



The
Episcopal Diocese
of New York

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Address by the Rev. Buddy Stallings

The bishop's invitation for me to speak with you both pleased and humbled me. It is not possible for people who do what I do to ever thank you enough: as wardens, you live on the front line of what it means to be "church" for us as Episcopalians, and I am honored to be with you. Bishop Dietsche and I go back a long way. I greatly respect him and even obey him as my bishop, as much as retired priests obey; but what is also true is that I have real affection for him. Some years ago now when I was one of those who nominated him to be bishop (we only admit that if our guy or gal wins!), I told him over lunch that I wanted him to be bishop but that I hoped that whatever happens to some bishops would not happen to him. He didn't ask what I meant, and I didn't explain—for indeed each of us knew. As far as I can tell, it—whatever it is—has not happened to him. His is still the heart of a parish priest, one who knows, loves, and bows to tradition but also one whose intuition and action are governed, as I see it, first and always by love and kindness in all sorts of circumstances. It is also a delight to see my friend and former colleague at St. Bart's, Esslie Hughes. It was I who most directly brought her into the Episcopal world, though my friend, Dan Matthews, claims to have had early influence in that direction. I know that I am not alone in being grateful that Esslie's capabilities now serve the whole diocese. And, finally, as I wrap up this effort to show you how connected and important I am—a process that gets more appealing, and certainly more necessary, the longer one is retired, I will let you know that I was on the committee that brought you the widely beloved Bishop Allen Shin. My subgroup of three committee members first interviewed him by Skype sitting in my office on Park Avenue; and the rest, as they say, is now history.

As you have heard, I recently retired from St. Bart's, almost exactly two years ago and have just this month completed a wonderful year as interim rector at Calvary Episcopal Church in Memphis. What little effect living in New York for the last two decades had on my southern accent has been totally reversed during this return to the south. It means that I am once again confronted with the dilemma of convincing a group of smart, sophisticated New Yorkers, Episcopal wardens no less, that I did not arrive here this morning on a

watermelon truck straight from Memphis but on Metro-North just as some of you did. My husband, Molitor Ford, and I are happy indeed to be back in our home in Manhattan, where we spend half our time.

In my life and time, I have had, as most rectors have, truly marvelous moments with wardens and some that were—ah—not so marvelous. To a one, though, I can honestly say of every warden with whom I have worked, when we agreed and when we didn't, each was unswerving in his or her dedication to the good of the church. I believe that to be true of you as well, and I commend your commitment, evidenced by your being here on a summer Saturday when you might be doing any number of other things. Your willingness to take on the monumental responsibility to serve as a warden in your parish is remarkable. Each of you knows it is not an easy job. I hope it is one that also gives you a big measure of joy. What is known is that for the time being, any latent hopes you may have had of assuming the wildly popular “spiritual but not religious” status must be postponed: it's hard to be any more officially religious than you are!

In the unusual polity bequeathed us by our Episcopal forebears, the marriage of a rector and his/her wardens is successful only when each of the players commits to a complicated dance of collaboration and mutuality. The possibility of Rectors and Wardens fighting the entire time exists, and more than that, is not unknown in the larger church. Though I hope not, some of you may live some iteration of this reality in your own parishes. Whether you know it up close or only by reputation, it is not good when conflict, inevitable in all relationships, becomes the principle attribute in the warden/rector connection.

Dealing with issues of hubris (an issue not unknown to rectors or wardens) and fear and deeply held convictions among them, Wardens and rectors do not escape the complications of life—any more than couples do. In marriage counseling, premarital and otherwise, a starting point for me is to ask how willing each party is to have as his or her default position the desire and the capacity to believe first the best of one another. If that willingness is not there, if it is not possible for each partner to honestly say, “though my partner may be wrong on occasion (or stupid, insensitive, or pushy), at his or her core, I believe, there exists a good person who has the desire not only for individual good but for our *common* good. In an almost literal manner, that same dynamic relates to the relationship between Wardens and Rectors.

All of this is an art and not a science. My experience over the last 30 years is that parishes, and particularly the Wardens and Vestries within them, want to love their priests. All the anecdotal evidence to the contrary—you know the stories of priests-eating parishes, despite all that, actual instances of such institutional sickness are rare. And, yet, I know that conflict is real and can suck life out of good places.

In an utterly legitimate desire to keep its clergy healthy and its parishioners safe, the institutional church in recent years has spoken of and taught extensively about healthy boundaries. Everyone agrees this is good. But even with the best of intentions, I fear that the process sometimes creates such guarded priests that they sometimes become truncated as human beings, operating from fear of being consumed or controlled, sometimes in ways that diminish their humanity, the capacity to give and receive appropriate love. And in some ways, though I believe to a lesser degree, the same thing works with regard to Wardens. There is no obligation that Wardens and Rectors be best friends, whose families vacation together; but it is a sad and dysfunctional circumstance when rectors and Wardens can't or don't seem to be able to genuinely like and care for each other. No matter that some aspire this model, the Rector is not the CEO, and Wardens are not the Chairs of the Board. Before all else, you are spiritual partners, leading a group of God's people in their and our search for God.

While none of that is precisely what I have come to talk to you about, it is not unrelated to my overriding point this morning. My claim to you is that it is by making the church more human, by speaking of and affirming the humanness of each of us in this journey, we, in fact, have the best chance of creating a space in which people, including us, can be transformed by the Divine. A natural outgrowth of that slight shift in perspective, the full embrace of our humanness, is that we will be more appealing and more welcoming—and, therefore, will grow. With that in mind, I want to share my thoughts about some truly simply things that I believe could really change the church, which are within your scope as Wardens to affect. There is no order in these thoughts; I throw them at you in hopes that something might stick as relevant or useful. The silver lining is that if none of that happens, I will be finished soon and you get on with the day.

How long has it been since you have heard laughter ringing out in the nave during a service of worship? If it has been a long time, if it only rarely happens, find out why. Life is as funny as it is tragic. Take my word for this: the tragic is all around and is largely irrepressible. It will find us. But the humorous sometimes has to be sought a little more diligently. What almost always helps in seeing the humorous is to take ourselves a little less seriously. It is not just about being stuffy and unfriendly; it is about needing to lighten up.

At the start of one my rectorates in a diocese far, far away, the parish, which I came to dearly love, had a sign in the narthex that read: "Be solemn and quiet when you enter. Church is serious business." It is possible my memory may have taken some poetic license, but my version is what it meant! Grimness was the opening chord! Have mercy! We need to be less concerned with guarding the sacredness of the space and more intentional about allowing its

sacredness, which is not our creation in the first place, to envelop in love and welcome all who will enter. Because of our love of liturgy and the formality that goes with it, I fear that should the church, particularly our Anglican version of it ever die, the epitaph on the tombstone might read: “A Very Serious Place Which Seriously Died.” Life is too short to be taken that seriously.

A quick story: on my last week at Calvary in Memphis, which was Pentecost, I baptized two little girls, sisters. One was 5, the other, almost 3. When it was time for the younger child to be baptized, she insisted upon getting out of her mom’s arms and walking to the font. About half way there, though, she decided the whole thing was a really bad idea and called it off—by screaming like a banshee, breaking loose and running all the way to the back of the church! For a moment there was stunned silence, no one knowing exactly what to do. Finally, not of brilliance so much as discomfort, I said, “Lord have mercy, let’s go get that child and try to sling some water on her.” Everyone howled, and that’s exactly what we did. Somebody got her, and with her screaming every step of the way, I managed to get a tiny but theologically significant amount of water on to her head, followed by some whiff of holy oil smeared in her direction!

And then like magic, it was over. I asked her to join her sister and me as we walked down the center aisle. To everyone’s amazement, this former Diablo child took my hand and paraded like a Miss America contestant all the way to the last row and regally continued back to the front. Laugh when life calls for it!

In a related vein, if you are bored in church, you are probably not the only one. But interestingly, it is also true that even if you are not bored, many others might be—out of their minds. Among those who get themselves elected Warden, I’d bet good money that there is to be found in each of you a significant dose of church geekiness. Don’t be offended by that, but let me tell that while you may swoon at esoteric details about early liturgies or intricate exegeses of biblical passages, most of the people we are trying to get into our doors are not swooning over such details! To be honest, a little bit of that goes a long way.

Small wonder we don’t have lines around the block trying to get in. It is not that I want us to be more entertaining, just more real. Consciously or not, people come to church in search of something relevant, something that can change their lives. If you, as leaders, experience your services as boring and detached from real life, risk talking about it with your rector. It is best to start somewhere short of, “You’re sermons are boring the hell out of me.” Try something like, “Mother Jan or Father Tom or better yet, just Jan or Tom, my experience of you as a human being is that you are real and approachable. Sometimes, though, in your sermons I feel that you hold back and that we don’t

see the real you.” If that is too risky, think of something else. The health and growth of your parish may depend upon it.

In the latest Pew survey, which provides the most reliable information about religious practice in the US, we learn that we are at an all time low in terms of people who identify as Christians. Believing as I do that Christians are not the only ones in the world of religion who are right, I might say, “well, so what?” If other God and love-centered faith practices are growing, is that truly a concern? But here is what bothers me about the drop in the number of Christians: people leaving us are not becoming faithful Jews or Muslims (the number of Jews is essentially unchanged and the number of Muslims in the US has grown only 0.9% since 2007, despite all manner of fear, not unwarranted, about radical Islam.). We are losing people to nothing—to their becoming “nones,” no religious affiliation. What they say is that the religion, as practiced in the faith, which they left—most studies show that the unaffiliated have not always been unaffiliated—simply has no relevance in their lives. They are leaving us because what we offer seems to matter very little. While it is true that some number of people, particularly the young, have left the church because they see it as standing against more than standing for, I think that factor is less true for us in the Episcopal Church. We’ve been on the right side more than some. So it is more than that.

What I fear is that we simply are not reaching people where they are. Some of our clergy have lost themselves to the liturgy and *appear* to love it more than anything else. I say this as a man who loves the liturgy. Though I came into the church because of it, was literally evangelized by it, I now retire as one whose first reaction is to be cautious about it. Beautiful worship alone, particularly when it feels distant and non-participatory, will not sustain us in a world where instant entertainment is available on a gadget in the pocket of every person in the pew. It is only when the liturgy invites us into the mystery beyond all practice, when it overwhelms with awe more than certainty, when it illuminates our lives beyond the sacred space, it is only then that it is worthy of the one to whom it directs us.

One way we humanize the liturgy, make it more accessible, is by being very conscious of and attentive to the atmosphere in which it occurs. I read years ago that most Episcopal priests are INFP’s on the Myers-Briggs scale (introverted and intuitive feelers and perceivers). To be honest, I couldn’t find the documentation for that fact, which may mean that I have just given you an alternative fact. Deliver us, O Lord from such as that! What I know to be true, at least anecdotally, is that many priests are introverts. Though we might wish otherwise, not every priest is bubbly, outgoing, and friendly; and to make that a hard and fast requirement for calling a priest would diminish our ranks. But the fact remains that as leaders in the church we are in sales, and as Wardens you

may have to fill some gaps in shaping an environment that makes people want what we have. If you have a contemplative, introverted, deeply and wonderfully spiritual rector, you may have step up to handle the sales department! If that seems crass to you, so be it. But trust me: it is true.

I wish all vestry people had a sense of responsibility about welcoming, speaking, engaging—not just visitors but all whom they see at church. That may be an impossible expectation for the entire vestry; but it is part of your job as a warden. It is not one that you will ever see written, but again trust me: it is your job. Speak to people for God's sake—and for the sake of the church. Wear your Warden or Vestry button. The good news is that your term will eventually end, but for now take responsibility to work the room during coffee hour and at the front door. An endless number of studies tell us that when people feel welcomed, they come back. When they don't, they don't return.

There is nothing in the church we both love and hate to talk about more than growth. I spent 30 years worrying about (and fairly often lying about) average Sunday attendance. The people who talk about it incessantly drive me nuts; the people who never talk about it drive me more nuts! The only thing that works is to create a space where real people, who presume to have very few answers, gather to talk about things that matter, deriving their positions and actions the best they can on what they know about Jesus. If we can create and live in that space as the church and if in it, love is palpable to any who come near it, growth will take care of itself. I don't have a ten-point plan for how to do it. It always comes down to love; and though love is hard (we all know that love often is more choice to act than delight of feeling) and nebulous (it is not always easy to know what is more loving—this or that), the truth, my friends, is that we know love when we see it. And so do others. In every way you can, keep love in the center of all that you do in this fine and important work. Every time you gather around the Table of Grace, which sits at the center of our liturgy and our hearts, take a read on the love quotient of the parish and act accordingly. And as you do may God bless and keep you always. AMEN.