

CONVOCATION 1

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

A reflection from Padraig O'Tuama

Where there is separation, there is pain

And where there is pain, there is story,

And where there is story, there is understanding and
misunderstanding,

Listening and not listening.

May we turn toward each other,

And turn toward our stories,

With understanding and listening,

With argument and acceptance,

With challenge, change and consolation.

Because if God is to be found,

God will be found in the space between. Amen

Good morning my siblings in Christ. I want to begin my remarks by saying thank you to the Standing Committee for inviting me to facilitate the task force that has done a lot of very hard and very good work to bring this day to fruition. They have not only planned logistics and content, but they have put their hearts, minds, souls and many prayers into processing the concept of reconciliation and the practices that can support it. They have struggled with the reality of where the diocese is, their own perspectives and feelings. They have worked hard to build community together, to learn, to disagree and to work through the challenges of pulling together an event like today.

They are courageous and bold and brave. I have learned much from them. Mostly they love you and they love this diocese, and they want to support a good, joy-filled and fruitful life and ministry ahead.

“Many members, One Body;” this is the title of today’s convocation. We are many members and at the same time one body. Many of us have read and heard these words throughout the years. It is a famous piece of scripture.

They are spoken by Paul in response to a community of followers of Jesus that finds itself in conflict in the city of Corinth. It is not just that they disagree, it is that they are fundamentally sorting through what it means to be and live as a Christian in their world. They are not of one mind. There are deep divisions that for them are quite serious.

That may sound a bit familiar today in the church and in our world. Paul wants to persuade this community to find their identity and belonging, transcended above difference, and found in “Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” *1 Cor 1:23-24*.

I just finished listening to *The Gifts of Imperfection* by Brene Brown. When I begin listening to something she is presenting in her areas of expertise – matters such as shame, vulnerability, authenticity, resilience or gratitude - I think to myself, “Oh yea...I already know all about that. I don’t really need to listen to what she has to say, but it is a long drive, and maybe I will hear something new.’

And I am usually glad I listened. One of things I like about Brene Brown is that she takes the reader, the listener, deeper into words we may use casually or lightly, sure that we know everything there is to know about that word or topic. I am always grateful, first, for the gift of humility that I experience when I listen to Brene Brown’s work, because it does not take long before I say to myself, ‘I never thought of it quite like that...’ And then, I am grateful of course, for everything I learn when I become present to her words and show up with a supple heart.

We all know something about conflict and reconciliation. We know the words as they are connected to a particular context, a time and a place. For instance, we all know something about this conflict here in the Diocese of Florida. We may even know something of reconciliation in this diocese. We may have observed an aspect of the structure that has become better organized. We may have had an experience in our own heart; perhaps a new understanding or insight, maybe even some forgiveness.

But like other words, we sometimes speak of conflict and reconciliation, casually and lightly, as though there is nothing more we need to learn about them. ‘Oh I know all about that’.

We also speak about conflict and reconciliation as though we know *how* to do them. But like the topics on which Brene Brown speaks – vulnerability, shame, authenticity – conflict and reconciliation are not words we merely talk about, they are interactions and transformations that we do that we experience in our hearts, minds, bodies and souls. We are immersed in the meaning and reality of these words when we are *in* the dynamics of conflict and reconciliation. Events that are associated with these words impact us deeply. We can be forever changed by both conflict and reconciliation.

I know that some of you will have come today hoping we can solve the problems, the conflicts of this diocese today. The task force who designed this day discerned that the body

would need to learn some practices, some skill sets, before getting too deeply into the content of the conflict. The practices we will use today will facilitate and strengthen our ability to engage in – to do - respectful listening and sharing, trust-building and concern for one another's sense of belonging.

I invite you to remember that we are not in a mediation where we will make a deal and go our separate ways. No, as many members of one body, we are about the audacious vision of an ongoing, loving and fruitful relationship which includes differences and diversity.

What we will do today are spiritual practices. They are holy because they allow for 'Christ the power of God, the wisdom of God' to be between us. Spiritual practices offer us an opportunity to go deeper in our understanding of seemingly simple things, like listening and speaking, because in slowing down to the speed of reverence, we find the eternal Christ, for whom our individual and corporate soul longs. When we treat listening as a spiritual practice, we learn as much about ourselves as we learn about the person who is speaking. It is transformational.

And... it can be frustrating! Our minds will get distracted. We might get irritated, which manifests itself in a desperate need to jump in with a response – or correction – or argument instead of letting someone finish completely sharing their thought. I invite you to give it a try. What does it feel like to *not* respond when you feel that what you have to say must be heard *now*? What is it to experience someone at your table *not* feeling safe enough to share or simply not ready to articulate what they are experiencing? Can we sit with one another's experience and learn from it? Can you sit in silence together? Can you name and learn what you are feeling? Which, by the way, research suggests that when we name our feelings, our anxiety level will drop. Besides feeling calmer we will also hear better, having a more comprehensive experience of the other and of yourself.

Engaging in this way means we do have to set aside the tool of debate. We are not at convention. There are no resolutions to pass or fail. Instead we will 'try on' spiritual practices and consider some communication norms. There will be time for discussion of those as a whole group, but we will not vote on them. We will take a look and see how it all goes. Will the diocese be willing to use these tools to see if they make a difference in the common life of the diocese?

Certain tools are designed for certain tasks. My experience is that around matters of the heart, matters concerning our most deeply held values and our sense of belonging, parliamentary procedure is the most effective set of tools.

So, today, we offer these tools: lectio divina, mutual invitation, psychological safety, communication norms. Today you can learn about them, practice them and take them home to your local congregation. Try them for a little while. See if a regular practice of them might support a healthier, more fruitful and satisfying diocesan life; solving your conflicts and preventing them down the road.

My own experience is that lectio divina and mutual invitation used over time deepens love and spiritual unity in the body of Christ; even amidst great diversity. Just those two practices can make quite a difference.

We have two more convocations scheduled. Today, the task force is going to learn a lot and use that learning to plan the next convocation. We all hope that it will not be long before we can go deeper into the content of the conflict that is present in the diocese. Today we are observing, listening, praying and reflecting and trying not to rush things. We invite you to slow down to the speed of reverence. I want to say that you are also courageous, bold and brave. I thank you for being here today.

May we hold one another in prayer in these coming hours, trusting that 'Christ the power of God and the Wisdom of God' never leaves us, is always forming us and carries us each step of the way.

Thank you and God bless you!