



EPISCOPAL
DIOCESE
of Southern Virginia

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The Venerable Bede, monk, author, and scholar was one of the greatest teachers and writers of the early Middle Ages. At age 7, his parents could no longer afford to feed him, so they gave him to the monastery at Jarrow. When he was twelve, a plague ravaged and decimated the village and surrounding countryside of Northumbria, devastating the monks as well. One morning, Bede arrived in chapel to pray the morning Office and only he and the Abbot were left to pray the office. The other monks had all died or were too sick to participate.

Bede asked his Abbot, “what are we to do” and the Abbott responded by telling Bede that they were going to do what all faithful Christians would do: “we will keep praying, we will care for the sick, we will pray, we will bury the dead, we will pray, we will feed the hungry, we will pray, and then, tomorrow, we will begin again.”

Prayer and service...the rhythm of Christian life. Prayer and service...we hear that a lot, don't we. In fact, don't we sometimes get tired of hearing that? Don't we sometimes get tired of doing what we think we're supposed to do without seeing any results?

The Prophet Isaiah says, *“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland”* (Isaiah 43: 18-19).

So, you're doing a new thing, are you, God? You say it springs forth? You ask us if we perceive it, almost with an incredulous tone of voice. Well, to tell you the truth, God. We DON'T perceive it. We're working hard here and what we're seeing are basically the same old things. The same church decline, the same aging church, the same church where we long for younger people to come. We also see the same political turmoil – the same decaying culture – the same loneliness and division that divides us. No, God, we don't see a new thing, and we are tired!

Why do we not perceive the new thing God is doing? Why don't we see it springing forth? THE REASON THAT WE DO NOT PERCEIVE WHAT GOD IS DOING IS THAT WE HAVE LOST THE ABILITY TO LISTEN DEEPLY TO GOD. WE HAVE FORGOTTEN HOW TO PRAY.

In our Diocesan Congregational Development Institute initiative that now has been going on in this diocese for four years, we are learning about St. Benedict (often credited as the founder of western monasticism). In his monastic Rule Benedict counsels the monks to “Listen with the ear of the heart.” Ancient spirituality believed that the heart holds the truth, not just in some sort of metaphorical sense. They believed physically that the heart held wisdom. As the Age of Enlightenment began to influence thinking more, philosophers put more trust in the mind being the seat of the Truth. Later, and particularly in recent decades, we have decided that the mind is a mess, and science has begun to reorient us back to the truth of the heart being the seat of wisdom.

St. Benedict reminds us to “listen with the ear of the heart.” We are to listen in a deeper way than with the actual sense of hearing. With such listening, we will discern the movement of the spirit. **WHY IS IT SO HARD TO LISTEN?** Here's why: The reason we are having such difficulty listening is because we are afraid. Fear prevents the ear of the heart from hearing the voice

of God. And we have plenty of fear around us. Social media and news providers market in fear. Fear is constantly for sale. On the internet, fear is ubiquitous. And we are addicted to that fear. And because we are addicted to it, we are willing to spend money to feed that fear. And folks the likes of Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos and others depend on us to feed that addiction.

Have you ever heard the term **doom-scrolling**? What is that? Doomscrolling is the act of compulsively consuming negative news online, often through social media. Research has shown that a society prone to neuroticism will be attracted to this constant buffet of negative news...our brains crave stimulation; and doom-scrolling provides that stimulation. Fear is what is being marketed, and people react to that fear by being willing to spend money to protect themselves. Constant access to information provides stimulation, and if the stimulation is negative, fear is generated, and people engage in actions to reduce that fear. The main action they engage in is spending money. So, keeping you afraid is in the interest of social media marketers so that you'll keep spending money.

Thomas Keating, monk and priest credited along with others for pioneering the rebirth of the contemplative movement in the United States, defines a major human problem as the lack of self-worth. Many in our culture, he says, define self-worth as related to a sense of wealth or lack of it. And if we are being fed constant negative news that invites us to spend money to protect ourselves, then we are focused inwardly on that need for security. When we are trapped by fear and focused on spending money to protect ourselves, we become isolated. And this isolation leads a huge problem – LONELINESS. Loneliness has been described as the biggest disease of the 21st century. Keating says the root of this loneliness is that we lack a sense of being beloved. The antidote is to experience being loved by spending time with the one who loves us.

As we confront the age-old problem of fear and loneliness, we need something new. We need a different, fresh approach. *Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.* How can we access this new thing that God is doing? How can we even notice it? The answer is plain and simple: we must find a way in our complicated, chaotic world to spend time with the One who is doing the new thing. We will not notice the new thing unless we know the author of the new thing. That author is God.

Recently, I spent a week in retreat with a few other bishops at a Benedictine Retreat Center in Schuyler, NE. The retreat was facilitated by Br. James Dowd, a Benedictine monk who is on staff with the Diocese of Nebraska as the monk-in-residence. Brother James travels all over the diocese teaching congregations to pray. He is enacting the vision of Bishop Scott Barker who believes that effective leadership in the church must begin from a point of contemplative prayer. Episcopalians in Nebraska are learning to pray and are discovering that this life of prayer leads to the enactment of new things. The Diocese of Nebraska is one of the few dioceses in The Episcopal Church that increased in numbers last year.

This Benedictine Community (of which Brother James is a part) lives by a Rule of Life of Prayer, Service and Community. Prayer. Service. Community. One spends time in prayer, getting to know the Author of Life. As a result, one is then turned outward to offer service to those whom the Author of Life loves. This effort of Prayer and Service is contained within a community that supports and nourishes the members. Prayer. Service. Community. It's a simple Rule of Life that is catching fire in that area and producing new things.

Many in Southern Virginia are asking for a new vision. We are beginning to sense that God is doing a new thing among us, and we want to be part of it.

Over the course of the last year, the Standing Committee conducted a Mutual Ministry Review, assessing the ways in which the Diocesan Bishop and her staff work in ministry with various groups in the diocese. Later in this Annual Council you will hear a report of that Mutual Ministry Review. For now, the short summary is that while the people of Southern Virginia have deeply appreciated the Bishop's relational, pastoral approach to ministry, they are now ready to work with the Bishop to cast a vision that they can follow that will lead them more deeply into the Kingdom of God. The Executive Council of the diocese, after hearing a report of this Mutual Ministry Review, allocated funds in next year's budget for the purposes of discerning and implementing vision.

I look forward to working with all of you over the next year to develop a new vision for Southern Virginia. I am excited to think that the new thing that God is shaping among us is a way of doing Church that will combat the fear and loneliness that holds our culture captive. And I'm beginning to wonder if the Benedictine pillars of Prayer, Service and Community might be a useful framework on which to construct our vision. Prayer. Service. Community. They're all related and you can't have one without the others.

When I was waiting at the gate in Omaha, NE for my flight home after the retreat, I read a news article that my husband had forwarded to me. He knows that I am interested in this epidemic of loneliness that permeates our culture. Many of you know that as well, as you have heard me preach sermons on the effects of loneliness on our spiritual, emotional and physical health. The article, forwarded by my husband, involved the Surgeon General's declaration that loneliness is the one serious epidemic confronting our world. Now this is not new news. The Surgeon General first declared this in 2023. This new article that I was reading, however, was reporting on the Surgeon General's antidote to the epidemic of loneliness. The Surgeon General had noted that in this era of increased technological advancement, people were more connected

technologically than they had ever been before. However, these connections were only superficial; they were not deep, meaningful relationships. Furthermore, when people experienced loneliness, they turned inward and focused on themselves. They didn't understand that the answer to loneliness was to look beyond themselves. And so, the Surgeon General proposed his own antidote to loneliness: Relationships. Service. Community.

I was absolutely transfixed by this idea. Here was the Surgeon General, hundreds of years later, proposing the same rule as St. Benedict. I had just come from a Benedictine Retreat focusing on Prayer, Service and Community to read the Surgeon General's exhortation to all of America (and in fact all the world) to live by a rule of Relationships, Service, Community. Relationships (with God and each other) begin in prayer, turn us outward to service, and propel us into the support and nurture of community. What if our vision in Southern Virginia went back to the basics of Prayer, Service and Community in order to dispel the dark demons of fear and loneliness and usher in a fresh, new vision of the Kingdom of God?

Prayer begins in solitude; and in our current noisy, chaotic world solitude is grievously lacking. Thomas Merton said, "Society depends for its existence on the inviolable, personal solitude of its members. When society is made up of men who know no interior solitude it can no longer be held together by love: and consequently, it is held together by a violent and abusive authority. But when men are violently deprived of the solitude and freedom which are their due, the society in which they live becomes putrid, it festers with servility, resentment, and hate." (Thomas Merton: *Thoughts in Solitude*) What if our Vision in Southern Virginia contained a plan for active teaching of prayer and Biblical literacy that grounded us in solitude?

Prayer is the activity by which we will change the world. In 1951 in the Diocese of New Hampshire, Bishop Charles F. "Todd" Hall stood up to address

the Diocesan Annual Convention. At the time the country was facing the McCarthy “red scare,” the nuclear arms race, and the Korean War. Here is what he said: *“The world is on trial for its very life. We have so much to give to the life of the Christian Church in a baffled world that it hardly behooves us to be either careless or selfish in this call to bring others to Christ. Now, if ever, it can be said – a disfigured world demands transfigured lives.”* How do we get transfigured lives? Prayer. By spending time with the Creator of our lives.

Solitude and prayer are good, but we cannot remain there. Our vision must include extending ourselves outward in service. *Rev. Dr. Carter Heyward says this:* We cannot enjoy the spirituality that truly is of God unless we are enjoying the struggle for justice–love, compassion, nonviolence, and forgiveness in the world. And we cannot stay in the struggle unless we are drawing personal strength from God whom JESUS loved, however we may experience and image this sacred power. Prayer and Service are connected. You cannot have one without the other.

God’s people are desperate for God, and the Church has the answer. Our Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe is fond of saying: “Friends, this is our lane! This is where the church can have an impact.” Churches can foster communities that connect people to God and connect people to each other. We are mandated now to be the Church in fresh ways that address this desperate need. When you ask people who are looking for churches what they are looking for, one of the most frequent answers is that they are looking for communities in which they can make new friends. And they are looking for communities where they can be included.

We have accomplished much in the last year. You will see many of these accomplishments highlighted throughout this Annual Council. By standing on the five initiatives of Rule of Life, Congregational Vitality and Connection, Racial Reconciliation, Stewardship and Creation Care, and Evangelism, we

have forged a viable path that now leads us to consider Prayer, Service and Community.

But we have much more to do because the epidemic of loneliness and fear still holds us in its grip. I look forward in the next year to working with many of you to craft a vision for Southern Virginia that will lead us into the new thing that God is already doing among us. While I do not intend to craft a vision on my own (I want your help), here are three things I think a vision should include:

Deepening of Spiritual Life (Prayer, Biblical Literacy)

We all yearn to pray. People frequently ask me how to pray. And I hear of yearning to know, fully know the Sacred Scriptures which undergird our faith. People really want to know and understand the Bible. After lunch, we will hear from our Council Speaker, Jay Sidebotham, about the signs of life in spiritually vital churches. And Biblical Literacy is one of those signs of life. Scripture ought to be embedded in all we do. And if we truly attend to Scripture, we will be led to prayer.

Intentional Crafting of a Plan for Diocesan Stewardship

Last year as we began to prepare the 2025 Diocesan budget, we conducted listening sessions on what you were wanting, needed, and expecting from the Diocesan Office. You suggested ways in which we could help, and we appreciate that. I want to express my gratitude to our Treasurer, John Fogarty, and our Director of Finance and Administration, Judy Dobson, for facilitating these sessions. We expect these to continue in the coming months. One of the things we discussed is some intentional work in which we could engage to

increase the number of parishes who are able to give the full 10% of the diocesan ask. We also recognized the need for and began work to draft an intentional plan for good stewardship of both diocesan and parochial resources, particularly real estate resources. And we heard about and recognized the need for increasing resources to fund diocesan initiatives around creation care, youth and young adult ministries (including Camp Chanco and college ministries) and congregational development.

Increased Resources for Youth and Young Adult Ministry

There is an exciting revolution happening on college campuses these days. Many colleges and universities are seeing an increase in the practice of Christianity. Those members of the population called Gen Z (ages 16–26) are seeking guidance on how to develop meaning and purpose in their lives and they are turning to Christianity. And many in that group are looking to the ancient traditions inherent in Christianity to guide them – such ancient traditions as Prayer, Service, and Community. Marlo Slayback, national director of student programs at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, told *The Fix* that students are desperately seeking guidance in life. “What has changed, I think, is the culture surrounding Gen Z. It’s a recipe for despair, hopelessness, disaffection, alienation.... They look around at our decaying culture and understandably feel alienated and lost at sea.” She said many students she interacts with crave traditional Christianity, which provides the guidance and structure that they have lacked. In a recent article in BestColleges.com: “Faith-based college and university enrollment grew by 82% from 1980–2020 — much faster than the national average of 57%.” An interesting anecdote that appeared on social media mentioned a class at the University of Notre Dame on

Augustine of Hippo's famous book, *Confessions*. The classroom had 500 seats and on the first day filled to capacity.

It would seem then that the area of the Church that is growing the fastest is among college and youth who are looking for guidance in our chaotic world. Historically, resources for college and youth ministries have always been underfunded in diocesan budgets, including our own. What if we intentionally looked for ways to boost resources toward a population that may hold the key to the new thing that God is doing among us?

Our world is chaotic and noisy. In many ways we are like the Venerable Bede who arrives in the Church to pray only to find that everything is destroyed. What are we to do? We would do well to remember the Abbot's words: "we will keep praying, we will care for the sick, we will pray, we will bury the dead, we will pray, we will feed the hungry, we will pray, and then, tomorrow, we will begin again."

Jesus is standing on the shore of Lake Gennesaret, and the crowd that gathers around him is hungry for guidance about how to navigate a chaotic world. The disciples have been fishing all night and caught nothing. They have been doing the same old thing to no avail and are now ready to turn in and give up. And Jesus appears among them and tells them to go deep. In obedience, they do as Jesus tells them. They cast their nets wide; and the ensuing abundance overwhelms them.

Jesus stands here with us. We are tired. We too have been fishing all night to no avail. And now Jesus tells us to go deep. Go deeper than you've ever gone before. The abundance is there. "I am pointing you to it," Jesus says. "I do a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?" Once you go deep you will need the community around you to help you reel in the abundance. "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Let us be like those disciples. Let us leave everything and follow Him. AMEN.