

Sermon by the Reverend Canon David Seger
to the Diocese of Eau Claire Eightieth Annual Convention
November 7-8, 2008
Christ Church, La Crosse.
Evensong, Feast of St. Willibrord
Acts 1:1-8; Psalm 98:1-4; Luke 10:1-9

I am delighted to be asked to preach at evensong on the eve of your 80th annual diocesan convention. Actually, I'm here representing Bishop Clay Matthews, who is the director of the House of Bishops Office of Pastoral Development. I'm one of a group of consultants who assist his ministry consulting with dioceses that are electing bishops. I have now worked with seventeen dioceses in the election process.

One of my fraternity brothers, a member of the same pledge class, Gary Veldey, who is a trustee of the Diocese of Eau Claire and junior warden of this parish is here this evening. We have seen one another only a couple of times over the past fifty years. Thinking back to our days at the Sigma Chi House at the University of Iowa, Gary and his wife Mary might be a bit shocked to see me as your preacher.

We all know that the etymology of words changes over time. One of the more obvious ones from our Rite I Eucharist is "it is *meet* and right so to do" from the *Sursum corda*. Rather than using *meet*, today we might say *it is correct* or *proper*.

The first verse of Psalm 98, which we prayed this evening, contains a word whose meaning has also evolved—*marvelous*. "Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done *marvelous* things."

Contemporary usage would say that it means something splendid or very nice. To the psalmist, however, it meant something to be so extraordinary—so improbable—that it was miraculous.

This 80th convention meets at a time when the diocese has been without a bishop for about seven months. I have had personal experience with that sort of thing. I served as canon to the ordinary for seventeen years in the Diocese of Northern Indiana. During that time our bishop, Francis Gray, resigned to accept a call as assistant bishop in the Diocese of Virginia. As a diocese we initially suffered from corporate anxiety and had deep concern, in some instances it bordered on fear, fear about our future. However, looking back at that now after ten years our diocese was presented with a challenging opportunity—it was a *marvelous* thing—a *marvelous* thing—to examine our corporate identity, we got a new sense of mission, we gained a renewed commitment to serving God.

I wonder if perhaps God is speaking to and inviting the Diocese of Eau Claire to "sing a new song?" I wonder if this moment in the history of this diocese is providential, full of God's grace inviting you into a *marvelous* future. I wonder if this is an opportunity for you to enter into a new *marvelous* venture in mission? I wonder if God is offering you both a *marvelous* gift and a challenge to evangelize those who do not know Him in the upper half of Wisconsin?

I think that these are important questions for you to spiritually wrestle with and discern as you meet at your 80th convention tomorrow. I read the report that Deacon Jo Glasser wrote—"Charting a Course into the Future". I believe this is a *marvelous* work. I think it will be a valuable resource for you as you corporately discern your future and possible options that are so *marvelously* laid out in that report.

The diocese not the congregation is the basic expression of the local Church, the primary unit under the pastoral oversight of the bishop. It is one of the things that make us different from other protestant churches. I know there are those who say the congregation is the basic unit. But,

in fact, we have a church where our bishop is in communion with other bishops and that is a basic fact. The Episcopal ministry today reflects the servant ministry of Jesus and the baptized calling of the whole people of God. The bishop's ministry is one of service to the community, a ministry that is intended to build up the whole people of God. It is an offering rooted in the ministry of Christ, who as good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

Earlier I wondered if this might not be a time of divine providence in the life of the Diocese of Eau Claire. For many folks providence is a somewhat archaic theological principle. That is not how I understand Jesus and his working in my own life.

Many things that happen in our lives are accidental or coincidental. We cannot credit God or give Him blame for every good or ill. But I know in my own life that when we open ourselves to His presence working in our lives, I find God speaks to me constantly placing in front of me choices that to others might seem "to just happen." I believe that the promise of God challenges each and every one of us to co-operate, particularly for the spiritual good and the spread of his kingdom.

To ensure God's providential working for our ultimate goal requires some effort on our part:

1. Seek first the kingdom of God.
2. Study and apply what is God's revealed will through the Word and Sacrament.
3. See that our plans are submissive to the Lord's will.
4. In all that we do give praise to God.

How this might all work out I do not know, but my past experience tells me:

1. That no individual, no congregation and no diocese can maintain the *status quo*. The world changes as fast today in five years as it used to in 200. If we stay the same we will die. And so we have a choice—slow painful death or deep, painful change. It is simply the way our loving, ever creating God works.

2. We are called by our baptism to engage the culture in order to transform it—embracing the holy in the ordinary and making it holy. What a *marvelous* expectation that God gives us.

3. The church is not about us—it really isn't. Its primary purpose is not to comfort *us*, but to challenge *us*. All congregations, all dioceses that grow—grow spiritually and numerically—are more focused outward than they are focused inward.

So let us

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things.

With his right hand and his holy arm has he won for himself the victory.

The LORD has made known his victory; his righteousness has he openly shown in the sight of the nations.

He remembers his mercy and faithfulness to the house of Israel, and all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. Amen.