

Convention Address 2016

By Bishop Robert O'Neill

As we begin this 129th Annual Convention of The Episcopal Church in Colorado we are gathering around the theme of our sacred story as God's people and the holy journey that we are all called to take through this life as instruments of divine transformation and peace.

Tonight we observe the feast of another one of God's people, William Tyndale, who was himself passionately devoted to the sacred story of scripture and who believed passionately that this holy word was so powerful, so redemptive, so alive, that it needed to be made accessible to all.

It was four hundred and eighty years ago today—on October 6, 1536—that William Tyndale was taken to a cross in the center of the town square of Antwerp, bound in chains, and executed. He was a graduate of Oxford and Cambridge. He spoke seven languages. He was proficient in Hebrew and Greek. He believed that this living word of God to which he was so devoted needed not simply to be translated but also to be made alive and living in his own life. So he visited refugees every week. He worked among the poor. He taught the Christian faith and life to others. He studied scripture. He did the hard work of integrating his Christian faith and life with the complex religious and political issues of his own time, and the great irony of his death, if you ask me, is that he was arrested, tried, and executed not by faithless people but by the “faithful”—religious and secular authorities who were supposed to know something about divine compassion and justice.

William Tyndale is known for having produced the very first English translation of the New Testament—a project he completed in 1525. He did so while living abroad in exile. His English New Testament had to be smuggled into England for distribution where, in turn, the authorities bought up every copy they could find simply to keep it out of the hands of the people.

Really? It just seems odd to me that something as apparently innocuous as translating words of scripture from Greek into English would be so threatening as to constitute a capital offense. But perhaps that is just the point.

In Christian tradition, this living Word of God that is revealed in scripture, this Word that the Book of Genesis describes as speaking all of creation into being, this Word whom John says is made flesh in Jesus and dwells among us, is neither static nor benign. It is dynamic. It transforms life—it lifts up the lowly and casts down the mighty, to use the words of Mary; it fills the hungry and empties the rich; it favors the humble and scatters the proud. It “turns the world upside down” as the people of Thessalonica complain to the authorities. I can see how those who are invested in their own position and power, or those who simply prefer the status quo, would find it threatening that this living Word might actually take on life among us. (God forbid. Things might change.) “Indeed,” as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, “the

word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edge sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before [this living Word] no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare.” (Hebrews 4:12-13)

William Tyndale was one who immersed himself in that living Word and translated that word into his life and the life of others. There’s the icon of our own life’s work, our own spiritual practice. There’s an icon of what it means to be a missional Church—that we, too, would dare to immerse ourselves in the language of this unconditional love so that we might become translators who bring healing, reconciliation, and peace to life in this world.

If you ask me, I will tell you that we are already doing this work—all of us in a variety of ways. Read the most recent edition of the Colorado Episcopalian and you will see that we here in The Episcopal Church in Colorado do have a story to tell. Two fully enrolled communities in Colorado Episcopal Service Corps, now in its third year. Hundreds of young people being formed in faith at our Center at Cathedral Ridge every summer. Record attendance at Quest and Genesis, our two cornerstone annual diocesan youth retreats. Think of it—young adults being equipped with a substantive and robust faith that is up to the challenges of this world, young adults learning leadership skills and being equipped to become those who transform their own communities. It is about making disciples who make disciples. And alongside that literally thousands of adults to date from more than eighty percent of our congregations—from small to large, from rural to urban—have come together in a variety of configurations at Cathedral Ridge to be formed and equipped as leaders in their congregations and communities. There’s the vision—substantive, intentional lifelong Christian formation for all ages, an essential spiritual discipline and practice for all, making disciples who make disciples.

It is a story of divine transformation that is already taking place in and through us.

But it doesn’t end there. Just look at the faithful Episcopalians across the five regions of this diocese bring healing and change and life and hope to their own communities. Folks in Westcliff, providing snacks for school children whose families simply do not have the resources to feed them adequately. The people of Saint Barnabas in Cortez providing some 170 meals per week to those who are hungry. Saint Raphael’s in Security establishing affordable day-care for working families in need. Saint Brigit’s in Frederick embracing an ambitious vision to create fifty units of low-cost senior housing. Folks from Saint Mark’s in Durango, and others from the four-corners area of the state, bringing electricity and light to our native sisters and brothers in Navajo Land. Saint George’s in Leadville offering community meals six days a week, providing some 12,000 meals last year alone. Saint Peter’s in Basalt buying a food truck and imagining a new way to reach out to the working poor up and down the Roaring Fork Valley. There is also Saint Benedict Health and Healing ministry in Boulder County. There’s Saint Claire’s table in the Baker neighborhood. There are those who are giving hospitality and care to Syrian refugees. I’m not even counting the Episcopalians who visit those in prison and tend to the needs of the incarcerated all over Colorado. Nor is it possible to number those who tend to the homeless among us—whether that’s through the Saint Francis Center, the Women’s Homeless Initiative,

Common Cathedral, or with new initiatives being undertaken by Saint Andrew's in Five Points or Saint John's Cathedral right here in Capital Hill. I can't track those among us who travel to Haiti, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador and elsewhere to offer medical care, or education, or support and encouragement to others. The list goes on. It is impossible to quantify. All the ways in which the living word of the living God is made flesh among all of us collectively simply cannot be named.

But it is real. It is happening. It is good. The word that goes forth from God's mouth, as Isaiah says, does not return empty. You are leaven. You are light. You are a gift and a blessing, and I thank you.

Is there more to do? Of course. To be the mission-minded, mission-shaped, mission-focused body of Jesus' followers that we aspire to be, we must always to be willing to be to be stretched even further and to move. "So," as my spiritual director likes regularly to say, "what's the next invitation? Or as I would put it tonight, "How can this living word be given even greater life among us?"

When you look at our proposed budget for the Office of the Bishop for the coming year, all our key priorities are there to see—evangelism, Christian formation, leadership training, congregational development, advocacy and social justice, financial stewardship and development. But among these priorities, I would like to challenge us all to consider how we might find our footing and claim our voice as advocates for that which is compassionate, freeing, life-giving, right, and just in our communities and in this world.

I am quite serious about this. We have thirty-five jubilee centers across Colorado—more than any diocese in the Episcopal Church—ministries that feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the poor, provide medical care to the underserved and marginalized, and more. This is good and faithful work. But when it comes to the work of advocacy in our communities, we have a lot to learn. I cannot say it strongly enough. It is time for all of us as faithful Christians to dig deeper and to step up our game. There are real life and death issues staring us all in the face on a daily basis, and by virtue of our collective denial and/or silence, they continue to be a source of suffering for all of us. Systemic poverty. Increased and increasing economic disparity at home and abroad—a world in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Unconscionable violence—much of it rationalized, justified and glorified in the name of God—all of it the source of unimaginable trauma and grief. Racism is not a thing of the past. It is a present reality that demands our best care, thought and attention now. Xenophobia is a word we need to learn and a fear we need to face into in our increasingly global and pluralistic culture. And please do not forget this fragile earth, our island home, that so freely and graciously feeds us and gives us life, even here and now. It is crying out for our love and care in return.

There's the invitation, an absolutely essential component of spiritual maturity—doing the hard work of integrating our Christian faith and life with the complex, life and death, issues of our world so that we who follow a more transcendent way might embodying a more

transcendent way of engaging healing the deep divisions and injustices that plague us all. Do we who sing that Jesus is “all compassion,” we who proclaim that Jesus is “pure unbounded love,” do we who believe that all are being “changed from glory into glory” do we not have a life-giving word of healing, reconciliation, and peace to speak into a world that knows no peace?

“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edge sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before [this living Word] no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare.” (Hebrews 4:12-13)

To be a disciple is to be one who is willing to be drawn into a stunningly dynamic and transformational relationship with the divine life of Jesus who in turn opens our eyes to the divine life in us and in every human being. To be a disciple is to be one whose treasured assumptions are challenged, whose heart is broken and cracked open, whose mind is blown, whose consciousness is transformed, whose life will be turned inside out and upside down, only to find ourselves sent out into the world by a relentlessly untamable Holy Spirit for one purpose and one purpose alone: to love. Of course, we all simply have more to learn, more to discover, more to be and to become and to do in the name of love. There is still, for all of us, another chapter, another book, yes, even another gospel of hope, to be written on our hearts and to translated in and through our lives in our day in our time.

I cannot tell you how very grateful I am to all of you for your gracious faithfulness. I cannot tell you how very privileged and blessed I feel to serve this Church and this diocese. You are indeed a gift and a blessing, and I look forward to the days ahead.