

*In the name of the one who sustains, renews, and pursues us. AMEN.*

My friends, It is truly a blessing to be with you as we worship together at the close of your annual diocesan convention.

For those of you who have been with me throughout the day, I say, “Hi again! I hope you’re not sick of me yet.”

And for those of you who are just joining us for worship, “Welcome!”

I come to you from the shores of Lake Superior, on the land of the Anishinaabe. And I bring you greetings from maybe the second coldest and snowiest diocese in our beloved Episcopal Church.

*I would like to open with a prayer by Bishop Steven Charleston.*

*“Imagine you walked onto a large open field at night when there was no moon. Standing there silently in the darkness were hundreds of people, each holding an unlit candle. Only you were carrying a candle that was burning, a single light alone.*

*How quickly would the field be glowing once you used your candle to light the others, and they used their candles to do the same, and all the people began sharing their light with those around them? How quickly?*

*You may never know exactly, but you do know over time what the outcome will be: a field aglow in the darkness where people can see one another clearly.*

*Your life matters. What you have started will carry on. You are a source of light. You help others in ways that will continue. You are a single candle, but you are stronger than the darkness.”*

How powerful it was, just moments ago to light my candle alongside you. Across the distance of time and space. Sharing in that simple action that really means so much more.

Isn’t it fascinating to realize that a flame loses nothing by lighting another flame?

And of course, we know that’s the way it is with God’s love.

This reading from the Gospel of Luke comes at the time in Jesus’ life right after his transfiguration. After the Great Commission. When he’s sitting with his closest friends. And one of them says, “Jesus, will you teach us to pray?”

And Jesus tells them about God's love. About how it flows naturally and freely from God to Jesus and to the faithful disciples. That it is within their reach, if only they ask.

And that flowing love gives meaning to all that we say and do. Love spreading and burning brighter because it travels amongst us whenever we greet one another and allow our flames to intermingle—to feed one another's fire.

That's how we keep it going through good times and bad. In the wind. In the storm. In the wet. In the snow. In pandemics and the disappointments of life. That flame burns on when we stay together.

And most of you resourceful folks in Alaska, probably know that the way you put out a fire is to divide and separate—to scatter the ashes (and then you can stamp it out or douse it). Think about that. The way we put out the flame of God's love in our lives is when we divide and separate. Mistakenly believing we are in it alone. That we alone carry the weight of the world on our shoulders.

The most consistent law of nature: is that it's by coming together that life is conceived and nurtured and protected and given its most profound meaning and purpose. And it is when we divide and separate and isolate ourselves our light dwindles.

There was a psychologist named Lawrence Leshan who, in the 1970s and 1980s, became fascinated with the power of prayer, and how prayer worked in healing.

He was very skeptical about prayer, so he did an in-depth study on faith healers. He expected to find a lot of swindlers and phonies.

And he did, but he was amazed by the 3-4% of those healers he studied in whom and through whom the power of God did work. People were actually legitimately healed.

He could not explain it.

So he dug deeper and listened to the stories of the healers and those being healed, and what he found was that the success of the healers lay in the fact that they genuinely loved the people for whom they were praying.

This emotional connection with their pain and suffering – and the shared desire to alleviate their suffering by prayer – appeared to be the common denominator among those whose prayers were answered.

We are in a time of wilderness. A time of so many unknowns. Of so many disappointments and unfulfilled hopes and promises.

And in such a world, how do we hold on to those things which will last? How do we gather together enough of a critical mass to start a fire and feed it and keep it blazing, or even just smoldering?

There are times, in these past 18 months when just the project of keeping the flame from going out is itself a Herculean task. And, you see, that's why, in the end, we are called to be people of faith.

So that we can carry the vision of a world in which all people might live together in peace and harmony with all of creation, where all can contribute and the gifts of all are joyfully received, nurtured, and supported, where our diversity is celebrated in community, and every human being is recognized as having eternal significance.

Because, as we are reminded in our scriptures today in our reading from Isaiah and in Mary's Song, we are promised so much more.

Good news to the oppressed. Binding up of the broken hearted. Liberty to the captives. Release to prisoners. Comfort for those who mourn. The mighty unjust rulers will be cast down from their thrones and the lowly will be lifted up. The hungry will be fed with good things. And God's mercy will always endure.

Ask, Jesus says, and it will be given.

And so as we did just minutes ago in our opening prayer, we pray to God, "shine into our hearts the brightness of your Holy Spirit."

And we give thanks for the ways we are indeed connected to one another as a Body of Christ.

Isn't it awesome that God made us for companionship?

And this deep connectedness binds us to one another, with all of the risks and losses and joys that come with loving. I know it sounds very kumbaya. And I have definitely been accused of wearing rose colored glasses. You know, let's all stand in a circle and hold hands and love one another.

But I think there's more to it. I think it's actually a very risky, edgy way to live. Because love is an action and it requires movement.

Growing up, my brothers and I would gather at the field outside our elementary school with neighborhood kids to play a game called Pickle, that our dad taught us. Have you heard of it? There were two homemade bases usually marked with someone's jacket or an old piece of cardboard.

One player stood by each base and they threw the ball back and forth, like a simple game of catch, while the rest of the players tried to run from base to base back and forth without getting picked off. When you got tagged by the ball you sat by the sidelines while everyone else was eliminated one by one until there was one survivor - the winner.

It's a pretty simple game, but an interesting dynamic always developed. There actually aren't any rules about when you have to run. If you wanted, you could stand there all day and into the night. As long as your foot stayed on the base you were safe.

But imagine what it would've been like if none of the runners were courageous enough to leave the bag. Sure, everyone would be safe, but what's the point.

It doesn't make sense to play at all if you only played to stay safe.

But it sure is comfy on that base. It sure is easy to play it safe.

I think we play it safe because we're afraid. We are afraid to move. Afraid we will be hurt. Afraid of loss.

But abundant life involves risk, and mad dashes, and close calls, and laughter, and pushing ourselves to the limits, and even an occasional twisted ankle, and a head on collision and sometimes worse. The hurt and the pain is inevitable.

It's part of the human story, and it binds us to one another.

It is because of that shared hurt - not in spite of it - that we are called to step off base and take action in the name of love.

According to the stories they told about him, Jesus kept calling his friends and followers off their safe bases and out into life.

"Follow me," he said to the fisherman and the rest, and they left it all behind and discovered how adventuresome life could be. They shared in his mission of compassion and justice and unconditional love

Yes, I may get picked off base and there is no doubt I will experience hurt, disappointment, and loss. Hell, I already have. A lot of it. But it's not just about me.

If we are all ONE, we are in it together. If I live out my responsibility to love, as God loves, I must put myself aside knowing that my freedom is bound up in yours.

It is a way of life in which we decide to sit shoulder to shoulder, holding hands when it feels like the sky is falling.

The world you and I wake up to every day is overflowing with deep, aching love, AND with brutal sadness and hatred.

I know which I want to win in the end.

Jesus has shown us the way. He has modeled for us a life of celebration and connection and passion. A life committed to caring for the poor and honoring the dignity of everyone. A life of risk taking and vulnerability and sacrifice.

In our deepest selves, we know. We know the way and we are called out into the world in love.

I invite you to join me to step off base. And as we renew our baptismal vows in just a moment, I hope you'll join me in imagining how you might show up for God in a time such as this. Because, God knows, we need you. Amen.