

2021 Diocesan Address: “Risking Something Big for Something Good”

Let us pray:

Gracious God...we know that:

What we choose changes us.
Who we love transforms us.
How we create remakes us.
And where we live reshapes us.

In all our choosing, O God, make us wise;
In all our loving, O Christ, make us bold;
In all our creating, O Spirit, give us courage;
and in all of our living, may we become whole.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Many years ago, following the completion of a course that I was taking at the College of Preachers in Washington, D.C., there was a closing Eucharist service. And the words of the benediction, the words of the final blessing given by the Celebrant of that service completely changed the outlook of my ministry...and it did so forever .

“May God grant you the grace never to sell yourself short ; the grace to risk something big for something good; the grace to remember that our world is too dangerous for anything but truth ; and is too small for anything but love .”

From the moment that I first heard the words of this benediction – which is a very close paraphrase of the benediction written by the Rev. William Sloane Coffin – these words became my blessing of **choice** . These words of Pastor William pierced my heart and they did so in a way that I cannot describe. And based on the number of times that I have been asked to write the words of this benediction down and share them with others, the impact of this blessing is as powerful today as they were when Pastor William first spoke them. They are, in fact, written down on the back of my business card.

“Risking Something Big for Something Good.” This is the theme of our 2021 Diocesan Convention – and now you know where these words have come from. We have tyed this theme, specifically, to the story of Jesus raising his friend, Lazarus, from the dead in the 11th chapter of John’s Gospel. And in that story, Jesus calls Lazarus forth from his tomb: “Lazarus,” Jesus commands, “come out!” And, in verse 44 of that chapter, Jesus instructs that Lazarus should be unbound from his burial wraps and set free.

Jesus, in raising Lazarus from the dead and through his direction that Lazarus be released from his burial bonds – in this story, Jesus is taking a risk. And we know that Jesus is taking a risk because, in verse 53 of that very same chapter, Jesus’ opponents begin formulating their plans to put him to death.

Jesus, who is our Lord and Savior whom we confess to follow – Jesus took **risks!** Jesus took risks for God and for God’s mission of reconciliation and restoration! Jesus challenged the powerful leaders and influencers of his time. He questioned the norms of his society, his government, and even the expectations of his own people. And as a result, Jesus encountered resistance. He encountered hesitance! He encountered opposition! And do you know what else happened? Jesus brought in **God’s kingdom on earth**. Jesus through his life, his ministry, and his death risked something big for something good. And none of us would be here had Jesus not taken those risks.

As followers, therefore, of Jesus Christ, the risk-taker – we are a people who have been **baptized** into his risk-taking **life!** And because we have been baptized into his life, we, like him, should expect to encounter resistance! And we should expect, like him, to encounter opposition! – and especially so wherever there is a very unhealthy respect for power, privilege and comfort! – as well as a high avoidance of change.

As a result – following Jesus through the kingdom of God on earth is not always a safe path to take. Being a Christian today? If we’re doing it well, then it’s a pretty risky life. And yet, at the end of each day, we know that whatever risks we have taken...they have been risks well worth the taking. For we have taken those risks on behalf of God and on behalf of God’s people! We have taken those risks for people who do not have earthly power! We sleep better at night because...today we risked something big!...and we did so for something that was much greater than ourselves.

At the same time – it must be confessed and acknowledged that some risks are far easier to take than others. Taking the risk to stand alongside and support the sovereign rights of our tribal siblings when they chose to set up check-points during COVID-19 – or when some of our number chose to take the risk of speaking and protesting against some of our state governmental leaders who wish to wipe away the presence of Native Americans from our state’s history in the classroom – these two risks are not nearly as difficult to take when compared to standing alongside our tribal siblings in the aftermath of the discovery of the graves of so many Indigenous students who attended boarding schools.

The difference between these risks is this: when it comes to the issue of Indigenous children in boarding schools, we – and by “we”, I mean the “white Church” (with a capital “C” meaning all white Christians of all denominations) – we have been and we are **complicit**. Those who came before us...those who represented the Church (with a capital “C”), those who bore the title of “Christian”...they are amongst the guilty. Our ancestors who came before us in this Church, for better or for worse, they sought to assimilate Native Americans. They sought to force them to think like white people think! – and to act like white people act! – and to dress like white people dress! – and to worship like white people

worship. The parents of these children in the mid-1800s were given a choice: sign away your land and, one day, you might see your child again. Don't sign away your land – and you'll never see your child again.

This complicity, based upon our white heritage? This has made it very difficult for those of us who are white to stand alongside our Native siblings today. The behaviors of our white ancestors has made it very difficult for the white Christians of the present day to ask for justice and seek reconciliation and restoration on behalf of our Native siblings. And why? Because our words are not believed – as our clergy leaders in the Northeast Deanery will tell you.

Fr. Charley Chan and Fr. Richard Zephier attended an event in the Sisseton Mission where stories of boarding school experiences were being told. One person who wished to tell his story saw Fr. Charley and Fr. Richard. They were wearing their clergy collars – so they weren't exactly incognito. And when this man saw the clergy collars, he demanded that these two priests of our Diocese leave. It made no difference to him that Fr. Charley is the Supervising Presbyterian of the Sisseton Mission! It made no difference to him that Fr. Richard is a Native American and is the Itanchan of our Niobrara Council! It made no difference that these two priests represented **Jesus Christ!** That man wanted them gone!

Being asked to leave was very hard for these two priests to hear. Fr. Charley and Fr. Richard were taking a risk to be at that gathering but they were there because they wanted learn from and to offer their support to those who were hurting! But you know something? – they left. They left because they were asked to leave. They left because they respect – and because they deeply love God's people. They left because they didn't want their presence to cause further harm. And I am very proud to say that their being asked to leave has not

lessened their resolve to continue to stand alongside and offer their support to those who are in pain. Their being asked to leave has not lessened their resolve to continue to risk something big...for something much greater than themselves.

Today – this moment – in the midst of everything that is happening – today I am asking us compare ourselves to the biblical figure of Lazarus. Jesus called Lazarus to come out of his tomb. And Jesus is calling us out of our tombs as well. And the tombs that Jesus is calling us out of are the tombs of our own making. Jesus is inviting us to come out of our places of false comfort. He is inviting us to come out of the dark and into the light, and that's oft times a scary invitation to accept!

And you know why? Because when we live in the dark, it's easier to ignore that which is right in front of our faces! In the dark, life can be anything that we want to imagine it to be. In the dark, it's a lot easier to lie to ourselves! – and to believe those lies.

So – let's view ourselves for a moment as Lazarus being invited to step out of his tomb! Let's envision our congregations as being a collective Lazarus who have been invited to step out of a tomb. Let's envision our various Diocesan ministries and committees and programs as being Lazarus! And let's say that we've all made the decision to step out! – and, having taken that step, and now being in the light, let's take a good look at ourselves. Let's take a really close and honest look – at the burial cloths in which we are wrapped!

Each **bond** of cloth symbolizes something! Each band symbolizes **something** that is holding us back! What are they? What fears can we name as being alive and well in ourselves, and in our congregations, and in our Diocesan ministries and programs? What **is** it that is keeping us from being truly **free?** – free to risk something big for something good?

What is it that is keeping us from risking something big?...for something so much greater than ourselves?

Imagine what our Diocese will look like in ten years' time if nothing at all were to change. Imagine what your own congregation will look like in ten years' time if nothing were to change. In ten years' time, should all of us consciously and deliberately choose to remain bound up in our fears – and go back into the safety of the dark tomb – what does our future hold?

On the other hand – on the other hand, imagine what our Diocese and our congregations will look like if we chose instead to risk something big for something good. What would we look like – what would our congregations and communities look like – if we took some real risks to make new life happen? – and experience some new resurrection moments in Jesus' name? What would our future hold then?

The Rev. Shaneequa Brokenleg and Archdeacon Paul Sneve, when talking with me about the creation of our Diocese's anti-racism committee, they introduced me to the word "Wolakota." And they taught me that this word, in English, means "right relationships." It's a word that means being in right relationship with everything: God, neighbor, creation, community...everything. Wolakota.

That word sounds a lot like restoration to me. It's also resembles reconciliation to me. But how do we get there? How can we experience Wolakota in our congregations and Diocese? We experience Wolakota by taking risks. We get to Wolakota by choosing to risk something big...for something much greater than ourselves.

Insofar as our relationships with God are concerned, what are we willing to risk in order to bring ourselves and others into a deeper relationship with God? How are we going

about forming our minds and our hearts – and how are we forming those who come to us because they want to learn how to become a follower of Jesus Christ? What are we willing to risk when it comes to our relationship with the Creator?

And insofar as our relationships with each other are concerned, how are we rebuilding our Christian fellowship after being apart for so long? How are we caring for each other? And what is it that we are willing to risk in order to exemplify Jesus' selfless love of neighbor?

And insofar as our relationships with our communities, our state, our nation, and God's world is concerned – what are we willing to do? What are we willing to say? What are we willing to stand for? What are we willing to stand against? Who are we willing to stand with? Again, what are we willing to risk for Jesus? – and for God's kingdom on earth? When anyone, nowadays, raises a question that goes something like, "What's the next step regarding this issue?", my first response is to ask, "What we are we willing to risk?"

These are the questions which face all of us as we move into this next year. And these are the questions that I am asking our Diocesan Council and the clergy and lay leadership of our congregations and reservations to discuss as we collectively prepare for 2022.

Question 1 – (and this question is of the utmost importance): To paraphrase the famous quote from Andy Dupree in the movie "The Shawshank Redemption" – in 2022, are we going to get busy living? Or are we going to get busy dying? Are we going to choose the darkness of a tomb and stop trying? Or are we instead going to step out into the light – and confess any fears, any doubts, and everything else which has us all wrapped up? Are we going to acknowledge the reality that our risks might work and that our risks might fail, and yet not allow that reality to stop us from trying?

Which of those two statements will we affirm as being true for us in 2022? Are we a Church that is busy living and taking new risks for Jesus, for His Gospel, and for the kingdom? Or no?

If a congregation discerns and decides on their own that the time has come to end their ministry in that place – if a congregation sincerely and prayerfully has reached a point where they are no longer able or willing to continue to try – then they will be given all the love and pastoral support that they require. Because that would not have been an easy decision for them to make. And we will talk about where and how they wish to proceed. There will be no shame. There will be no blame. There will only be love. A decision has been made. They are no longer uncertain about their future. And lots of prayers of thanksgiving for the ministry that has happened in that place will be prayed.

However, should a congregation instead decide and affirm that they want to start living anew, or living again, or living differently – then the following three questions will be discussed.

If your congregation affirms that they want to get busy living, what risks are you willing to take in Jesus' name that will bring the members of your congregation and others into a deeper right relationship with God?

If your congregation affirms that they want to get busy living, what risks are you willing to take in Jesus' name that will bring your congregation into a deeper right relationship with each other? And, finally...

If your congregation affirms that they want to get busy living, what risks are you willing to take in Jesus' name to make a transformative difference in your community, our state, our nation, and/or God's world?

At next year's Diocesan Convention, each congregation in our Diocese will be given the opportunity to bring their stories of the risks that they are taking in 2022 and the results that are being experienced. This will be our shared Wolakota Project. This will be an opportunity for us on both a Diocesan and on a congregational level to offer a new kind of witness – a witness of our willingness to follow Jesus, the risk-taker. A witness of our willingness to risk something big for something good. And a witness of our willingness to take risks...for something much greater than ourselves.

May God the Father grant all of us, in the name of His Son and through the power of His Holy Spirit, everything we need to bring us into Wolakota – into deeper right relationships with everything. And to God – always – may our glory be given. Amen.