

**An Address
to the 205th Convention
of the Episcopal Church in Maine**

*delivered by Bishop Thomas James Brown,
16 November 2024
at the Cathedral Church of St. Luke
in the City of Portland*

Celebrated Maine author Elizabeth Strout, born in Portland and now living in Harpswell, is arguably best-known for introducing the world to her character, Olive Kitteridge, in 2008. Strout's eight books aren't exclusively set in Maine, but the fictional Maine towns of Shirley Falls and Crosby are readily identifiable to you and me because they look and feel like us.

I wanted Elizabeth Strout to be here today, to speak personally about how she sees religious communities in Maine making a difference. Teresa Pinney—always the smartest one in the room—told me, “Elizabeth Strout is not stopping the tour of her new book to come to convention!”

It's true... Ms. Strout has a new book out, and she is indeed on the road. Since she's not here, I'm unabashedly co-opting the title of her new book *Tell Me Everything* as the title of this address and sermon. Tell Me Everything.

We begin by returning to those three driving and arresting questions which define the missional direction of every congregation:

Who are we?

Why are we here?

What are we doing about it?

Identity drives mission. This means until we're crystal-clear about who we are, we'll struggle to know our why and our what.

Who are we?

The Episcopal Diocese of Maine is a community of 10,000+ people in every one of our 16 counties. We gather in 57 year-round congregations, a summer camp, 17 summer chapels, and four separate-yet-affiliated organizations in Augusta, Biddeford, Lewiston, and Portland who care for people.

Taken together we are disciples of Jesus Christ who make disciples for the transformation of the world. This is our identity!

Here's something I notice about who we are: when the leaders of our faith communities—ordained and lay—exhibit a lively faith in Jesus Christ, and when they're able to put in an honest day's work, the congregation thrives. Joy abounds.

And from there energy multiplies, our focus becomes clear, and we gladly spend resources mostly on people, rather than on buildings. It's not that buildings are unimportant, not at all; they're used to support mission, but they themselves aren't our mission. So a lively faith in Jesus Christ and energy for the work...they're hallmarks of identity.

This doesn't mean challenges and disappointments suddenly evaporate, it means that in the face of them, leaders don't bear burdens alone. Instead, we share information and tell stories so that others catch joy. Even when we eat the bread of anxiety, we eat it together! Faith and enthusiasm—when one is absent the congregation drifts. When both are absent, when faith goes unexpressed and the congregation lacks capacity, the community founders.

Faith is the lynchpin.

There is no one way to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, nor is there one way to express faith in him. But when we talk about Jesus, authentically and lovingly, we demonstrate who we are.

Some of us do this outwardly—focusing on social action and change. Some respond through prayer and quiet. Many of us do both discovering purpose at the intersection where discipleship with Jesus, meets a desire to befriend others for the sole purpose of transformation—in ourselves, in our communities, and in the world. We are disciples of Jesus Christ who make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Say it with me: *We are disciples of Jesus Christ who make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.*

Let's talk about who we are in the bishop's office, and let's state the obvious: we are largely a new community. At 11 years, Teresa Pinney is the most senior, followed by me at 5.5 years. In the past 11 months we've welcomed five new colleagues: Lauralee Raymond; executive assistant to the bishop; two communicators whom we share with the diocese of New Hampshire, Susan Sherrill Axelrod and Amy Redfern; an accounting manager, Sherri Quint; and a canon to the ordinary, Mark Furlow. They join the continuing team: George Cooper, Emily Keniston, Aaron Perkins, Suzanne Roberts, along with independent contractors John Hennessey, Wendy Kopera, Anne Coyne, and Bishopswood director, Michael Douglass. Join me in thanking them. They're amazing!

Many of us are Episcopalians, five of us are ordained, one of us is a Postulant for Holy Orders, one of us is Jewish, and all of us care about you. The reason we exist is to help you get the resources you need to be disciples of Jesus Christ who make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. My love and respect for these colleagues gets more real every day, drawn from deep wells of both gratitude and joy, for the blessing of being your bishop. I love you and I love the work God gives us.

Loring House is the physical center of activity for your diocesan staff. The beautiful work of the Loring House Task Force, chaired by Lisa Leighton of St. Alban's in Cape Elizabeth, and

their report to us last year, equipped the Standing Committee, the Trustees, and the Diocesan Council with information to have lively discussion.

The report from the task force led our governing bodies and me to discernment and discussion, which leads me to announce today the decision that we ought not distract ourselves with whether to sell or repurpose Loring House. Our base of operations and hospitality will remain at Loring House. We might pick up the Task Force's recommendations another day, but right now, we use every inch of Loring House, and our priority is to serve you, not solve for new offices. However, and this is really important, the decision means making Loring House physically accessible, requiring a plan no later than the end of next year.

Since I said I'd tell you everything, let me give you a bird's eye view of life at Loring House.

Your diocesan staff laughs. We laugh at each other, we laugh with each other, we laugh because you make us laugh, and we laugh because the Joy of the Lord is in our hearts. Since we reject outrightly the notion that our work is more important than yours, we hold everything lightly.

I hear laughter from you, too. After every episcopal visitation I drive home lighter, filled with more joy. You are they who follow our ancestor Sarah, who said, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:6).

When we laugh, or provoke laughter, we're wondering,

*"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?
Can I see myself in you? How can this be
this fun?"*

As a bodily response to the unexpected, laughter helps us forge ties; laughter fosters connection. Suddenly we uncover joy from mistakes and missteps, we grow, and all of that makes way for the profound. That is no joke. *pause*

Why are we here?

If indeed I'm telling you everything, we'll need to answer the "why" of who we are, and then, what we're doing about it.

We exist to give praise and adoration to God who shows us a way to live, die, and rise again in Jesus Christ. We're here to be outposts of the gospel of Jesus Christ, to proclaim good news to the poor, to set captives free, and to make God the subject of our sentences.

You do this day in and day out, year after year, because God gives you utterance and because you are they who say, "Here I am, send me!"

Whenever I need to be reminded of the answer to "why are we here?" I need only look at you. Your enthusiasm is no small gift, especially now.

There is another part of our why.

To illustrate we need look only as close as today's commemoration of the late Queen of Scotland, Margaret, and to thank God for her pioneering theological leadership. Over a millennium ago, Queen Margaret opened the eyes of God's people to recognize that at every Holy Eucharist we participate in the Lord's living, dying, and rising until he comes again.

Queen Margaret freed the Scots from an overwrought sense of unworthiness, and eventually, their devotion for Holy Communion revealed the Anglican premise that we offer and present to God ourselves, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice.

When we receive Jesus Christ's body and blood we become one body with him. This isn't about quantity—the more times we receive the Sacrament the better we become? No, it's about union with Christ and the offering of ourselves is our why. Here's data: we know growing Episcopal churches exhibit specific characteristics:

- 1) they ground everything they do in scripture;
- 2) they pastor the wider community;
- 3) their leaders demonstrate a warm heart;
- 4) they testify to the transforming power of the Holy Eucharist.

The ongoing and beautiful work of being the church, friends, is from everlasting and for everlasting. *pause*

And because that's true God shall use us for kingdom work following last week's national election. Many of us voted for Donald Trump, and to you I say: I am listening, and I pledge to see you and love you. This church is yours too. In turn, please understand that if Mr. Trump follows through we'll need your help to be the church, galvanized for mission, perhaps resistance, opposing policies that keep poor people poor, or harm the environment. All of us shall denounce rhetoric which belittles people. We'll be sanctuary for trans folk, and others who are threatened, not because we are old-school Republicans or Democrats, but because our why is grounded in the through-line of the Old and New Testaments, and the sacraments of the New Covenant.

The renowned theologian Walter Brueggemann writes brilliantly regarding America's tendencies to cling to a mix of denial and despair. In our denial we imagine that everything will work out, that whatever is wrong in society isn't as deep or as long term as we fear. In our despair we fear there's no return to well-being.

Like a Phoenix from the ashes, God raises God's people to once again recommit to preach the saving grace of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, and to keep making God the subject of the sentence.

Here's another story about why we are here.

Bishop Rob Wright, of the Diocese of Atlanta, hosted Ron Heifetz, Harvard's management professor and a leadership guru, who teaches how to lead amid adaptive challenges, problems for which we don't already know the solution. Here's an example: how to grow and lead Episcopal Churches in Maine in 2024. During lunch with Professor Heifetz, Bishop Wright asked a thousand questions. Finally Professor Heifetz answered them by summing up all the law and the prophets in this way.

Heifetz said, "Rob, if you're going to exert leadership you'll have to love, and anybody who leads change is going to have to love more greatly than ever before." A secular Jew instructed the Bishop of Atlanta in the faith. To lead change we have to love greatly. There it was, and there it is.

We exist to be a delivery system of love.
That's our why.

Tell Me Everything—

Elizabeth Strout titled her novel, "Tell Me Everything" because of the human desire to be heard and understood. *Tell Me Everything* is a plea to be real, to say how we're vulnerable, and to see and hear each other. Crosby, Maine, isn't fictional because it's every city, town, and village in this state. 1.3 million people in Maine, many aching with spiritual hunger...and God sends us in each community to share the Good News. There we are, fulfilling our why.

When we tell people everything, the parts that are great and the parts that aren't great we show faith, not only with our lips but in our lives.

What are we doing?

- We are welcoming new people, and we are growing. Every single congregation has welcomed new people this past year. In some of our smallest congregations, as you know, the presence of just one or two new households can ignite immeasurable energy and fuel momentum.
- 19 faith communities have commissioned earth-keepers, people who place front and center our commitment to care for creation, to ready ourselves for changes in weather, plan for storm damage, and hold to the fire the feet of our congressional leaders in the Senate and the House so that our national policies are in sync with science and innovation.
- Through the *Maine Episcopal Public Policy Network* we work for racial justice, partner with Indigenous communities, care for the earth, and strengthen our state-wide engagement to make Maine a state with sensible gun safety laws. The Episcopal Church beyond Maine is no less committed to this priority.
- Here, we must "Tell Everything" about the reckoning and restitution The Episcopal Church will do to apologize for our complicity with Indigenous boarding schools from the 19th and 20th centuries. A formal apology from President Biden, which he made last month, lays on the altar our sinful and unknowingly, or intentionally, the eradication of Native culture and language. Of the 523 boarding schools, 34 were owned and operated by The Episcopal Church. And just because there wasn't one of these schools in Maine in no way grants us impunity. This blood is on our hands as well, and those of us who are white shall work with and listen to

Native Americans who must be the deciders for how we'll make restitution.

- The Trustees of Diocesan Funds, whom you elect, commit ourselves to communicate directly with our partner churches. The trustees are a direct-service ministry, consistently outperforming investment benchmarks without any fee to you.
- Resulting from your action in 2023, the *Special Commission on Investment of Diocesan Funds* proposes today continuing a dialogue with the Trustees, supporting the Trustees unapologetic goal to gain profit, while urging the Trustees to invest in companies who lift up people of color, care for the earth, and who practice equitable governance.
- Treasurers and finance leaders in our congregations are working right now with diocesan leaders to make sure our financial houses are in great shape. We're talking about audits.
We need canonical permission to conduct reasonable annual reviews, and to share the cost when outside professional reviews or audits are required. This is work in progress, and it's really fine.
- Your grants committee will sponsor a town hall so that applications for grants are easy-to-understand and easy-to-complete, with clear standards for evaluating and funding grants.
- The hard work of helping congregations who need to lay down the burden of ministry, that is, to take the painful but faith-filled decision to close, will be necessary in the next seasons. This will require our governing bodies—the Standing Committee, the Diocesan Council, and the Trustees of Diocesan Funds—to know where each begins and where the other ends, and to connect spiritually and emotionally—across the governing bodies—to serve you!
- Insofar as God gives us the will, we shall invest in Camp Bishopswood as a diocesan institution who sees Christ in all persons, embodying the best of Anglicanism,

remaining open to fresh expressions and addressing questions, old and new.

- This is the third year I have pointed us toward farmers, food, and agriculture, and the 18,000 people in Maine who make a living on our rivers, lakes, and ocean. With just a couple of exceptions in the midcoast, and a few individuals who support potato farmers in The County, we are impoverished by our lack of connection and partnership with people who care for the earth every single day. Let's figure out ways to change this, not to signal virtue, but to fulfill the baptismal promise "to cherish the wondrous works of God, and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation."
- We'll get behind our Presiding Bishop to reorganize and rightsize our Church, confronting the natural urge to resist change, which only hobbles our response to God's call. We celebrate our catholicity as a diocese who gives 15% of our resources to the Episcopal Church by writing a check and saying, "we are are happy to be part of the family. Here you go."
- We are preparing for the likelihood of full communion with the United Methodist Church. Our partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America flourishes, but given the number of United Methodists in Maine, we'll soon sing with St. Peter echoing the Prophet Joel: "In the last days," God says, "I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people. Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters; your young people will see visions, your old people shall dream dreams." *Pause*

Tell Me Everything.

Long after Jesus Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, St. Matthew borrowed from St. Mark and gave us this:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a jewel merchant on the hunt for excellent pearls. Finding one that is flawless, she immediately sells everything and buys it."

To Tell Everything, well, it's nothing more or less than finding a pearl of great price, entrance into God's commonwealth, not by our deserving or earning it, but solely because of God's grace.

Who are we?

Disciples who make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation for the world.

Why are we here?

To be outposts of the gospel of Jesus Christ, to proclaim good news to the poor, to set the captive free, to be changed through Christ's body and blood, to offer ourselves, and to make God the subject of our sentences.

What are we doing about it?

We're growing in faith, caring for the earth, renouncing Christian nationalism, reckoning with racism and abuse, investing in companies that do good, restructuring administrative systems to strengthen congregations, and supporting the Episcopal Church beyond Maine, for the sake of the gospel.

A delivery system of love.
And that, well, that is everything.