

# BISHOP BROOKHART'S ADDRESS

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*106<sup>TH</sup> DIOCESAN CONVENTION IN MISSOULA*

*26 SEPTEMBER 2009*

I will flat out admit it: I hate to exercise. I have always been that way. Even now I approach the tread mill in our house with loathing and disgust. As I figure it, who wants to be sweaty, or gasping for breath, or suffering from aching muscles. I am firm about this: I hate to exercise.

But I know I must do it. When I visit the doctor, the inevitable questions are: do you exercise, what do you do, how much time do you spend? He and I both know that I have to push my body a little bit, that I need to move and pull and stretch. Without that, my health will decline and I will begin to deteriorate. We can all be firm about this: we need to stretch.

This applies to our relationship with God and with our sisters and brothers in Christ. We need to stretch. We need to push ourselves. We need to sweat. Yes, I know, because people tell me all the time that religion should be about peace and comfort and consolation and rest. They tell me, hoping that I will agree and validate this view. Well, of course, there is peace and comfort in the biblical religion, but it always goes hand-in-hand with stretching and challenging. That's the way it is in the Reign of God. Just read the gospels; it is clear that Jesus was, shall we say, pesky, always pushing it, always asking his followers to go further, always poking and prodding.

All of this applies to our diocese. I want to spend just a few minutes talking about three areas where I believe we need to stretch, to be poked and prodded, and then I will move on to something else. So here we go. First, we continue to be bothered by money issues. My very first convention address was about this, despite the fact that no one should begin an episcopate pushing the cash button during a convention; that is politically stupid. And I think I have mentioned it in every address since, and I do that because it is a sticking point, a neuralgic spot, something we hate to address.

People often tell me that we are poor in this diocese, that people are giving the best they can, that we really can't ask people to raise their giving. Frankly, I just don't see it. None of the figures I read indicate that we are exceptionally poor---although there are poor among us---or that we are overtaxed or that we are excessively and dangerously generous. On your way home, just look. How many slums do you go through? How many people are without shoes or food? Then count the number of RV's, boats, ATV's, campers, and other toys you see. We here: we came in our cars, we will go home to comfortable houses, we had a choice about what we had for lunch, and we have disposable income. This is an area in which we need to prod ourselves. We need to talk about generosity, about the staggeringly abundant blessings God has given us, about tithing, about what our Lord has done for us. Let's move beyond poor-mouth to the place where we can say and mean it, that God loves a cheerful giver.

Second, we need to get a clear image of mission and ministry. I hear hints too often that all we need to do is have a priest and open the church doors on Sunday. Of course, Sunday Eucharist is central

to whom we are and what we do, but mission, too, is central to who we are and what we do. Mission is the fact that the Lord of the church sends us out of the church to be his eyes and ears, hands and feet in the world. Remember the Risen Christ's last word to his disciples in Matthew's gospel:

Go. That's mission. We are to go, because we have been sent. This is not an optional things; it is the command of the One we serve. Ministry is how we use the gifts and talents, the interests and skills that we have been given, how we use them to serve the Risen Christ. The church has a mission, the diocese has a mission, your congregation has a mission, you have a mission. Doing your share in that mission is your ministry. Remember what it is that the deacon proclaims at the end of the Mass? Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

We have not been promised that this will be easy, or that it will not cost much, or that we can just fit it in among the other affairs of our life. We need just to drop those illusions. It will require much from each of us. The title of that old devotional classic says it: My Upmost for the Highest. Or listen to this section of a collect from Morning Prayer: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace. When we give ourselves away in the work of our Savior, life is returned to us made new and transformed into something grand and good.

Third, we need to be very, very careful in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Classic Christian spirituality has an exercise that is strongly advocated; it is called the examen. The spiritual masters say we are often and honestly to evaluate our relationship with Christ, the church, each other. I think they all boil down to this simple question: do you love Jesus? Do you? Who is Jesus to you? Are you willing to turn over your life and the life of the church to him. It seems to me that if we get this straight all the rest falls into place. Do you know that "Jesus loves me" has more than one verse? Our kids have been singing this verse all summer at camp:

Do you love Him, does He know?  
Have you ever told Him so?  
Jesus loves to hear us say,  
That we love Him every day.

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I had a conversation recently with one of our priests, and I had to admit that I need to exercise in order to have the energy to get through the day. The stretching and sweating and pushing leads to good results. Exercise leads to life for me. That is the other side of the exercise equation.

So, too, in our life as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, stretching leads to strength. We have much to be encouraged about in our diocese. Resurrection living is springing up all over the place. Let me talk about some of these.

First, nearly every one of our churches has at least one significant outreach ministry. I think that is marvelous, a sign of our Lord's active presence among us. Lots of us have ways to feed the hungry and to cloth the poor, both basic things commanded by Jesus himself. If we had the time, we could spend the rest of the afternoon simply swapping mission and ministry stories, and I am quite sure that it would take all afternoon to do this. We are on the move as mission people.

Second, our numbers are beginning to get better. For more than a decade we have been in decline in terms of members, but in the last several years those loss figures have been shrinking. This year may be the year in which we show a net growth; if not this year, then next. Now, I know that

numbers can get to be overly important for us. I know that God has God's own arithmetic, and that numbers in and of themselves are not that important. But the numbers do indicate some trends. They can be signs of life. So it is that as individuals we want to know the blood pressure numbers, the weight numbers, the cholesterol numbers; they are signs of our health. Attendance numbers, giving numbers, baptism numbers can be signs of our health.

I am also aware that many of our churches have begun to grow in giving, in the percentage of people who give, in the amount given. Again, the money per se is not the issue; but it is the money that funds the mission and ministry. Your car does not run without gas; the church does not work without money. I also note that people are beginning to be aware that giving involves time and energy, too. A car needs oil as well as gas; time and energy are the oil of the church. We are beginning to see that we can measure the depth of our love and commitment to Jesus by looking at our checkbooks and our calendars. We are beginning to see the presence of generosity, which is one of the major gifts of the Holy Spirit.

I am proud of how hard many of you, the lay people and the clerics of this diocese, work. There is, I sense, a level of commitment, a belief that what we do as church is vitally important. I used to have a bishop who insisted that at every visitation and diocesan event we sing the hymn *Ora Labora*:

Come, labor on. Who dares stand idle  
On the harvest plain, while all around us  
Waves the golden grain? And to each servant  
Does the Master say, "Go work today."

Finally, we need to be encouraged because God is on our side. God knows the struggles and difficulties in being the church. God knows that much is asked of us to whom much has been given. The good news of the resurrection is that God will go the limit to give us life and energy and new creation. The good news of the resurrection is that nothing can stand in God's way. The good news of the resurrection is that we are the apple of God's eye. Some of the Reformation theologians said that the gospel can be summed up in two words: for us. That is the way God is: for us. That is the way God acts: for us. If that is not good news, that the creator of all things visible and invisible is consumed with loving us, if that is not good news, I do not know what is.

In the diocesan house is an icon of that paradigmatic gospel episode, the Road to Emmaus. Two disciples are walking down the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus on Easter evening. They are worried and discouraged, because Jesus, in whom they had put such hope, had been executed on a cross. The icon, in one corner, shows them on their journey, tired and despondent. Along the way the Risen One joins the two disciples, although they do not recognize him. They talk about the scriptures, and they invite him to supper. At the breaking of the bread they recognize him as Jesus, now raised, and present with them. This is the other part of the icon, the joy of the presence of the Risen One in the holy meal. Both scenes in the icon are surrounded by gold. In the language of icons, gold always represents the glory and the active presence of the divine. That's the point. In discouragement we are surrounded by glory. In moments of joy in the Lord, we are surrounded by glory. When prodded and pressed, it is glory. When we are able to carry out our ministry, it is glory. Lord, show us your glory.

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