

“Learning Together”
The Bishop’s Address
The 36th Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of El Camino Real
November 5, 2016

Good morning,

Let us pray: O God, our time is in your hands. May we offer each moment to your glory. Amen.

I would like to begin this morning by taking us back to our reading of the full Book of Ruth. It is rare that we get to hear together an entire book of the Bible read all in one sitting!

Tamara Eskinazi, a Hebrew Bible scholar, notes that Ruth is a character that exemplifies what it means to love according to the holiness code of Torah.¹ Ruth encompasses love for God, love for kin, and love for the stranger in a holistic way. She flows from one to another seamlessly. It is important to note that Ruth married into the Jewish faith, she was not born into it. Ruth is a foreigner to this holiness code. Eskinazi explains that loving the stranger was a unique notion in the ancient world. Imagine the vulnerability required to love the stranger when one was a nomad, a refugee; especially if one was not raised with that expectation. And for Naomi, it would have been difficult too as she returned to a hometown that no longer felt like home. Surely, everything could have been perceived as a threat. Naomi names that vulnerability, “I went away full but the Lord has brought me back empty.” She may be referring to her womb, but probably even more so to her spirit.

Entering an established community, as Ruth and Naomi entered Bethlehem, required a very savvy sense of strategic, intentional and vulnerable love. It required certitude and the capacity for ambiguity. There really was a lot of risk and uncertainty. They held their values and were themselves as they became a part of the community that would become home.

Interestingly, ‘holiness’ is often characterized through its separation from others but in the Book of Ruth we see the keeping of the code – loving God, kin and

stranger, exemplified not by separation but by holy community. For such holy love requires spiritual practice that can only be developed in relationship.

Naomi and Ruth make choices all along their journey. They are values-based, vulnerable, strategic, creative and forward looking – even though they are not sure of their next move or exactly where they are headed. In the end, the characters of the Book of Ruth, kin and stranger together, form a community of practice whereby faithfully they keep the holiness code of loving God and one another. They know and trust that their salvation is in the process.

I invite you to take five minutes at your tables and ponder together an experience in your congregation, or personally, of maintaining your integrity even though you were not sure where you were going.

Another interesting aspect of this power-packed little book is how the Hebrew Bible places Ruth after Proverbs. The character of Ruth typifies the valorous woman of Proverbs. This valor, if you will, is the approach to life that creates sustainability for the people – as a people – of Israel. It is the keeping of Torah that builds and holds the community through all time.

In the Christian canon, the Book of Ruth is a sort of bridge between the period of the Judges and the monarchy, specifically David. The genealogy of David laid out at the end of Ruth, leads the Christian reader to the genealogy of Jesus. The intent for both Hebrew and Christian versions of the Bible is to support an ethos, values, virtues, a holiness code, by which community is sustained and grown – even when in uncertain transition. It is sustained for Jews by the living of Torah, and for Christians by following Jesus.

For both Christians and Jews then, strategic (and perhaps an easier word is ‘conscious’) vulnerability to God’s love and to being in community is a primary spiritual practice. In the practice, we must hold our values, follow the way of salvation to which we have committed – even when we do not know where we are going or the way seems filled with risk.

This past year I was blessed by our work on Values in our diocesan ministry. That was last year’s convention theme. Some of the most fruitful conversations in our work about the Strategic Plan Remix were prompted because we spent time on our values. I think we became a more holy community as we considered together

how we are Christ-centered, Passionate, Reconciling. How we live our Integrity, and exercise Innovation and Creativity. The overarching experience for me was that we loved one another as together we practiced vulnerability and ambiguity; as we lived our values and discerned our future.

I especially want to commend our Budget Advisory Committee for reviewing our budget through our values. We don't tend to think of money as a place of spiritual practice, but indeed, that is what we mean by the word stewardship. As the Budget Advisory Committee engaged the process of discernment around the Strategic Plan Remix, they asked the important question, "are we budgeting our financial resources according to our values, according to our mission, or, are we defining our mission according to the limits of our budget?"

I was humbled as I watched our beloved number-crunchers exercise the spiritual practices of vulnerability and ambiguity. It was particularly beautiful, since money is precisely where we think our security is, that our vulnerability must increase. Their process has supported new conversations for us in diocesan ministries as we strategically expand and organize our common life as diocese. Strategic vulnerability, strategic ambiguity – not always knowing exactly where we are going – these are the spiritual practices of being a Learning Community.

I invite you to take five minutes at your table and remember a time that the spiritual practice of vulnerability – whether strategic or conscious -- advanced your sustainability as a loving community?

What did you learn from that experience?

We see the fruits of our learning as a diocese. This learning is reflected, for example, in our capacity for raising money, our willingness to be a voice for justice in the world, and our increasing ability to do our work as a diocese with professionalism and excellence. And, so importantly, innovation and creativity for being holy community in our congregations is percolating more and more in the surrounding communities. Our reach is wider than it has been. 60% of our congregations report that they are more connected with their communities.ⁱⁱ That is a very good number. I read it as a reflection that the idea of "Learning Together" is not limited to ourselves, but that we have learning partners with our neighbors, community organizations, our local politics; with 'strangers, kin and God'. This is very good news indeed!

Before we move to our consideration of the Strategic Plan Remix, I want to say a bit more about what a Learning Organization is and how we know when we become one. As we name ourselves a learning community, we will live more fully into that reality, and dare we say, gain wisdom as a diocese. Not individuals within the diocese, but that as the body of Christ in this place we grow in spiritual maturity and wisdom. Is that not the prayer of all scripture, of Jesus, or every prophet?

Being a Learning Organization, or Community (both words are helpful and I am not yet sure we know which one we want to use), is very Biblical. It is also a concept found in the corporate world. We don't have to polarize these realities. In fact, spreading the Kingdom of God would suggest we learn to be partners together so that justice and well-being for all can be a reality. People of faith are the link between the two.

Peter Senge, MIT professor and author of *The Fifth Discipline*, states, "A Learning Organization is the combined knowledge of each member." Silicon Valley think tanks and Pentecost unity of understanding. Board meetings and prayer meetings. One for all and all for one. Our unity is in Christ Jesus.

This thinking is a big shift for us as a sanctified, hierarchical organization where the clergy, whether we like it or not, are deferred to as knowing more and knowing better. Sometimes it is true, but it is never scientifically or theoretically true. It is not even theologically true. Our baptismal covenant states quite the opposite. It has been a mode we have lived into in our church and society. We can learn other modes that, I believe, will take us further along in following the graceful way of Jesus.

And always, the Spirit is wiser, the Spirit is clearer, the Spirit is stronger than any one of us alone. To gather in the Spirit as we follow Jesus, as we are the discernable and touchable body of Christ in the world is more than any one of us can offer separately. Each of us because of our position in the world has a reach, a place we touch for Christ. Together we touch more places in our communities than any one of us can alone.

So what are the markers of being a Learning Organization, a Learning Community?

I think we see these things coming through in Biblical stories, but the *Harvard Business Review* has an easier breakdown in an article titled, “Is Yours a Learning Organization?”

The authors note three building blocksⁱⁱⁱ:

A supportive learning environment which encompasses:

- psychological safety, appreciation of differences, openness to new ideas, time for reflection.

Concrete learning practices which include:

- experimentation, information collection, analysis, education and training, and information transfer.

Leadership that reinforces learning which involves:

- active listening, probing questioning, and openness to opinions other than one’s own.

I will pause here so you can read and absorb these points.

I wonder if we have ever thought about how important the qualities of these markers are to being Church? Perhaps we have seen them in Paul’s lists of the gifts of the Spirit in his various letters to his communities. The qualities are translatable.

This year, I invite us all to consider that “A Learning Organization is the combined knowledge of each member.” I invite us to discern and develop in each of our contexts the practices that arise out of the markers just listed.

You will see in a moment that a reimagined Conference, Education, Resource Committee, CERC, is a goal under our first strategic objective: “Build Leadership for the Future.” As a diocese I invite us to live more deeply into these realities. I invite us to a cultural self-examination, if you will. I invite us to discover and help each other learn practices that deepen our understanding of organizational health. I invite us to spiritual practices of strategic vulnerability and ambiguity which will deepen our spiritual maturity as Christians and strengthen our gospel witness in the world.

At last year's convention I said we would come back to you with a Strategic Plan Remix. The goals of the 2011 plan were completed – as well as they would be completed – earlier than expected. As diocesan leaders came to understand what was finished and what would be ongoing development for us as a diocese, we moved immediately back into discernment. No organization benefits from going any length of time without a plan. All of our congregations and organizations should always have a plan that encourages and activates their intentions and goals, and the diocese holds itself to that same standard.

So, we began the “Remix” process, recognizing there were things like cross-cultural and inter-generational awareness and growth that would be ongoing for us. We may never complete those goals because there is deep transformational need within ourselves that requires more than a programmatic, easy fix to our cultural and generational biases. As Jesus says of some things, demons mainly, “these things take a lot of prayer.”

The overarching theme of the Remix remains the vision of the diocese: “to be a resilient and dynamic Gospel presence, empowering people to lead faithful lives in a rapidly changing world”. We – you and me – are the target area of the plan. The relationship between our spiritual maturity and our world is the object of our development.

And so, things like education, formation, inter-generational and cross-cultural capacity have greater focus in the Remix, not less. Our growth as Christians is the friction of the “rubber meeting the road.” I hope this focus on empowering our witness jumps out at you.

What is *not* in this plan, and here I ask your patience, is the detail of who is responsible for each area, and, how we are going to fund the bigger items, such as staff positions. As our Commissions and Committees have expanded to meet the demands of the Strategic Plan we have reorganized some of the tasks for which each group is responsible. The relevant diocesan bodies need more time to craft and organize the goals and the Committees and Commissions so we lessen confusion rather than add to it. On funding, while we have exceeded our goals and done very well instituting the Bishop's Appeal into our diocesan life and funding of targeted objectives, we will need to run a capital campaign to make longer-term goals a reality. This also needs more work.

In summary, what we have accomplished is to clarify goals under the same strategic objectives, with one and two re-ordered. This was to make clear, that, really, all objectives and goals flow from our willingness and ability to develop as Christian leaders.

We offer this Strategic Plan Remix having had your input at deanery meetings. The Bishop's Council of Advice, Board of Trustees, Finance Committee and Standing Committee have all been part of this process. On behalf of the Board of Trustees, whose canonical responsibility it is to be sure our diocese has a Strategic Plan, I invite you to support the resolution that will arise out of this address at the appropriate time during this convention.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees I assure you, that if you approve this Remix today, we will continue to work on these details in order to give the Remix the legs it needs to keep moving forward. In truth, we are already working on all of this and hope you will approve the Remix so we can continue to do so. My hope is that together we share excitement about this Strategic Plan Remix.

I conclude by once again saying what an honor it is to be your bishop. I am blessed beyond measure to serve here and to engage in this very exciting work of being a resilient and dynamic gospel presence in El Camino Real. I begin the 10th year of my episcopate next week.

Now, I want to introduce Joe Head, Vice President of the Board of Trustees, to present to you the Strategic Plan Remix. You have copies on your table and we will have an opportunity to have a conversation around the plan. Jesus will give us those instructions after Joe has presented the plan.

Thank you.

ⁱ Eskinazi, Tamara, *The Torah, A Women's Commentary*, pg. 704, eds., Tamara Eskinazi and Andrea Weiss, URJ Press, NY 2008

ⁱⁱ Please see the Standing Committee Five Year Review for more information.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gravink, David, Edmondson, Amy, and Gino, Francesca, "Is Yours a Learning Organization?", hbr.org, March 2008.