

November 9, 2013

Dear Delegates and Friends of the Diocese of Eau Claire,

Our Lord Jesus Christ is with us! What a wonderful day! What a splendid time to be alive! What a Diocese we are privileged to serve!

I have been your bishop nearly eight months. During that time I have come to learn your story. I have become keenly aware of the last five years. Much of what happened is sad, but there were bright spots. For Bishop Leidel and his two and a half year tenure I give thanks. He gave you direction and guided you through many issues and problems. I also thank the Trustees of the Diocese. Over five years they moved us from financial implosion to the solid foundation we now enjoy. Bob Weathers and the Executive Council are able to present to you a budget with apportionments reduced to 10% because the Trustees have restored the finances of the Diocese of Eau Claire. I also thank all who served on the Standing Committee and the Executive Council these past five years. I know the time was difficult. I understand the exhaustion you experienced. Please realize that your service was important. Each in your own way contributed so the diocese could find its way through what might be called the Wilderness Years.

Now we come to the present. As your new bishop I don't know exactly what I am doing. 18 months ago the thought of being your bishop would have brought laughter from me. It was a ridiculous notion. The Holy Spirit was serious, and here I am. My becoming your bishop is one of the two great surprises of my life. The other was meeting and falling in love with May Ruth. That happened in about 10 minutes. The Spirit's call to be your bishop was just about as short. It was a powerful moment for me, in which I blurted out, "Lord send someone else!" So here we are together. I don't know completely why. This does not mean I am in despair, confused, or without direction. On the contrary, I am comforted by the Spirit. Being aware that the Holy Spirit is with you and me as we walk forward together brings a spirit of peace. Right now we are laying a foundation. It is built upon trust, integrity, transparency, and respect. In the midst of this we are surrounded by one great truth. Without it we have no purpose, but with it we have everything.

That truth is Emmanuel. God is with us. Jesus Christ is the Way the Truth and the Life. He is Savior and Lord! He has taught us to live the Gospel—the Good News. Through Jesus' resurrection we have become an Easter people. My brothers and sisters of Eau Claire, this is not church jargon. It isn't pie in the sky talk. It isn't spin. This is a true message. It meant everything to the disciples. It was the driving energy behind the tremendous work of St. Paul and the early church. These teachings transform people today! Look at the alternative language. Consider your television or computer sites. Out there are all sorts of strange ideas and false values. It is an empty world. In contrast Jesus offers everyone Living Water. You drink from this, and thirst is quenched—

permanently. Who will bring this water to others? At this 85th Diocesan Convention look around and consider yourself. Here within the Diocese of Eau Claire is the answer.

Imagine that you are with Jesus as Risen Lord in the Upper Room with the other disciples. One of the disciples, let's say Peter, asks Jesus this question, "Lord, we know you have brought to us eternal life. How do we share this with others who do not know you?" What if Jesus responded this way, "Well, let's just sit here in this Upper Room and see how many people want to join us?" That answer would be unthinkable. It would be ineffective and an invitation to laziness. Worst of all, instead of spreading the Good News, Jesus would be teaching us to hoard it. It might be healthy to laugh at this crazy approach so we won't cry. You see, this is how nearly all our churches function in 21st century America. Congregational development experts call this the "Attraction Church Model." You open your doors on Sunday morning and hope people walk in. If Jesus applied this model with his disciples, what would have become of the Church? You know the answer. What amazes me is that this model of Christianity dominates our thinking today.

Our Diocese of Eau Claire is small. We are fragile. With a few missteps we can disappear as a Church body. There is something liberating in this. Janis Joplin in the 1960's had a hit song, *Me and Bobby McGee*. In there is the lyric, "Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose." Our recent diocesan story is that traditional Christian practices for congregational development have served us poorly. We have closed churches; we have little money; the attraction church model is killing us! God is calling us to freedom. There is nothing left to lose!

It is time for a new model. The old model with its poor results calls forth the phrase, "Necessity is the mother of invention." Here is where I am: I am an old priest trying to make sense of being a new bishop. I have many years experience protecting the vested interests of the attraction church. I have become a very good attraction church maintenance man. As your new bishop I am confronted with this reality: THE OLD MODEL DOESN'T WORK ANYMORE IN EAU CLAIRE! Freedom is having nothing left to lose!

As Jesus and the disciples left the Upper Room, we mentally have to leave our brick and mortar churches. What this means is as we encounter people in everyday life we leave behind the concerns of Christ Church LaCrosse, Christ Church Cathedral, and Ascension Hayward. We focus upon that person we have just met. She or he may be family, friend, stranger or neighbor. We come equipped with the Good News. We listen with undivided attention. If needed we provide hospitality. When we hear of a problem or a fear, we respond by offering that person the Living Water of Jesus. Your Church of St. Katharine's Owen, St. Luke's Springbrook, or St. John's Sparta is secondary, It is an afterthought. It is the bridge to cross down the road. It is where you guide someone who needs further resources.

Notice that Jesus formed the disciples before he sent them out. They did not go forth seeing people and not knowing why. The disciples knew that the cup they carried

had Living Water. They took every opportunity to be formed in the teachings of Jesus. When Jesus told them they were ready, the disciples went out. They were not comfortable. Those first efforts may have been clumsy, but they did know Jesus was with them. They were equipped with the Spirit. As we attempt to share the Living Water with others, we too are not alone.

Make no mistake about it. This is important work. In some instances what you are offering others is literally the difference between life and death. Remember this is a reactive ministry. You start your day in a normal way, but you take the words from the old railroad crossing sign of stop, look, listen! When you see someone hurting or in need you respond. Your cup is full of Living Water, and you give it to this person to drink. The Living Water will both soothe thirst and make the person want more. You are changing a person's life! O my God! Heaven forbid! What would your grandmother say?!! You have become an evangelist!

As your bishop, this is all I ask you to do right now. I request that you take this message to heart. Take this responsibility and as a boy or girl works with discipline to be an increasingly better baseball player, piano player, or ballerina, I ask that you do all you can to develop the skills of an evangelist. Read the bible. Study the saints. Take what you know and extend your faith to others. Meanwhile, let your church community support you. Let St. Andrew's Ashland, St. Paul's Hudson, and St. Mary's Tomah aid you in living and sharing the Christian life. With this support you can make a difference to those people you encounter during the week.

For our diocese and for each of our parishes, let's make this the main work we do. My beloved priests and deacons, will you commit to leading your people to make this leap of faith? Will you equip them for this ministry? Dear Wardens and Vestry Members, will you reorient resources of parish life so evangelism can be a priority? O Christian People of God in the Diocese of Eau Claire, will you dare to live into this calling? As for me, I pledge to you that I as your bishop will do all I can to provide support systems and resources to move you away from attraction church practices and into the new model of evangelism.

I have asked you to step out in faith with me into uncharted waters. I know you are aware of the dangers. Your discomfort is understandable. There also is another side, and it is just as real. God is with you. You are not alone. You have a very powerful friend accompanying you as you step forward in faith. If you let him, God will take charge. Realize you won't make sense of his accompanying you. It just is. As you share your faith you are giving balm to those who are hurting. It will exhaust and exhilarate you at the same time. This is holy work. You will make a difference. God will be happy with what you are doing. You will have no better feeling on this earth! This is what it means to be truly blessed! Let's live the evangelical life! Let's go to work! Amen!