

Sermon at the Council Eucharist

105th Annual Council of the Diocese of West Texas

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The Rt. Rev. David Reed, *Bishop Suffragan*

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower...abide in me, as I abide in you.”

(John 15:1-17)

Good evening. *Muy buenas noches y bienvenidos a McAllen y el Valle.* Lots of people have been doing lots of work and fretting over lots of details so that we could just show up for Council and now, tonight, gather to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. For eleven months, the people of St. John's have enthusiastically prepared a great Council, and for eleven months, they were so glad we were all coming. And then, for the past month, they've wondered, "What were we thinking?" And more importantly, "Who can we blame?" Your two priests, for starters, and their co-conspirators, Rachel Davies and Heath Smith. Seriously, John Badders and Philip Cunningham, and all of St. John's, please stand. Thank you for this great offering of yourselves and for this beautiful gift of hospitality. You *should* be proud, and you can brag on yourselves all the way to, say, Ash Wednesday.

I want to speak first to those who have the hardest time sitting through a sermon, who get fidgety and fussy in a hurry unless you give them a cookie or something to color. I mean the clergy, of course. It's an occupational hazard that they...we...tend to be more critical, quicker to check out of a sermon. So let me say this before I lose them:

Thank you, and thanks be to God for you. Bishop Lillibridge and I can only echo St. Paul when we consider this diocese and these clergy: "We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and

Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (I Thessalonians 1:2-3)

Parish priesthood has probably never been an easy vocation, but there’s no doubt these are acutely challenging times in which to be a priest. We’re not being fed to the lions, but still the stresses and fractures within the Episcopal Church and across the Anglican Communion take a toll, regardless of anyone’s particular point of view on the issues. And add to that the anxious crises that come locally in rapidly changing communities when needs are great and resources seem few, when church members expect more and more from their clergy while our culture cares less and less about the Church...any church. Still, these clergy abide, keep showing up—not grim-faced and sour saints, but with joy and lively hope.

Bishop Lillibridge and I are very aware of the burden of love these men and women carry for your sake and for the sake of the Gospel. They bear on their bodies and in their souls the marks of this costly love. But what Jesus said is true: in laying down our lives for him, we receive life, greater and more abundant than we could imagine.

With St. Augustine of Hippo, Gary and I reaffirm to you: “For you I am a bishop, but with you I am a Christian; one is an office, accepted; the other is a gift, received. One is danger; the other is safety. If I am happier to be redeemed with you than to be placed over you, then I shall, as the Lord commanded, be more fully your Servant.”

Back in December, I wrote an article in *The Church News* about our spiritual geographies and the importance of place in our spiritual formation and the practice of our faith. (I want to thank everyone who read it...Dick Elwood, Diana Thorp, Patti and Kaitlin...Dad...I think that’s everyone). St. John’s wanted to give you a better understanding of the Valley, to show it off a bit, so let me give you a sense of place, the lay of the land.

If you’ve never been to the Rio Grande Valley before, you should understand that, like Border Buttermilk, things here are not always what they seem. For example, you might have noticed that there aren’t any mountains, or even hills, that you might expect to see while in a Valley. There *are* some lomas—little hills higher than flat—west of here at Rio Grande City, which inspired some chamber of commerce-types to declare it to be “the Hill Country of the Valley.” But the Valley is actually a river delta formed by the

Rio Grande, or the Rio Bravo if you're in Mexico (and *never* call it the Rio Grande River because then you're saying the Big River River and people will know you're pura turista). We're 121 feet above sea level (a little more for me) and about 60 miles from St. Andrew's, Port Isabel, which is across the street from sea level.

I was born and raised in Brownsville, which unlike McAllen, is *really* South Texas. I was baptized and brought up at Church of the Advent, founded in 1851, 23 years before Bishop Elliott arrived as first bishop of the new missionary district, and just 15 years after this area was no longer part of Mexico. Episcopalians have been here a long time, but of course, Christianity, thanks to the Franciscans, arrived in the 1750s, with a string of missions from Laredo to Reynosa.

When I was much younger and more foolish, I would say I was from Brownsville like somebody at their first court-ordered 12-step meeting: "Hello. My name is David. I'm from Brownsville." When I was in high school, we saw our hometown not just as the southern tip of Texas, where both the river and Highway 77 ended, but as the end of the world. We changed the words to our school fight song so that it referred to us geographically in terms that only a gastroenterologist can fully appreciate.

But you grow up, sort of, and your perspective changes. What looks like the end might be the beginning, and a dead-end becomes a doorway. What looks like a static, solid line on a map turns out to be a dynamic, shifting, life-giving place of unexpected meeting and fertile relationship. *Y ahora, estamos aqui en la frontera*. If you haven't been on the border before, you might be surprised that there is NOT a bright red line running down the middle of the river, defining us and them, what's in and what's out, who's here and who's there. La frontera is less easily defined, more blurry—in some ways less important, and less defining, to those who live here than it is to those who wish to define and categorize from a distance. To visitors, the Valley...the whole border...may seem messy, contradictory and confusing. That's okay; it seems that way to people who live here, too. But things aren't always what they seem. And when it comes to making your home in communities that are given more than chosen...when it comes to living with and loving people who at first and second glance are very different from you...then the border is way ahead of the curve, and the Episcopal churches in the Valley and all along the border have a lot to teach the rest of us. Because, to me, *la frontera* looks a lot

like the world we all live in—with all of its blurred and changing lines, with all of its blending and its resistance to blending, with all its cacophony and contradictions and troubles, with all its beauty and potential and longing. This place looks a lot like the world into which our Savior was born, and for which he died, and to which he now sends us.

I've spent some time talking about this setting tonight because I want you to think about the places *you* live, 90 different points on the map. It's so important that we be grounded in our practice of faith and not over-spiritualize it. We can't settle for merely *thinking* about faith. It is action that separates belief from opinion, and whenever we say our creedal, "We believe," we're saying we'll put our money where our mouths are, that our faith will be revealed in our footsteps, and we will strive to flesh out our believing in the daily living of our lives.

Ironically, St. John's Gospel, which begins and ends and shimmers throughout with the Incarnation—"and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14)—is written with such profound and soaring beauty that we're tempted to lose sight of its earthiness, its embodiedness, and its life-transforming good news for our lives and our life together right here and right now. If we're not careful, what is powerfully mystical can be reduced to flimsy spiritual escapism.

So when we hear Jesus say, "Abide in me," we need to resist the temptation to think, "This is so cool—me and Jesus hanging out." First of all, he's not talking to just me or just you, but to all his disciples. My extensive study of the Greek texts reveals that Jesus is using the present plural emphatic: "all y'all." When Jesus says, "Abide in me, as I abide in you," he's including lots of other people, and to come close to seeing the reality he's offering, we need to think of the most difficult person in our congregation, the group we least identify with in the Church, the priest who gives you a rash, the bishop you disagree with. When Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you," that's less about how we might feel about each other at any given time, and more about how we will live toward one another, live with one another as Church, and for the sake of the world. We know where Jesus' love led him, and the command is for us to do the same, to give up our lives for one another and for the life of the world. Now personally, I have no problem with loving everybody. It's when you get

down to particulars—loving THAT person—that I have a hard time and remember what a sinner I am.

When Jesus speaks the words we heard tonight, he isn't on retreat in the wilderness, isn't having visions on a mountaintop. He's looking around the supper table on the night before he's going to die, looking at these friends he's chosen and called, whose feet he's just washed like a slave. They've been with him three years and he knows them as well as anyone, maybe better than they know themselves. He knows what they're capable of, for better and for worse, and he knows they'll all fall away before this night is done. And his words—beautiful and spiritual as they are—are also grounded in a time and place—then and now, there and here—earthy words, incarnational, forming and fleshing out what discipleship and friendship and belonging to Christ both is and is laboring to become.

Starting with a farming image that went way back into Israel's history—Israel is God's vine—Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower... Abide in me, as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:1 ff.)

"Abide in me... Permanece en mi." This Council is organized around these words and these words are woven through it like branches on a vine. Not so much so we'll go home Saturday thinking, "Well, wasn't that a *nice* theme!" But so that all that we do here might reflect—better, will flesh out—the truth Jesus is speaking here. Abide in Christ, as he abides in us: not just in the worship, the teaching and the singing—but abide together in Christ in the reports, in the budget, in the elections, in the resolutions, in the discussion and debating. People who love Jesus with a passion are going to disagree and we need to have committed ourselves to loving one another as Christ loves us before we open our mouths.

And because what's most interesting about Council isn't Council but what it reveals about our life and mission as a diocese of 90 congregations, our hope is that when we go out from here Saturday, in the power of the Holy Spirit, it will be with a renewed

confidence in who we are together, and with a deepened desire to live more fully out of our identity as people who abide in the Christ who abides in them.

The vine and branches tell us that “abiding” together is more than sharing the same church address. It describes a mutual indwelling, a continuous, dynamic exchanging of life. Abiding isn’t passive, it isn’t just hanging around together. To get at what Jesus means by “abide” talk to someone who chooses to sit in a hospital room or nursing home with someone they love. Talk to someone who’s a caregiver for a dying loved one. Talk to someone who refuses to give up on an angry hurting teenager. To abide with one another in Christ is to be drawn into communities and solidarities and missions not of our own choosing. What Jesus says in the upper room about our union and communion in him is implied throughout the New Testament. God enters fully into human life so that we might be restored fully to him, sharing in the divine life, participating in the very life of God. This, as Anglican theologian A.M. Allchin writes, “overthrows our customary ways of thinking both of God and humankind, and opens the way towards the wonder of our adoption into the circulation of the divine life.” (Participation in God, p. 6)

To call this holy mystery is not to separate it from daily living. To try to keep this participation in God’s life separate from our daily life and work, leads to a spiritual poverty, a stunted and pinched view of what God desires. We become a closed-up people. There’s no good way to translate this Spanish word, but if we don’t share this great good news of God’s extravagant generosity with those who don’t know about it, then we’ve become a *pinche* people. To be in communion, to participate in God’s life, is intensely personal, but not a private matter. What better and more public news than this to share with others: that God in his love has entered fully into our lives, not as a spectator, but as redeemer and restorer—as a full participant, so that he might draw us to himself and make us partakers of eternal life. It is mystical not because it’s a theological abstraction, but because it’s an embodied way of living the mystery of our salvation. “Apart from me,” Jesus says, “you can do nothing.” But with Christ and in Christ, we are nourished and enlivened with Christ’s own life. Listen with fresh ears to the words at the end of the Eucharistic prayer tonight as we prepare to receive Communion, to be fed by Christ: “All this we ask through your Son Jesus Christ. By him, and with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and for ever.”

(BCP, p. 363) Or as we pray in Rite One's Eucharistic Prayer, that "we may be made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him." (BCP, p. 336)

Discipleship is not a matter of passive openness to God's revelation in Jesus, and it's not simply a question of giving intellectual assent to the Church's claims about Jesus. Discipleship calls us out of ourselves to embody and live out Jesus' words and deeds. Action is the difference between opinion and belief. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus says, "If you remain in my word you are truly my disciples, and you shall know the truth and the truth will make you free." (8:31-32) And in tonight's passage, disciples will be recognizable because they love one another in the same way Jesus loves them. We'll be known as his friends if we do as he tells us. We're no longer servants, but friends because Jesus has told us what he's doing, brought us into his confidence, made us partakers and partners in his divine life and work. And far from giving us license to sit around and marvel at how special we are, Jesus draws us into this communion so that he can send us out to bear fruit for the sake of those who don't know the love of God. To draw others to abide with us in Christ.

The American poet Gwendolyn Brooks wrote:

"We are each other's business/We are each other's harvest/We are each other's magnitude and bond."

That's us, abiding in Christ as he abides in us.

"I am the vine, you are the branches" gives us a way of understanding our life as the Diocese of West Texas. We are bound to one another in Christ; apart from him, we can do nothing; we are each other's business. And this annual Council—part big-tent revival, part family reunion, part business, part frat party—is in a real sense a sacramental reminder of what is true at all times in our various places. That is, we are part of something bigger than just us. We receive life and identity by being part of it, but we also contribute life and identity. There is a mutuality in this communion and fellowship, a giving and receiving as we participate in the circulation of the divine life, vine to branches and back again. I think we are too busy in the busyness and preoccupations in our own particular places to pay too much attention to this. I suspect sometimes that, as Eagles' drummer Don Henley sings in "Through Your Hands": "we wouldn't know a burning bush if it blew up in our face." Council invites us to step back and look up from

our lives and see the larger and deeper reality into which our Lord has drawn us. What we might see, by God's grace, in these three days, is what is deeply true in all our 90 places. Again, the point of Council is not Council. We gather and, by God's grace, enjoy being Christians together and are renewed in our confidence in Christ, so that we'll go out from here, enjoying being Christians, confident, where we live. Every one of our churches has something to offer to the life we share in common. Each one of your churches has all it needs to invite others who don't know Jesus to come and abide with him and to share in the life he offers. Every one of you can nourish and strengthen the other branches, by Christ who dwells in us.

I invite you to make a renewed effort to turn to one another, to love as Christ loves us, to recognize the gift we are, by grace and mercy, to the other 89. I've mentioned the Valley churches already, but let me encourage some of our "resource churches" to be available to you, like St. Luke's and Christ Church and Good Shepherd. Of course, I mean St. Luke's, San Saba; Christ Church, Laredo; and Good Shepherd, George West. All of you have something good and holy that can be offered to strengthen us and bind us together more closely and send us out more bravely.

Jesus makes it clear that abiding in him is not just about us, but about embodying his life in the world around us, about fleshing out the Good News in the midst of all the heartache and despair and boredom of modern life, so that others might have joy and hope and life, and have it abundantly.

"A mighty fortress is our God." But the Church, the Body of Christ, seems much more like a border town than a walled city. We all live *en la frontera*-- a people of flesh and blood, water and Spirit, called to be Jesus' witnesses, to embody in our lives and in the ways we are the Church, to love one another as he loves us...a holy communion abiding with one another in Christ as he abides in us. AMEN.