



**Sermon at the Convention Eucharist
40th Annual Convention of the Diocese of
Southeast Florida
November 13, 2009, St. Paul's, Key West
The Rt. Rev. Mary Gray-Reeves, Bishop of
El Camino Real**

Walter Brueggemann says, "The wondrous thing about preaching is that anyone shows up." That is a humbling thing to hear when one is gathered in front of a crowd such as this.

Thank you, Leo, for this invitation to come home and to hopefully say something worth listening to. It is good to be home. As I said earlier, I was raised in the faith in this diocese at St. Stephen's in Coconut Grove, I served as rector at St. Margaret's in Miami Lakes and served Bishop Frade as his Archdeacon for Deployment before becoming bishop. I am blessed to call this home--along with my diocese of El Camino Real--I am blessed to have so much family! I am honored to be with you. You are part of me and I am part of you; I literally cannot unwind myself from you, the connection is so significant.

Several months ago one of my canons, Brian, worked a CREDO conference, and I knew he would see Linda Schlepp-Gray there. I gave Brian a big hug and said, "You must give Linda this great big hug for me." And when he arrived home, he gave me a great big hug, and said, "This is from Linda!" And then he said, "You know, everyone I meet from Southeast Florida loves me just because you love me...."

We shared a pause and a look, and I said, "I think, that is the church."

What a powerful thing to understand the church as the place where we love a stranger just because a mutual friend loves them. What would it be like if a member of our congregation brought a friend and we loved them, just because our mutual friend loved them? Moreover, what would it be like if we loved the stranger that came among us, just because Jesus loved them? How powerful it would be if that stranger thought, "Wow...those people love me just because Jesus loves me, just because my friend loves me."

And I bring you love and greetings from El Camino Real; they love you just because I do--and because Jesus does.

I am reading about five books right now. I used to read about three at a time, but when one becomes a bishop, the attention span takes a bit of a downward turn because one is about twice as busy. Have mercy on your bishop!

Two of the books I am reading are *The Word Militant* by Walter Brueggemann and *We Are Here Now* by Patrick Keifert. They are books of two different disciplines, Brueggemann of Biblical Studies and Keifert of Missiology, but both address aspects of speaking something worth hearing.

People of all ages long to hear something significant for their lives, larger than their current circumstances. We long for it, no matter who we are or what our generation is. These two writers, though, speak specifically to this time, when we are moving from a modern age to a post-modern one; when we no longer live in a world where truth or reality is singularly defined. I think we understand now that reality and truth can vary greatly depending on where you stand. Both writers say that we need to do two things as we seek to speak in this post-modern age.

First we need to dwell in the word. I went to seminary about 15 years ago and I read a lot of Brueggemann. He is great, but now he says in this book that in fact, we need to dwell in the text itself--instead of reading what others write about it. Having read a lot of what Brueggemann wrote about scripture, this is a switch! But we do need to discern what the word is saying directly to us.

Keifert says that any community that is re-visioning first needs to spend significant time, as a community, dwelling in the word; studying the scripture, listening to what it is saying, in that moment in time to that context. That is the first step to listening to the call of God.

Let's do that now. I am going to re-read the gospel. If you are more comfortable in Spanish or French, please read it as I say it. I imagine that as we read it again, dwelling in it, a word may catch your heart and mind. We will have a little silence afterwards, but I won't be finished yet--after all, I have been asked to preach --and silence in a sermon may feel like it doesn't belong!

“Jesus went about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’” Matthew 9:35-38

I hope that as we continue our worship and work, leaving this place to return home, we will allow the word to dwell in us, and we in it. See what you and Jesus might do with that.

The second thing Brueggemann and Keifert say is that we must dwell in our community. We must dwell in our neighborhoods; get to know the people who live here. We must dwell with the stranger and the friend. As one who is interested in Congregational Growth and Development, I have studied a lot of data and demographics. I know who lives where and what their preferences are, how many children they do or do not have. I know what chances exist of their coming to church.

We can know the information, but there is no substitute for a relationship. A relationship where you know a person; you know their preferences, how many children they have, who they are--not because they are data, but because they have become your friend, you have deeply listened to them--just as you have to the scripture, and you know them.

Dwelling in a neighborhood means that you don't study it, you have a relationship with it. And as a church, we need to hear this, especially as we seek out the honored and salvific 18-35 year old--our latest target in our church. Be most careful that you do not treat these beloved people of God as data, as demographics. Have a relationship with those among you--there is no substitute.

We celebrate Samuel Seabury today, first bishop of our country. Seabury was interested in bringing the established church to this country--bringing a reformation church to a revolutionary church. Interesting. Seabury wanted to bring the democratic principles of

Anglicanism to these new United States. The church was to be integral to the founding of our country, to creating space for participation in the citizenship.

We come by our desire to shape our context rightly, and we have served an important function in the creation of our country. It is no accident that our church and our country look somewhat alike in polity. In my own diocese, the church's voice in the community is still key in the area of making citizens. We have so many people who come to our country and who need help accessing the system, in order to become a citizen. It is an area of ministry for us, to be sure.

Yet overall, our influence, the influence of all mainline churches--we are not alone in this--has waned over the years. Our voice is not listened to like it once was, and over the years a result of this is that we have turned our energy inward and begun to develop the democratic atmosphere within our church. For those of us interested in inclusion of all sorts of people; we think this is great. We want to create a church where people can say, "Those people love me, just because Jesus does, or just because my friend does." And that is good.

But it is so important to remember that we do not exist for the institution, we exist for the sheep. I stand here as a visible presence of the institution to say that we do not exist for ourselves. We create a healthier institution not for the sake of itself, but for the sheep that long to come home, that long for a life with the shepherd, that long to be told with great abandon that they are loved. For some, we are the only place that such a reality may be found.

I honored a man at my convention a couple of weeks ago, who was very wealthy and who lost it all in this economic downturn. He was incredibly generous when he had a lot of money; gave lots away to all sorts of causes, to individuals--just a man of great and compassionate heart. Since I have been in El Camino Real I have heard nothing but wonderful things about this man and how many people he helped. When I called him to tell him I wanted to honor him, he said, "Don't you read the papers?! I have 50 lawsuits against me--I can't pay my bills."

I said, "I know, but your problems now do not tell your whole story and I want to honor you for all the generous and good work you have done for years and years. I want to honor you for your compassion." He had been honored many times by many organizations--when times were good. As I reflected on this, I was aware that now we were the only entity in this man's life that could honor, could say thank you, that could in some way speak some redemption in this life situation. The banks couldn't do it, secular organizations and members of the community seemed to feel they couldn't. Others were stuck where in fact we had some freedom. The church had a voice; we had some freedom of speech in this situation.

Only the church could say in the midst of what was understood as failure, "Hey we love you because Jesus loves you. We love you because others love you--and we will use our voice to say just that."

May we never forget that we exist for the sheep who long for Jesus, who long to be told they are loved, who long to come home. Amen.