

PASTORAL ADDRESS TO THE 2017 DIOCESAN CONVENTION – EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MILWAUKEE

“Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

Esther 4: 13–14

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

For such a time as this.

This is the theme of our convention gathering this year taken from the book of Esther and the story of God’s deliverance of his people from the persecutor Haman who had convinced the king that all the Jews should be killed. For just this time, God raised up Esther to bring about her people’s deliverance, an event now celebrated each year on the Jewish festival of Purim.

For such a time as this.

I mentioned these words to you in my sermon last year. I was struck by them at our House of Bishops Meeting in the fall of 2016 when they were spoken in our word to the church, written during a time of harsh civil rhetoric before last year’s presidential election. That rhetoric was causing division in our nation and in our world. The story of Esther and his verse of scripture has stayed with me all year. I have returned to it frequently, and each time I reflect on it I hear again the call to action as the priestly people of God.

As we gather today, what we lamented last year has grown worse. While the harsh and hateful rhetoric continues, we now see what these words produce. We have witnessed racist rallies and the increase of hate groups. This summer reflecting on the senseless violence and racist rallies in Charlottesville, a community where our younger daughter, Haley, was born, I wrote to you, “I have to admit that I find the whole thing simply unbelievable, and I keep wondering how did it come to this?”

If this were not enough, the slaughter of innocents in mass shootings and daily assassinations in our cities continues to grow. Mass shootings and the public response to them has become routine. Is there nothing we can do but say “our thoughts and prayers are with you”? We have either become numb or turned a blind eye to the daily slaughter on our city streets, while we and our leaders fail to bring about the change necessary to end this tragedy.

Moreover, we have witnessed the havoc of hurricanes, leaving many homeless and without food. We have seen wildfires destroy homes across our nation. We have watched as rescuers bring out those affected by any means necessary in order to save lives. These events, too, lead us to tears, and yet we have failed to take the steps necessary to address issues of climate change.

“Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the others.” God is calling his people to action for such a time as this. For such a time as this.

I can think of no time in my ministry when the public witness of the Church was more needed and more necessary, when the need for disciples to stand up for Jesus by standing up for those on the margins was more urgent.

I realize that all this can be quite daunting. In such a moment, we feel powerless, saying to ourselves what can I do, what can we do, who is going to listen to us? This feeling of powerlessness and despair is exacerbated by our present age and the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, public officials and the public, and those on the margins and those who get a pass because of the color of their skin and their credit rating.

But God has a word for us. It is a word of empowerment, a word of God’s faithfulness.

Today we celebrate the feast of Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, Bishop of Shanghai, and founder of St. John’s University, and, most importantly, biblical translator. Born a Jew in Lithuania, Schereschewsky as a young man entered rabbinical school. It was there he came across a copy of the New Testament translated into Hebrew. As a result of his reading, he began to wonder if Jesus just might be the promised Messiah. Later, while a college student at the University of Breslau, upon entering a cathedral he had a vision of the crucifix on the altar bathed in light which spoke of an unearthly glory. At the age of 23, he immigrated to America, and six months later converted to the Christian faith saying, I can no longer deny my Lord. A skilled linguist, Schereschewsky eventually entered the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church, was ordained deacon and was sent as a missionary to China. During the five months of his sea voyage, he spent nine hours a day learning and mastering Chinese. He was ordained priest in 1860 by the Bishop of Shanghai and served faithfully as a priest and translator for 17 years. His faithfulness in his work and his zeal for the Gospel led the House of Bishops to elect him Bishop of Shanghai in 1877.

Schereschewsky was fervent in his work for the Gospel. When some of the missionaries abandoned their stations, he himself went to serve the people they had left behind. But his service was not without cost, as a result he was struck down by illness, an illness that left him paralyzed and only able to use one of the fingers on his right hand. But that did not stop his work on behalf of the Gospel. For the next eight years, sitting in a chair typing either with his one finger or by holding a stick in his fist, he completed his translation of the Bible into Chinese.

Shortly before his death while reflecting on his life to his physician, he said, “I have sat in this chair for over twenty years. It seemed hard at first. But God knew best. He kept me for the work for which I am best fitted.”

His work for the Gospel lives on in the work of the Episcopal Church in Taiwan, which I had the privilege to visit three years ago, and in the work of St. John's University in Taipei.

God kept me for the work for which I am best fitted.

Think for a minute. What is the work for which you are fitted? Pray that God the Holy Spirit will reveal it to you. Think what difference will you be making for God when you engage this work. And then ask for God's grace and power to do it.

You see, I believe that God has chosen us as individuals, as congregations, and as a diocese to do his work, work for which we are fitted, endowed with the gifts of the Spirit. We are in Christ. And because we are in Christ, we are ministers of God's reconciliation—each of us has a ministry in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. And Christ is counting on us.

Moreover, I know God has given every one of us the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we may love him and serve him by serving others.

I see examples of this across our diocese.

The priest and people of St. James, West Bend used their gift of prayer to open hearts and minds through a prayer booth at the Washington County Fair.

Grace Church Madison is exploring ways it might engage with its neighbors across the street in the state legislature. In the midst of the deep divisions in our state and nation, they are engaging with legislators from across the political spectrum to see if we might find common ground on issues of concern. Their goal is to be a space where people of faith from all over the state might build relationships with legislators and work together on issues that affect all of us. As an initial opportunity, Grace will hold an open house in conjunction with the gala celebrating the State Capitol's centennial on November 8.

St. Luke's, Madison, along with ecumenical partners, has established a relationship with a neighboring school to provide food and supplies to children living in poverty who would go hungry on the weekends without their aid.

These are just a few examples of ministry in our midst, people and congregations using God's gifts for the ministry for which they are best suited. God has put us in this place and time to serve Jesus by serving others in his name.

But we need to remember in the words of the hymn in our hymnal, "Loving puts us on our knees serving as though we were slaves." True ministry in model of Jesus means setting aside our own power to do God's will.

It is this understanding that is behind our Haiti Project's examination of how to move from helpers to those who empower others. They are asking how we can end the cycle of dependency, described so well in the book *Toxic Charity*, and help our friends in Jeannette build their community. This is at the heart of our Milwaukee-Newala partnership, as demonstrated by the cow project and our support for training leaders at the Medical Clinic in Lulundi. It is for this reason that we are seeking to build relationships in the central city of Milwaukee through Collars on the Corner, an ecumenical effort with Roman Catholic deacons, led by Deacon Kevin Stewart, before starting new ministries in the central city of Milwaukee.

This past spring, Cindy and I had the privilege of participating in a conference in Chicago sponsored by Bishops United Against Gun Violence. The theme of the conference was Unholy Trinity: The Intersection of Racism Poverty and Violence. It was a powerful gathering and one which reinforced for me the need for us, from the community of white privilege, to listen and learn from our sisters and brothers of color so that our eyes may be opened and our hearts moved by hearing and honoring the stories of others.

I was similarly moved when I read the book *Just Mercy*, our diocesan read for this year. These words from the book by Bryan Stevenson particularly spoke to me. "We have a choice. We can embrace our humanness, which means embracing our broken natures and the compassion that remains our best hope for healing. Or we can deny our brokenness, forswear compassion, and, as a result, deny our humanity."

I believe that in baptism we have made the choice to embrace our broken natures, that is to acknowledge that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and embrace the compassion that remains our best hope for healing.

In the waters of baptism, we acknowledge our brokenness. We confess that we need a Savior and even that knowledge is a gift of grace. As Christians, we turn to the model of compassion, the one who is compassion, the one who suffered and died for us, the one alone who can bring wholeness and healing. Jesus, who suffered and died for us, who gave his life that we might live, who shows us what living according to God's design for humanity is, and who gives us the Spirit to make it possible for us to do.

At baptism, we are asked, "Do you promise to follow and obey Jesus as your Lord?" And we respond, "I will with God's help."

To say Jesus is Lord is to say the model for all human living, for truly human living, is Jesus who ate with tax collectors and sinners, who championed the poor and the marginalized, who served in his name is the example of how we are to live.

To say Jesus is Lord is to say that his way is our way. And when we discover that our way, our actions, and attitudes are incongruent with his, it is the determination to make the changes

necessary to conform our life and actions to his example. If it is not right for Jesus, it is not appropriate for us.

You see, I believe that God uses all this for our sanctification. By admitting our brokenness, embracing God's compassion, learning to live in Christ, God desires to make us as individuals and as the Church the people he is calling us to be so that the world may believe and that the words of our Lord's prayer, "thy will be done, on earth as in heaven," might be fulfilled.

One of the great saints of God in my life was my maternal grandfather, Alvin Frederick Steffen. He was, for me, an example of faith in action. One of those who for me God's light shone through. Appropriately, he died on All Saints' Day. This was his favorite hymn.

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Thou art the potter, I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after thy will,
while I am waiting, yielded and still.

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Search me and try me, Savior today!
Wash me just now, Lord, wash me just now,
as in thy presence humbly I bow.

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Wounded and weary, help me I pray!
Power, all power, surely is thine!
Touch me and heal me, Savior divine!

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Hold o'er my being absolute sway.
Fill with thy Spirit till all shall see
Christ only, always, living in me!

That is my prayer this day. As we come to the Lord's Table this day, let us come with hearts prepared for God the potter to mold and shape us, to discover and do that for which the Lord has best fitted us.

Let us come committed to Jesus way of doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God.