

237th Annual Convention | Holy Eucharist

Sermon — the Rt. Rev. Kevin S. Brown

Video transcription

Saint Paul wrote... but in all these things, we went a sweeping victory through one who saved us. I am convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus, our Lord." In the name of the living God, father, son, and holy spirit. Amen.

Please be seated my sisters and brothers of Delaware. For those assembled here and for those online, it's good to be with you. It is a joy to be with you and to be here at St. David's. Thank you, Father Brad and Deacon Bruce for your hosting us here. It's great to serve with you once again and it's good to be here. And to Steve Weatherman, I know you've done a lot of the music for this service, thank you for helping assemble this good work. And to the liturgical officer, who's worked overtime, Jim Bimbi, thank you. I really do appreciate it. We all do. Liturgies don't just happen, do they? They take work and cooperation, people all coming together. And when we do liturgy, well, we do liturgy really well!

Today, this Eucharist celebrates the mission of the church. Intentionally chosen on this day of annual convention and a time when, after going through a long meeting online, how many hours were we on screen today? 48?

That's about right. We were online waiting, and we would rush, and we would do something, and then we would wait, and the votes would be tallied, and then we would do some more, and then we would wait. And I can tell you, to come here today and to be reminded of the power of the church to be the body of Christ, even sometimes when it doesn't feel like that much fun, that is what we are.

We are the body of Christ, the people called to be together, to be God's people in this world. And I am sure that the world needs us to be a voice. There's a force afoot out in the world, a force afoot that looks to pull us apart, to separate us and divide us into camps. It's just working all the time from the minute we wake up to the minute we go to sleep, and then the next day, and the next day to try and separate us. I read in the Wall Street Journal a couple of years ago — this is just a typical headline, and they're not just in the Journal, they're in the New York Times, this kind of thing is everywhere—"The Yawning Divide that Explains American Politics."

There are folks on the left and folks on the right, and if there was ever a time when we could work together, it just seems harder and harder because we're apart. I remember an article that said that you could even start to tell if people were Democrat or Republican by the jeans they wore. Did you know the Democrats prefer Levis? Republicans prefer Wrangler? So, I'm just saying, you better be careful because you're making a statement and you didn't even know it. I'm not sure what it means to wear high tops. I just think it means you love Jesus, and that's what I'm hoping since I'm wearing high tops today. But something looks to pull us apart. So even with something as simple as a decision of what to wear, somebody might decide that you're making a statement, and all you're trying to do is go to the grocery store with your pants on — thank you.

There's a force afoot out there, culturally, that pulls us apart. And I'm not saying there was ever a perfect time in our history. I mean, at the very founding we argued as a nation about whether or not we wanted a strong central government or we wanted strong states government. That's what all the Federalist papers were about. We argued from the very beginning and it's not like we just sat around and everything was great, and then the sixties came, and the hippies said we have to distrust government, and next thing you know, nobody trusts anybody.

But you know what happened in the sixties is the hippies came along and said, "You can't trust government." And really in the sixties, things picked up at a pace that we have not seen in our history before. Not just a distrust of government, but really a distrust that moved into all institutions, into religion. For a church like ours, the Episcopal church that has long benefited from being an established church, people began to distrust us because we sure looked like establishment.

And we sure acted like establishment. And in a world that increasingly said that the old needs to be cast out and the new brought forward, it was easy to leave that old Episcopal church behind. And religion began to be distrusted more and more, not just in our church but all churches and temples and mosques, and fewer and fewer people are signing up and even going to church. It doesn't mean they're not spiritual, but it does mean fewer and fewer people are committing.

In our pandemic recently, medicine itself, that has tried to bring us together, is fighting a pandemic that pulls us apart — social distancing, for goodness sakes. And our technology — technology that can make community like Zoom or Facebook or TikTok or Instagram — can also tear us apart. It's a litany of separation and division. And even in our politics, natural differences get inflamed. Now, disagreement leads to demonization. That's the story of our times — that's the story of now. Aren't you glad you came to church? Boy, this guy's a real ray of sunshine.

This is, indeed, the story of our times. Must it be our story, church? Is this our story? No. I'm going to answer that one for you. No, no, no, no, no! Our story, our power even, is a force for unity. Our God is a God of unity. You heard of this thing called the Trinity — this core symbol at the very beating heart of our faith — unity and difference? We are a people that sees unity as not just something that's good to have, but as part of who we are, the fabric of what it means to be the people of God. It's not just nice to have, it's who we are. And our lessons today set up for the mission of the church, we could have called the lessons for unity. The prophet Isaiah preaching thousands of years before Christ, preaching to the people of Israel, proclaims the word of God to the Israelites.

"I will appoint you," God says, "As a light to the nation so that my salvation may reach not just you guys, not just your tribe, but the whole earth," God said. And He said "When I do that, the people are going to come from North and West and South and East. They're going to come because that's what I'm about," God said. Didn't you love that great old hymn we just sang? "In Christ there is no East or West, in him no South or North, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth." That's who we're about. We're about unity everywhere.

In Matthew 28, the great commission, Jesus, the risen Jesus, tells his apostles go and make disciples of who? All nations! That's pretty big — it's a pretty big tent. All nations. And of course, Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, a passage that is dear to so many people, I hear it all the time that it's a favorite passage, that "Nothing will separate us from the love of God and Christ Jesus." We cannot be separated when we are bound in the love of Jesus Christ. I don't care what jeans you wear. We cannot be separated when we love each other in Christ Jesus. We're people of unity, we're people of coming together, that's who we are. And when we're told we can't come to worship on Sunday morning together, it just pushes against the fabric of what we're about as Christians. Our theology at our heart is one of togetherness, not apartness, not separation. The image of the body of Christ is one of interconnectedness. So that litany of separation and division maybe the story of our times, but it is not our story. Amen?

It is not our story. It is certainly not Christ's story. We are unified, but we are not uniform. We look different. You notice that, don't you? We don't all look the same and thank God for it. We don't all talk the same. Some of y'all haven't figured out y'all yet, but y'all will, we just work on it. When I was up in Pittsburgh last week, they said you'ens a whole lot. I thought, well, that's interesting! We don't walk the same. We don't even always pray the same. We don't sing the same, but I tell you what, we are unified in Christ Jesus. But that doesn't mean we have to be uniform.

And I think that part of the problem in our culture is that we're looking for people that we want to agree with, we want them to somehow look and act like us — you can be my friend, as long as you fit in this box. You can be different as long as you're the same as me. Right? One of the great strengths of The Episcopal Church in particular, is that we try our very best to embody this. We are one church over this state of Delaware without out-posts all across the state, North and South. And when we are strong, we can reach and pick up another who is feeling weak, and when we're feeling weak, we can reach out to a sister parish and be made stronger. And if we don't do that as Christians, if we don't do that as Episcopalians, we are foolish. This is part of who we are — togetherness — part of what makes us strong. For too long, we've inherited this kind of idea that our sister parishes are somehow competitors, and they are your number one fan.

They should be your first resource. Am I right? Because we're all in this together. In tough times, especially like pandemic, we continue to march on together. You saw those ministry presentations at convention. How Camp Arrowhead had such a stunning summer, even in the midst of such struggles in finding help, finding people that they could hire. The capital campaign has been a raging success, even in the midst of pandemic. We saw new life in our children's ministries and in our youth ministry and new life in a warden's network, for goodness sakes — how such a simple idea could take root, and you think, why didn't we think of that before? We're doing that with our treasurers too, by the way.

The powerful work of Invite, Welcome, Connect, and our racial justice commission, it just keeps coming. And this is all of us together — together we are stronger. There's a fascinating new ministry for the folks down in Georgetown, that you are getting ready to launch, ministry with your Hispanic neighbors. I'm so excited and can't wait to see what bears fruit there. You're not waiting for pandemic to be over. And there are churches all across southern Delaware, churches that don't have full-time clergy, that have begun to connect with each other, first at the warden's level, then at the vestry level, and it's spreading out, and we are realizing that our closest allies are just down the street — not competitors, but unified. Kind of like that Trinity thing!

It's exciting. It's exciting to be a part of this diocese now. There's new construction going on at St. Peter's, Lewis, where they've expanded their worship space, and renewal of the sanctuary at Christ Church, Dover — beautiful new work that's been done in the sanctuary and in the nave. And our advancing development fund in the last year awarded over \$700,000 in grants to parishes to do new work like this and to refurbish things and to fix things. That's a pretty good sign, isn't it? It doesn't mean that we don't have challenges. Don't think for a second that I'm going to sit up here and just sort of spread icing over a stinky cake and serve it. The cake isn't rotten, but it's tough out there. It is tough for any of you who come back to church and you're wondering, are people going to come back? Every church wonders this. Will the people who were here before pandemic, will they come back?

For churches that were already struggling, pandemic has made it a whole lot worse. We heard today from our wonderful friends at Nativity Church in Newcastle. Did you see the presentation today? Wasn't that unbelievably powerful, to hear the senior warden, to hear the current resource priest, speak about this parish? A parish that recognizes that they are in the midst of hard times and rather than just limp on forward, decided that we are taking control of where we are and we choose, now as the time that we end. This was not an overnight decision. The good folks at Nativity Church, and God bless you my friends, looked five years ago, well before pandemic, and said, things are tough. Things are not happening here like they were back in 1950 when everybody went to church, when there were blue laws on the books that just funneled people into church, those were the good old days, y'all.

They sure were indeed and it's not that time anymore. Things have shifted. Things have changed and the good folks at Nativity have recognized that. They put measures in place to say, this is what and who we are, and if our attendance declines to a certain point, if our funds get to a certain point, we're just going

to name it. We're not going to pretend — we're not going to put icing on a stinky cake." Can I patent that by way? I'm going to copyright. This sermon is called "Icing on a Stinky Cake." Instead, they've told the truth. Because everything has a season, beginnings and endings. That's biblical, right out of Ecclesiastes. And Nativity, New Castle, you have given us a model of courage, as I said this morning, honest, even difficult, no excuses. And that's what we need right now from our sisters and brothers at Nativity. That building may be closed, but they're still members of this church. They're still here among us, right? And their power, their courage, will still be here among us. They remain a witness.

We worry if people are coming back, we're worrying about how to do online worship, we're worrying if we do it well, we look at another church. The next time you feel guilty that you see another church who does it better than you, quit feeling guilty, pick up the phone, call them, ask them how they did it. Right? The next time you see a church with a youth group or a children's ministry or an adult book club or whatever, and you feel guilty or you feel jealous, call them up and ask them how they did it. Can I join? Can we join? Can we get together? We're stronger together. It's who we are. Right, diocese? Right, church?

That's who we are and it's what we do. We pick each other up when we're down and when we're down, we lean on the strong. As our presiding Bishop likes to remind us, he says "Don't get weary. Don't get weary. Keep moving." These times are tough. We learn from the courage and from the faith of one another. We learn hope and we see love in action. So, let's keep praying like we mean it, praying like it matters, praying like prayer could transform us and the world.

Listen to what the holy spirit says and then work together. Work as our Lord taught us, together. I'm reminded that when we're invited to pray in the words our Lord taught us, we don't say "My Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." We say "Our Father who art in heaven." We say, "Give us this day, our daily bread." Because we're people of you, Jesus Christ, and we are together. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive. We! Our story is one of unity in Christ Jesus, it is not one of division. And we can be the healers that this world is aching to know. Our power is in Christ Jesus, our help is in the name of the Lord, and our strength is in each other.

God bless you, Delaware. Here's to another great year in ministry, in Jesus Christ's name. Amen.