

I would like to begin this morning with some personal remarks. First, I would like to express my gratitude for the privilege of serving as your bishop. Already, you have my admiration, respect, and affection. I want you to know that the leadership of the Diocese of Northwest Texas is fully supportive of this arrangement. The Standing Committee expressed at last week's meeting that they are "all in" on this. And most importantly, my wife, Kathy, is too.

I would also like to express gratitude for your service to our Lord in and through The Episcopal Church. I know you make a difference as individuals and as a community faith in Fort Worth and beyond; and you make a difference to one another. And I would like to thank Father Barnett for your leadership and your pastoral care of this congregation.

And finally, I would like to express gratitude that St Andrew's is the community of faith in which my brothers and I were raised in Christian formation including baptism, confirmation, Sunday school, serving as acolytes, youth groups, and, of course, the beautiful worship.

I have vivid memories of particular decade (an important decade for the growth and development of any young person) from the time we moved to Fort Worth when I was eight until I went to college. I'm grateful for your role in my formation spiritually, theologically, and as a human being.

I would be remiss if I didn't add that we were raised in a home where we were loved without conditions. My basic fundamental theology comes from our parents,

and it was our mother specifically who taught us two things about God: God is everywhere. And God loves you.

After over twenty years of ordained ministry and a fair amount of theological studies I wonder if all else is commentary – all theology and doctrine and the scriptures themselves are commentary expressing that fundamental truth: God is everywhere, and God loves you.

By way of introducing myself, I would like to say a little about what I believe to be true about God and the Church. (You didn't have that opportunity before you elected me.)

I'll take as my starting point, the Church. All baptized people are grafted into the Body of Christ as living members of the Body. And as living members we are called to a purpose beyond ourselves: to participate in God's mission to restore all people to union with God and one another.

Today's collect (opening prayer) says: "Grant, O merciful God, that your Church being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples..." Unity. Union. Communion with God and one another is God's vision, God's mission. It's not so much that the Church has a mission, but rather, God's mission has a Church.

And we participate in God's mission in the many and various ways we proclaim and embody the unconditional love, unmerited grace, and undeserved forgiveness made known in Jesus of Nazareth. That "power" referenced in today's collect – the power we pray to "show forth among all people" – is the power of God's love;

love which has the power to change lives, love which has the power to raise the dead to new life, love which has the power to change this world, love which has the power to restore us to communion with God and one another. And people of all walks of life all over this world and in our own backyards are hungry to know the Good News of God's love and God's presence.

One way to participate in God's mission is by being an Episcopalian. I have heard it said that all religious traditions are instruments in the symphony, and that the symphony would be diminished if any were missing. If we are honest, we are peculiar instrument, and comedians like Robin Williams and Garrison Keillor have enjoyed poking fun at us. I suspect you've seen Robin Williams' Top Ten Reasons to be Episcopalian, but it's Garrison Keillor's essay, which is making the rounds on social media.

With affection he says about us, [they] "are the sort of people you could call up when you're in deep distress. If you are dying, they will comfort you. If you are lonely, they'll talk to you. And if you're hungry, they'll give you tuna salad." ...

"Episcopalians believe in prayer, but would practically die if asked to pray out loud. Episcopalians like to sing, except when confronted with a new hymn or a hymn with more than four stanzas. ... Episcopalians believe in miracles and even expect miracles, especially during their stewardship visitation programs or when passing the plate." He says: "And finally, you know you are an Episcopalian when: it's 100 degrees, with 90% humidity, and you still have coffee after the service; you hear something really funny during the sermon and smile as loudly as you can"

I love our tradition. We are part of a beautiful tradition with a beautiful way of worship, following the Book of Common Prayer. We have a history of being perceived as non-judgmental, tolerant, and open. Our character is stamped by the 16th century Elizabethan Settlement, when it was decided that we would be united in prayer – more than right beliefs or doctrine. Whether by Providence or by happy accident, we chose common prayer over common doctrine. And I would suggest that we have a history as a witness to the message of God’s unconditional love.

As always, the proclamation of the Gospel – the Good News of God’s love as made known in Jesus – takes place in a particular context. You, the people of St Andrew’s, have a particular context. I’m not going to dwell on it, but I cannot ignore it – especially given today’s reading from First Kings.

In First Kings we hear the account of the dedication of the Temple by Solomon. As the story goes, the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place in the inner sanctuary of the house in the most holy place underneath the wings of the cherubim. And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord.

The ark, which was the outward visible sign of God’s presence in the midst of His people, is placed in the sanctuary. And a cloud – another symbol of God’s presence – fills the sanctuary. And Solomon declares that he has built a house in which God can dwell.

And I find it significant that most biblical scholars believe this account was written while the people of Israel were in exile – scattered – not only separated from one

another and the Promised Land, and their house of worship, but from the Temple where God dwells.

Two thousand years ago during the last week of Jesus' life – sometime after Palm Sunday and probably two or three days before the Last Supper – Jesus is in the Temple with some of his followers.

He says: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” It's not hard for us to feel the shock of that declaration. It's not hard to imagine why that might be the last week of his life. For it's not just any building. I would suggest it's more than St Peter's in Rome, or Canterbury Cathedral in England, or the Washington Cathedral in the USA.

To capture the magnitude and meaning of what Jesus claims here, we need to understand that for a big part of the history of the people of Israel the Temple is where God lives. As we hear in today's reading from First Kings, previously the visible sign of God's presence and power could be found in the ark of the covenant; now it's the Temple.

Here's what I would suggest today. To frame it positively, Jesus is proclaiming a new Temple. I don't believe that Jesus is claiming that houses of worship are not important, and I'm not either. I cannot imagine Jesus being dismissive of those suffering the grief of exile.

One of the most respected spiritual directors of our time, a priest who served in the slums of East London (Kenneth Leech), claimed [even in the midst of such poverty and so many material needs] that we need Church buildings and that they are

“signs of the Transcendent.” They are outward visible signs of God’s presence and God’s love.

After the horrific and devastating earthquake in Haiti, the Episcopal Church made a commitment to re-build their cathedral; to spend resources on a church building, along with food and shelter. Hope is needed as much as food.

When Jesus says, “all will be thrown down,” he is proclaiming a new Temple – a movement from the ark of the covenant to the Temple in Jerusalem to the Temple of His Body (the Body of Jesus), and even to the “Temple of the Living God,” as the Apostle Paul says – meaning the Church.

Paul says, “God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.” Peter says something similar. Peter refers to us, the Church, as the new resurrected temple: “like living stones let your house be built – a spiritual house.” Peter takes what Jesus says – that stones will be thrown down – and says, “like living stones let your house be built.” The new resurrected temple, “the temple of the Living God,” is us – the Church.

There is something interesting about the word, “temple.” The word “temple” lies at the root of the word “contemplation” – as in contemplative prayer. Con-temple, contemplative.

A Catholic priest named Ronald Rolheiser tells us that the word structure is not an accident, but that “long before [the word “temple”] referred to a building on earth, the ancient peoples believed that the word ... designated a place in the sky, a certain divine arrangement of the stars, a dwelling place for the deities.”

He says, “Part of the root idea of contemplation was to build on earth something ... which corresponded with the temple in the sky, to bring together the two temples.”

Connecting heaven and earth. Maybe that’s our vocation, our calling, and our role in the grand scheme of things as the Church: to be that conduit, connecting heaven and earth. Perhaps that’s our purpose as the New Temple, the Resurrected Living Stones of the Temple, once thrown down and now risen by the Grace of God ... Who can roll away a stone, and do something new – even in these times, and in and through us, the people called St Andrew’s, called to proclaim and embody God’s love and God’s presence ... in the Name of the Holy Trinity, one God, in Whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.