

Would you join with me in the Celtic prayer? I've been so impressed by many of the Celtic prayers, because of the Christo-centric character of them, reminding us how our lives are completely enveloped and directed by Christ our Lord. Let us pray together.

Christ be with me, Christ within me,  
Christ behind me, Christ before me,  
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,  
Christ to comfort and restore me,  
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,  
Christ in hearts of all that love me,  
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger. Amen.

Within the gathering of this company I expect that we would represent everything that could go wrong in life has gone wrong in each of our lives. Sometimes we've been on the receiving end of that and sometimes we've been on the giving end of that. Yet it is the grace of God that allows us to come and be representatives of Jesus Christ, part of the body of Christ, if you please, in order to make known to the world the transformative power of God's grace.

In short, the Spirit of God has brought us here.

We have been called to discern where God is trying to lead us. And you've worked on that this week as you always do. And some are here to be ordained and commissioned, to devote the balance of their lives to the special ministries of the church of Jesus Christ.

Some of them might share with us if they had opportunity, that conversation with God may have gone something like this, a conversation that my wife had with our granddaughter, who at the time was two and one half years old. I don't know what the issue was, but Susan said to Isabelle, I have an idea about how to solve this problem, and told her what it was. Isabelle responded and said, "Gee Gee, I have a better idea." And she did.

See, God always has a better idea about the paths of our lives and the path of the church. And we would do well to listen. God's way is always preferable to our own. And the truth is, God has a plan for each of us. For each of our congregations, for this Annual Conference, and for the church as a whole. The goal for which we often pray is that the kingdom of God may come on earth as it is in heaven. These are not just pie-in-the-sky words, they are filled with possibility for healing and hope for all who are broken, and for all that is broken in this world.

The ways of God, however, do not lead us to places of comfort, but to places where the difficulties of life must be faced. The two lections read for you already in this service from Matthew and Jeremiah point us in something of the way in which God leads us.

First, the post-resurrection account in Matthew. And I have to preface that. I'm sorry, but today you have to suffer the memories of an old man. One of our superintendents in West Virginia went back deep into the hills of one of our counties with the anxious news in those days, that they were going to receive a woman pastor. Not so new anymore, thank God. So he went in and

told all of the wonderful qualities of this pastor, and then late in the presentation, indicated the gender of the pastor. And there was utter quiet in the PPRC until the oldest member of that committee, a man, looked to the superintendent and said, if it was good enough for Jesus to announce the resurrection through a woman, it's good enough for us.

And so here is this post-resurrection appearance with the message that they are to go and share with the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee.

Now the followers of Jesus, I think, probably we quite excited about that. Galilee had been the setting for the happiest days of their lives. Some of us would kind of like to go back to those best, most fruitful days of our local congregations and ourselves. And that prospect must have been exhilarating for the disciples, for they would be reconnecting to Jesus in the place where they first connected to him. What they did not expect was, once they were at Galilee Jesus was going to lead them in a lot of other places.

They would go out from Spain to India, and they would never see Galilee or each other again. Their assignments would not be easy. In fact, their assignments in most instances would cost them their lives. That's how serious this life of the church is. But they could do what they did because Jesus was always there ahead of them, whether it was Spain or India and all of the places, and by the time they got there Jesus was already there. And that makes all the difference in ministry.

Looking back across a lifetime of appointments, the places to which I was sent to carry out the ministry of Christ were rarely the places where I thought they should be. Any of you recognize that?

I recall my very first appointment. In those days we didn't know where we were going until we went to Annual Conference. Now that is an exciting Annual Conference. And I thought I had already picked out the place. It was a small single church with an attached residence, and I was just getting married and didn't have any furniture, and it would be just perfect for us. Instead, I was sent to six churches surrounding a town that I always said within myself, I will never live in that town.

And it was right. If I'd only had one church I would have had a much lower learning experience. But there I had six churches who taught me something about listening to God. And in every one of those churches I learned to find the spiritual center of those congregations ranging from about ninety to seven or eight. There was always one or two. And I learned to trust them, because they had a care for their church, care for their people, and a care for their community that went outside the walls of the church. And they taught me always to trust. I was going into a setting where God's people already were. There are people there; Jesus is always there.

In the second appointment I went to, I told you I was going to take you down memory lane today. Second church I went to had a wonderful label – this is right out of seminary – was labeled the meanest church in the annual conference. When I told my father where I was going, he broke down and wept and said you will be out of ministry in two years. You either died there,

had a heart attack, or became a superintendent. Whatever you could do to get out. And it was true; it was a tough congregation.

We lived in the inner-urban part of that city; most of them did not. And there was anger and divisions and frustrations. And I have not time to tell you the whole story of all that went on, other than to say Jesus was already there at work in the lives of those people who were looking to gain a fresh vision of what it is to be the church of Jesus Christ. And we went through all of the pain, the suffering, and the agony, and then there was joy.

Remember the Natalie Sleeth anthem, “Joy in the Morning”? That’s what resurrection is all about; hence, the resurrection passage. We understand suffering because we’ve all done it. We understand hard times because we’ve all been there. But on the other side, out of faithfulness, there comes joy and life.

Well I never did go anyplace but what Jesus had already been there and at work. And sometimes I experienced a little and sometimes a lot of humility, which was not necessarily voluntary. But then I remembered Christ our savior never waited for an invitation to a comfortable setting. Whomever he was with and wherever he was, was always good enough for Jesus. And if it was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for us.

That first destination out of the Gospel of Matthew is a reminder to always follow, because Jesus will get there first.

The second destination in the Jeremiah passage is the refugee camps in Babylon to which the surviving leaders of Israel have been taken involuntarily. They didn’t want to be there. I’ve never known anybody in a refugee camp who wanted to be there.

Several years ago I visited a refugee camp. Some of you may have been with. A Refugee camp for Palestinians in Bethlehem. They’d been there for a number of years. There was no prospect of Israel letting them out of that tight enclave. So they had built houses and shops pushed up against each other. There was a school, but they had no paper, no pencils. All of the learning was done by rote memory. Little or no outside assistance, including medical help was there. And that was the case in the late sixth century BC for those receiving this portion of Jeremiah’s words.

What they wanted from God was to get out of there. Have you ever known that feeling? You’d just like not to be there. In fact, I used to say to some of my pastors when I was at New Jersey, if they happen to see me at the Barnes and Noble over in Princeton and I didn’t speak to them, not take it personally, I was running away from home that day, too.

But they weren’t going to get out of there. And the word they heard from God was seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. The exile’s first reaction to those words must have been, “God, are you kidding us!?! You want us to pray for these people who brought us here against our will and then (a pause) wait a minute; you said you sent us here. That was not a good idea.” But God had a better idea. And out of that refugee setting in Babylon came for the Jewish world the

beginning of the synagogue, where they learned that God was with them, even though they were not in Jerusalem.

And it's so important for us to know that wherever we are, if it's not the city of our dreams, God is there. God had put them there for a purpose.

The point of all of this is, of course, is life with God is almost never about our comfort level.

The community of faith that doesn't look outward may not have a right to call itself a church. Wesley called them family chapels. They were places where people lived. They had their own pews. And it was a place for which they were to be buried, but only the "in group" were welcome there.

I was fortunate to be part of the life of two churches that decided to join themselves and become one. And they did it with wonderful direction and energy. I recall we were in the new church, and attendance was picking up every Sunday, and one of the oldest members of one of the churches that had merged, came to me and said Neil, I think I need to leave. I was deeply shocked, because he had had a vision of what we could be together. He had been a part of the building committee and the planning of what was going on. He had a wonderful way with children. And I said to him why, why do you need to leave? And he said because I don't know everybody here anymore. My response to him was, but isn't that why we built a new church, in order to bring new people to God? And he got it, and he never left.

It is so important for us to understand what God is about, often taking us to places where we hadn't anticipated going.

Several years ago in another annual conference, surely never would have happened here, a district superintendent reported that as he was trying to get acquainted with the district and the pastors who were there, he wanted each of them to say a word about his or her parish. And so down the line they went. They talked about their membership, their attendance, and their friends. And then he came to another pastor who talked about the community around the church, what was going on there, and what was needed by them from the life of the church. He got it. That's the life of the church.

What I want to say to you is that renewal and ministry in the life of the church does not depend on what we do inside. If all we do is get each other revved up periodically, then we'll just wind down again. Renewal only comes when the church reaches beyond itself and new people come in and join with us and teach us about ministry and life and struggle and grace.

That all depends on our capacity to follow God into the world around us.

They went to Galilee in order to go every place else. God sent them into exile because there were things they needed to learn and do there, not just for themselves, but for the sake of the cities around them.

Your welfare is bound up in the welfare of those who are outside of you.

You didn't know Jeremiah could be that preachy, did you? He wasn't popular, as you might understand.

We are called as a people to go where God is already at work. There is no question but what you face monumental challenges in the world around us. I started ticking them off, and the list is way too long. But the culture around us no longer has any great interest in people going to church, and you can't depend of somebody else to convince people to walk into your church.

And there are those who say that they are spiritual but not religious, but they have no idea what that means. And religion should not be a negative word; it should be a description of how we nourish those spirits that almost all of us recognize we have.

We have people around us now of many different faiths. And we need to understand them. We need to learn to live respectfully in a world that is more diverse than that into which some of us were born. And we have the issues, of course, around human sexuality and trying to understand that and trying to find God's ways with grace in this world of such differing opinions.

Now I want to say to you just as a side----- sermon. I don't think God in all of God's wisdom ever expected us to agree on everything. John Wesley preached it. And the message was, are our hearts in tune with each other? We will not ever agree on everything. We don't all want to worship the same way. But if our hearts are together, we can walk together. I think the world can get into that.

Well, these witnesses, Scripture, on this day of ordination and commissioning, are just a reminder that the Lord is always out there ahead of us. And there is a radical dimension to following Jesus. Peter, James, and John left their boats and nets; Matthew left his high-paying job at the tax table; Mary Magdalene left her past in the past. Those of you being received into provisional ministry and ordained this day, you've had to leave some other dreams behind. You start on this journey with little or no baggage, but that's true for all of us. When we agree to follow Christ, things just have to drop away and stay behind us. We're not in the church in order to get our way, to pull rank, to control others, rather we're only in the church to live up to the radical demand that Jesus puts on all of us. In ordination God's hands are both heavy and light.

I recall when I finally relented to God's call in my life, of going home and telling my parents what had happened. And I thought they'd be overjoyed, because we'd been raised in the church. They may have been overjoyed, because my life was a mess at the time, but their reaction was terribly solemn, almost sad, because they understood. And all the dreams I have for myself, and all the dreams they may have had for me, now went away in order to answer this call from God. Well, that's how we lead.

Nelson Mandela, one of my great heroes of the twentieth century, and I was privileged to be a part of a delegation to go to Cape Town, where he received the World Methodist Peace Award.

He told us how he learned to become a leader. He was a shepherd boy. He said I learned not to walk in front of the flock or behind the flock, but to walk in the middle of the flock, because

there were always things that members of my flock could teach me that I didn't know. And once they let me know what needed to happen, then it was my responsibility to see that they got there. That's what leadership in the church is. It's not walking in and somebody saying what's your vision and you say to them, this is my vision for the church. How would you know what the vision is until you've been there and lived in the middle of the people for awhile?

Mission Central was mentioned in my introduction. And I've given some reasons why it came into existence. But I want to say I think the primary reason is because of you. For what I quickly learned was that you are a people who are missionaries at heart. And you give, and you give, and you give. And in total dollars, you out-give every other Episcopal Area in the Northeastern Jurisdiction. So when we began to think, we knew it had to do with mission, because this is what you are about.

So following Christ simply means living in the midst of people, discovering the presence of Jesus and what it is that we might do together.

I want to share with you, as I close, an example that was given to me not very long ago. Kathy Miller was the daughter of Gene and Joyce Miller. Many of you may remember Joyce from Cokesbury Bookstore. Kathy did not survive this life too many years beyond her confirmation. But what she left behind, among other gifts, is a moment in her confirmation class, which her pastor, Russell Hart, shared with Kathy's parents on the first anniversary of Kathy's death. And a part of that letter from Russell goes like this: I had asked the class to draw a picture of God, an exercise which is flatly absurd. My intent was to see how much or how little they had learned in Sunday school. Hers, it turned out, is the only picture I remember. She had painted a rainbow in the bottom half of the picture, above which she had placed several human-like figures. And I asked her where God was in this picture. And she replied God is in the hearts of people on earth and in heaven who love God by loving one another. I was astonished. This was as concise a description of the communion of saints as I had ever heard. I asked her how she had come by this idea, and she replied she hadn't come by it at all; she had always believed it. The look on her face was so earnest, that I had to believe her.

The communion of saints gathered by our Lord Jesus Christ for ministry for the transformation of the world, let us not be afraid to follow, because Christ never leads us astray. Amen.