



The Grace of God: A Gift, Free, For Everyone.
The Rt. Rev. R. William Franklin
Address to the 180th Convention of the Diocese of Western New York

As most of you know, I get lots of email. One of the things that I did when I was on sabbatical was clear out my email inbox of over 64,000 emails. Just now I am getting more emails than usual because I just became a grandfather on Wednesday.

Someone emailed me a wonderful joke about a grandfather and grandson. The grandfather and grandson are coming into church. The boy sees the plaque with a list of names and asks his grandfather what it is. The grandfather says, "Those are the names of people who have died in the service." The boy thinks for a minute and says, "The 8 o'clock or the 10 o'clock service?"

It is sometimes easy for me to forget in the midst of answering the hundreds of emails that flood my inbox each day that the purpose of all of this activity is to proclaim the faith of Jesus Christ. But ultimately that is why we are all here.

We are here to proclaim what we believe to be true.

I believe in Jesus Christ, the son of the Living God.

I believe in the church of Jesus Christ in its many varieties across the world.

I believe in the Episcopal Church. I believe that it is not an overstatement to say that the Episcopal Church is the hope of the future of the message of Christ.

I believe that the Episcopal Church is uniquely ready to speak to our world today. It does not matter to the world what a company or institution or church does. The world does not care about what we do. The world cares about why we do what we do. The world judges us by how closely what we do is aligned with what we say we care about.

I believe that in our Baptismal Covenant we have the most powerful statement of why we do what we do.

I believe that this statement of meaning is what the world is looking for.

I believe that we are living a new Reformation.

We are here today on the 500th anniversary of the first Reformation. 500 years ago Martin Luther went to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg and nailed to the door a statement of how the church had gotten away from the message of Jesus Christ.

Luther's message freed the Church to proclaim the Gospel. Luther showed the Church all of the traditions and structures and practices that were getting in the way of proclaiming the Gospel. Luther proclaimed the most basic statement of the faith of the Gospel.

And that statement is: The Grace of God is a gift. You can't pay for it and you can't earn it. It is free and it is for you and for everyone.

Now we stand in a new Reformation. We need to free the Church to proclaim that the purpose of the Church is Jesus Christ. We need to proclaim that the Grace of God is a gift. It is free and it is for everyone. This is good news.

But just like the first Reformation, the Reformation of today will take us into the unknown. Just like the first Reformation this journey into the unknown was not planned. Just like the first Reformation it was not and it will not be predictable.

And just like the first Reformation, I believe that we are being led by the Spirit of God. We are being called to free ourselves from structures in the Church that have grown up over the years. We are being called to free ourselves from the way things have always been.

We are being called to take a deep breath and to follow where Christ is leading us.

It is sometimes difficult for us in Western New York to step out in faith, and I blame the Buffalo Bills for that, it is hard to hold on to hope & faith in Buffalo and Western New York year after year. By the way, do you know how to keep the Buffalo Bills off your lawn? Put up goalposts.

It can be a real challenge to hold on to hope. It can be a real challenge to step out in faith. It can be a real challenge to follow Jesus Christ. But that is what it means to be a Christian.

We are being called to find ways to bring the Good News of God in Christ to the daily lives of the people around us. We are being called to walk out of our Church buildings and into the lives of people who would never consider walking inside our doors.

This is the call to the Church of Jesus Christ right now. This is the call on the Episcopal Church. This is the call on each one of us as followers of Jesus. We must free the Church to proclaim the Gospel of Christ.

The Grace of God is a gift, it is free and it is for everyone.

When I talk about the Web of Grace this is what I mean. All of us have been given the Grace of God. All of us are called to reach out to one another, to remind each other that God loves us. All of us are called to support each other in sharing the love of Christ with the world around us.

That is the Web of Grace.

Here in Western New York we have been presented with a great opportunity to try something new. We have been presented with a way to explore what this new Reformation might look like.

I am required by the Canons of the Episcopal Church to retire 3 months after my 72nd birthday. I have announced that I will be retiring on April 3, 2019.

I could, of course, call for the election of my successor in the old way.

Or I could do what more and more bishops are doing and not call for an election of a new diocesan bishop before I retire and instead have the Standing Committee call for the election of a Bishop Provisional. A Bishop Provisional is someone who is already a Bishop who is called by a Diocese to serve as their bishop Diocesan for a set period of time.

But there is a choice for something greater that we can make together.

We have begun many collaborations with the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania. We have been doing more and more things together and discovered that the more that we do together the greater our vision and the more capacity we have for mission.

Bishop Sean Rowe of Northwestern Pennsylvania has been serving as Bishop Provisional for the Diocese of Bethlehem for the last 3 years. That will come to an end next fall.

Our partners in Northwestern Pennsylvania know how it works to have their Bishop also be the Bishop Provisional of another Diocese and one on the other side of their state of Pennsylvania to boot.

And there is an even greater opportunity before us. We could try to be two Dioceses who not only share one Bishop but two Dioceses who share one staff, who really live into working together and sharing ministry with one another.

We could commit to walking together and learning from and with each other.

We already have many connections with the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania. We have shared ministries and are looking at opportunities for more. We have discovered how alike we are. Every time groups meet together we discover more and more that we have much in common. We are doing that very thing right now. Because there are many guests from Northwestern Pennsylvania here. And as we meet as we are doing today, we discover more and more ways that we are facing the same challenges. We discover that we really like each other, even though a disturbing number of our guests do indeed cheer for the Pittsburgh Steelers.

What I have discussed with the Standing Committee of Western New York and what Bishop Rowe has discussed with the Standing Committee of Northwestern Pennsylvania is that the Diocese of Western New York elect Bishop Rowe as Bishop Provisional for the period of five years at the Convention of 2018.

For five years the two Dioceses will live and walk and learn and serve and explore together and see what comes of the collaboration.

We have shared this idea with the clergy of the two Dioceses and in early October we gathered a group of 20 people from each Diocese,, 40 people in all who spent two days asking questions and thinking about what might be gained from cooperation, what might stand in the way of cooperation and how we could talk and think and plan for cooperation over the next year in a way that included the widest variety of voices possible.

You can see around the walls of the room, along with the trees representing the congregations of Western New York, some pictures. These pictures were produced by the group that met in early October. They are icons of what this relationship between our two Dioceses might look like.

We are very early in the process of considering this together, clergy and lay, New Yorkers and Pennsylvanians. We know what a lot of the questions are, but we know very few of the answers.

We are standing at the start of the trail. We can see the first half mile or so of the path, but the rest we will have to discover as we walk it together.

We are in many ways just like Martin Luther. Luther found the presence of God all around him. He found the presence of God in music and in theology, in joy and in struggle. I enjoy Luther's writings and they are often surprising.

Here is just one. Luther said, "Whoever drinks beer, he is quick to sleep; whoever sleeps long does not sin; whoever does not sin, enters Heaven! Thus, let us drink beer!" Luther found the presence of God in many, many places. He could probably have even found the presence of God at New Era field.

I see the Diocese of Western New York as being like Luther 500 years ago. Luther standing at the door of the Castle Church could not possibly have imagined where sharing his ideas would take him and the church and the known world.

We cannot imagine where this idea might take us and what might develop or change as we explore what this might mean.

We will ask questions. We will share ideas. We will explore options. We will head down promising paths that turn out to be dead ends and we will head down doubtful paths that open onto amazing vistas. We will spend the next twelve months, an entire year, doing this exploration together.

At this moment in time we all stand at the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg. The new Reformation is in our hands. Just as the first Reformation came to England and was adapted into what became the Anglican Church and then that Anglican Church came to America and was adapted into the Episcopal Church by many of the very people who helped shape the United States itself. This idea of two Dioceses working closely together will adapt and change over the coming year.

As we begin this journey, we have the gifts that have been given us by Luther, by Thomas Cranmer, by Elizabeth I, by Richard Hooker by Thomas Cromwell and William White. We are a church that values Democracy. We value freedom. We are a church that lives with the tension of different ideas even as we kneel together at the altar of Christ.

We will bring those gifts to the consideration of this idea. We will dream and we will plan in equal measure. We will find answers and live with the discomfort of questions that cannot be answered until we live into them.

As we do all of this we will not forget the most important thing. We will not forget the only reason that we do any of this.

We will not forget the only purpose of the Church. To proclaim that salvation is free and it is for all.

Perhaps it is because I am a new grandfather, that I find myself thinking of the church that we will leave to our children and to our grandchildren and not only our own, but those who will find the presence of Christ in generations to come.

We will not forget the only reason for Dioceses or Bishops, for congregations or churches. We will not forget that the only reason that any of us is here is to proclaim to the whole world that The Grace of God is a gift. It is free and it is for everyone.