, and new expenses – both expected and unexpected. I am asking each rector, vicar, and warden to seek gifts from your respective vestries and bishop's committees. We will give everyone in the diocese an opportunity to support this congregation. I am confident that you want this opportunity. This is it. Let's show our gratitude to the people of Good Shepherd for their endurance, strength, and faith – and to their remarkable rector, Celia Ellery.

This February I attended the diocesan convention of our companion diocese – the Diocese of the Dominican Republic. The Diocese in the DR has an amazing story; it has grown from around 25 congregations to 70 congregations in the last 20 years. They have started a number of schools, a clinic, and retirement homes. I encourage you to visit there or participate on a mission team, but I warn you, don't go if you don't want to get hooked. Don't go if you're afraid you will fall in love with the people of this diocese, and want to participate in God's mission there.

At any rate, the theme for this year's diocesan convention in the DR was the Five Marks of Mission. By way of reminder, a document called the Five Marks of Mission was developed by the Anglican Consultative Council around 25 years ago as a practical checklist for mission activities, and it resurfaced in the Church 4 or 5 years ago.

The Five Marks of Mission are:

To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom

To teach, baptize, and nurture new believers

To respond to human need by loving service

To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind, and to pursue peace and reconciliation

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

That's a good practical checklist to keep us on track. I would suggest that marks two through five, flow out of the first mark of mission. We are called to proclaim and embody the Good News of God's love for all people, and nurturing new believers, responding to human need, transforming unjust structures, and safeguarding creation are ways of showing God's love – ways of restoring humankind to communion with God and one another, which is God's mission.

So, throughout the weekend at the Dominican Republic convention everyone broke up into small groups to discuss each mark of mission – which I think is a good idea. The guest preacher was the bishop of Nebraska, Scott Barker, and he preached on the theme, as well.

Now, Scott doesn't speak much Spanish, so he has a translator. He names the Five Marks of Mission, with which by then everyone is quite familiar. All of this is being translated as he preaches.

And then he says [in effect], "All of this is quite good, but I'm a simple guy. And I need something said a little simpler and easier to remember. So, I've boiled down the Five Marks of Mission to these three words: 'Love Like Jesus.'" And the translator says: "Amaras mismo que Jesus." Love like Jesus.

He says, “Do you want to proclaim the Good News?” The translator repeats the question in Spanish. He answers, “Love like Jesus.” “Amaras mismo que Jesus.” He says, “Do you want to grow?” The translator follows the question in Spanish. The bishop then says, “Love like Jesus.” “Amaras mismo que Jesus.” Back and forth. The congregation is finishing his sentence. “Do you want to make a difference to those in need?” “Love like Jesus.” “Do you want to impact the community around you?” “Love like Jesus.” “Do you want a more peaceful world?” “Love like Jesus.” Three words: Love Like Jesus.

I would suggest that the bishop of Nebraska has named the main thing: Love. The Five Marks of Mission reflect love. When we participate in the Five Marks of Mission we proclaim and embody – we incarnate – God’s love. We love like Jesus.

The Good News we are called to proclaim and embody – the same Good News announced by the angel to the shepherds, and the same Good News made known from the Cross – is that God loves all people without conditions; that God’s love is a gift that cannot be earned or deserved; that God’s love for us surpasses the measure of the mind.

That is the Gospel. That’s what we are called to proclaim and embody, and it’s what each one of us needs to hear, and receive, and believe (as in trust). You are loved as you are, period. No if’s. Not if you behave better; not if you do good works; not if you believe the right stuff; not if you go to church.

That's the Gospel love which has the power to change lives, to raise the dead, to restore people to union with God and one another. All true. And yet, there is more to this. It's called the Great Commandment. Jesus says, "...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

It's interesting that the first and greatest commandment is not to follow some narrow moral path, not to take on a particular spiritual piety, not to do some particular good work, but rather, to love God with our whole selves.

Perhaps you are familiar with the Taize community in France. It's likely that they are best known in the United States for their worship music, but the community of Taize has become a focus of Christian spirituality where tens of thousands of young adults from all over the world make a pilgrimage.

One of the brothers of the Taize Community, Brother Emmanuel, was travelling in Texas last year. Some of you have met him or heard him speak. Brother Emmanuel has written a book about God's love, translated into over twenty languages and shared throughout the world. I commend it to you.

At any rate, Brother Emmanuel claims that the first commandment to love God with our whole selves reveals the heart of God, Who desires to BE loved. He says God desires our love.

Now that may push the theological envelope for many of us to suggest that God desires, or needs, or lacks anything. I'm not going to try to sort that out today, but I am inclined to believe Brother Emmanuel is right when he describes the highest form of love as mutual, harmonious, and reciprocal; that love reaches its highest expression when it harmoniously balances the desire TO love and the desire to BE loved. The highest form of love is mutual and reciprocal, rather than one-way and condescending.

A twelfth century theologian, Bernard of Clairvaux, says the same thing. In his commentaries on the Song of Solomon, Bernard compares God to a "husband" and the soul to a "wife." He says, "... this Husband, who has everything that might call for honor, admiration, or even fear, greatly prefers being loved." A twelfth century theologian claims that God prefers being loved to being honored, admired, or feared.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

This year's Convention Speaker is Rich Nelson. Many of you know Rich. He was ordained to the priesthood in 2004 at St Stephen's in Lubbock, and served there as the Associate Rector, as well as Chaplain at All Saints School. I want to tell part of his story, taken from his personal reflections.

He writes: “One day in seminary I was writing a missiology paper when it struck me that I knew a lot about Jesus, but I didn’t know a lot about how to live a life of discipleship. I was committing my life to guiding other people in their faith journey, but mine was still lacking a clear sense of direction itself. I had done all the things ‘I should have.’ I’d been an acolyte, a lector, a vestry member, and a diocesan convention delegate. I’d gone to Happening and Marriage Encounter. I was a seminarian and a pastor’s spouse. I was devoted to loving and serving people in Jesus’ name. I loved God.”

“And I felt like a Pharisee. Something resounded in my soul with the scribe in Mark 12, who asks Jesus, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ I imagine this man had been trying to live a faithful life, doing all the right things, keeping all the right rules, and yet sensing he was missing something and still seeking a deeper and simpler way. Seeing that Jesus had insight he did not himself possess, he sought Jesus’ answer to the basic question, ‘What is the most important thing? What is the meaning of life?’”

“Jesus’ answer to him was the traditional Jewish Shema: ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength ...[and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ The scribe commended Jesus for his great wisdom, and Jesus told him, ‘you are not far from the kingdom of God.’ I wanted to be closer to the kingdom, too.”

Rich says, “It struck me that Jesus said this is the most important thing, and yet I had no idea what it truly meant to love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I sensed that these were more than vague platitudes, but rather specific directions – a key of sorts to be explored and lived into. It sent me out on a mission to explore these four ways of loving God, and to see how this might transform my life. It has. Profoundly.”

There are two things that I want to share with this convention that emerged out of Rich’s experience. First, he started envisioning what it would look like to foster small communities of people who truly knew one another and supported each other in walking the difficult and counter-cultural path of discipleship. He eventually developed an innovative discipleship resource called “Following the Way.”

And second. Rich started dreaming of what it would be like to get every church in one community to commit to working together to improve the lives of the elderly, the children and youth, and the poor. This is now known as the Burton Bridge Ministry in Burton, Texas (population 300 with approximately 2000 in the surrounding countryside). As far as they know, they are the only community in America where every church is working side-by-side to serve God’s people. Thirteen churches in and around one small town come together across theological, denominational, and racial differences to serve their community in Christ’s name. It sounds to me like the three words: Love Like Jesus.

As you might imagine, I believe it's possible that a diocese such as ours can benefit from Rich's experience. In some way, I hope it becomes my experience, and maybe yours. There are church consultants who give the impression that if only the church was listening to them, or following them, then all would be well. That is not Rich. He's not offering a program, or a technique, or even a curriculum. He's sharing his experience of discipleship, following the One who said: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself."

One final remark. This convention gathering represents – is – the leadership of this diocese. Each one of us has been called by God and chosen by our peers to lead. We know that Christendom is history. We've talked about the challenges we face. All Christians in North America face the challenges associated with a re-formation or a metamorphoses (a change in form), or a death and resurrection. There is a lot of negativity, cynicism, and blame out there. We are not called to operate out of an interiority of fear or anxiety, and our purpose has to be more than "saving our church." We are called to love. Love is greater than fear and more powerful than death. Love resurrects.

As you know, throughout a given year I attend a number of meetings with other bishops. My staff will vouch for this: I never come home jealous. I couldn't be more grateful than to serve with you. And I look forward to our continued journey, following the Way together, as we strive to Love Like Jesus.

