

Convention Eucharist, 2014
Willibrord, November 7, 2014
Sea Tac Hilton
The Rt. Rev. Gregory H. Rickel

Today, we celebrate the life and witness of Willibrord, Archbishop of Utrecht, missionary to Frisia, a Northumbrian missionary saint, known as the Apostle to the Frisians. He studied under St. Egbert and eventually established the Abbey of Echternach on the site of a Roman Villa, which was donated to him by Pepin's mother-in-law, Irmina of Oeren, the wife of Count Hugobert. By now, many of you are saying, oh yes, this is going to be a good one; the man went on for 30 minutes last year, where is this one going?

Willibrord; I know it sounds like another planet, something from the Coneheads on *Saturday Night Live*, Rimulach and such. Not sure I am even saying it correctly. Pope Sergius was so perplexed by the name and not being able to pronounce it in his Sicilian tongue, he changed Willibrord's name to Clement. Willibrord is not someone of whom we have lots of icons. There is not a lot he wrote, just stories of what he did, mostly from the Venerable Bede.

I had never heard of a St. Willibrord's Church, although, in that wonderful and sacred mystery of the universe, Google, I was able to find quite a few, in Green Bay, Wisconsin, Quebec, Holland Michigan. Willibrord did not travel the world. He was not extremely flashy. He was described as a short man, who loved adventure and had a great sense of humor.

He set up camp in Echternach, in the Low Country, because he was sent there by his bishop, and presumably, by extension, God. When driven away for three years because of persecution, as soon as it was safe, he and a person named Boniface made their way back, set up camp, and went back to work. Willibrord stayed local. He always believed he was sent by God to that place; so he stayed there and did his work. He believed you must take Jesus to the people, not expect them to come find Jesus. He is the kind of saint that we ought to celebrate on this day.

This annual convention is always part business – mundane essential stuff we must do as a body to continue in our work for another year – and part family reunion – a celebration of our life together – and, for some, part basic inconvenience. Some of you will find this hard to believe but there are those that just live through the year for this to happen again. They love this. It is like Christmas. So, for the three of you, I hope this is everything you wished it would be.

We are going to make the most of it. I have to say, I am one of those three; I love gathering us all together. It is so rare. We seem to be, for the most part, a very happy bunch, and I hope we can live out of that in this next day, and year, even when apart. However you see this gathering, it is, in the end, a gathering of local ministry, people with like minds, hearts, and faith; people who come from a place. And will go back to a place.

Places like Snohomish and Redmond. Last year in this address I mentioned some work being done by Holy Cross, Redmond, and St. John's, Snohomish, with Chinook Farms; they were on their way to 100,000 lbs of food grown and given, and they made it, and will this year too, and then some. It is a full circle thing that the bread for this Eucharist comes from that work. You will note in your bulletin that

this bread comes from wheat I was honored to be invited to bless back in May, and now it is here for us to share, in this meal.

We come from places, like Gig Harbor, where Eric Stelle is rector of St. John's. He, along with his team and the Liturgy and Arts Commission put this worship space together. He wrote me to describe it: "I'm using recycled parts of mattresses from Spring Back, a division of the Northwest Furniture Bank in Tacoma that provides furniture for people in need (e.g. recovering from homelessness; aging out of foster care; etc.). Spring Back employs entirely ex-cons, giving them dignity, jobs, and job experience. They are able to recycle 90% of the mattress material, saving it from landfill. The altar is going to be made out of mattress frames. The stage back will be a series of three (very stylized) faces of Jesus built entirely of mattress elements. The concept is to "See the face of Jesus" in the former prisoners doing the work; to see the face of Jesus in the "resurrected" mattresses, being redeemed from destruction and given new purpose; to see the face of Jesus in a ministry that provides elemental necessities of life (a bed to sleep on; a table to sit at)."

We come from places like Darrington, which as a very small church of ours has so heroically answered the need, and continues to do so, after the horrific mudslide of this year. We come from places like Marysville, for which our hearts ache, and in which St. Philips', that faithful band, has stepped up so valiantly in these days and is so well aware, and working even as we are here, to find the needs in that community, and to try to fill them. In Marysville and in Darrington, I want you to know I heard when I visited shortly after these events, something like, "If people ever wonder why it is important, or special, or needed, to be part of a diocese, send them to me." Now, I know.

We come from places, like Tahuya, Washougal, Forks, Blaine, South Bend, Vancouver, Longview, Issaquah, Seattle, Tacoma, and many more. We are brothers and sisters, kin to one another in this faith we call Episcopalian. But we are spread out, all across our land, living in the places we have been called, because there is where the work of bringing Jesus to the people, the work we are called to by God, is. By extension, when you are there, we all are there. Of the many purposes of this gathering, perhaps the most important one is reminding us of that.

Willibrord came from Echternach. Were he here he would find the names of our towns just as strange and the stories just as wonderful; and our mission much the same. All of this, and even those places we return, the work that we do there, is all for those who are not yet part of us, for those we hope to welcome in, and some we only need to serve and learn from.

We come, and then we go. That is also what happens every week, in every town and church in which we meet, and pray, and worship, and work; we come, and then we go. Today's Gospel is about the same.

This convention address takes on different perspectives, a different focus and intent, depending on our context each year. I often have stood here and regaled you on the state of the diocese, and I probably should do that, but I am not going to do near as much of that this year. The short story is that this diocese is very healthy; it is hopeful and faithful. We will always have a long way to go, that is what moving on toward perfection will always leave us with in this life. And I am not going on as long as in years past, so if the clergy took a pool on the time of my address – this does happen from time to time – whoever went short may have a good chance.

Of course, I can't resist a few highlights which include you all and which would only be possible with a collective effort, in every local place. We have the lowest non-payment of assessments (at under 2%) that anyone can remember or can prove. That is a remarkable change from just seven years ago. More congregations than in past years are vibrant, sustainable, and in many cases growing. For the first time since I have been your bishop, we are gathering here without two of our congregations being in dispute over property. The covenant with St. Charles, Poulsbo, and St. Stephen's, Oak Harbor, ended; the properties were turned back to this diocese, without litigation. There is a list of dioceses with disputed properties sometimes discussed at the House of Bishops; I was very glad to inform them that we could be taken off that list. Great thanks go to the patient work of so many, on both sides, and most especially the grace of the Holy Spirit.

As witnessed by the field trips this morning, which could not even begin to show the whole of the story, we are giving outside ourselves through Episcopal Community Action, through Episcopal Relief and Development, and in so many ways; a multitude and abundance from all the places from whence you come, and to which you will return.

We are lowering the assessment once again – I have always said: if you pay it, we can lower it – trying our best to be efficient and to do the things an Office of Bishop should do, while leaving more at the local level for local ministry, which, in the end, is the ultimate focus for us all, the ultimate focus for a diocese, and an office of the Bishop; the local ministry, so that all might see Jesus. Willibrord got that.

We have gone through several years of reflection and assessment of our life together, and of what we are called to do, as this gathered body we know as a diocese, and even more how that works to support that ultimate focus, the local ministry. We have done this through regular Mutual Ministry Reviews and the Holy Cow consult of the whole diocese by Russ Crabtree in 2012; and through two years of Outside Church Walls (a group that, having spent that time looking outside, at those not part of what we do, and what we believe, will, amazingly, call us back to a focus on who we are, essentially saying to us, we cannot share what we do not know ourselves. We cannot attract others to something we cannot describe, or articulate, or live. We cannot expect passion, if we do not have it). That is a challenge for each who served; and to me, equally I can assure you. It is a challenge for us all.

In the midst of this I have shared, at every convention, my intent to stay at this, in this role as your Bishop for about 12 years, give or take; half of that now behind us. This next 6 being about more shared leadership, giving it back to you, letting you point the direction and vision. That all has brought us to what you will hear from your Standing Committee at this convention, a group designed to pull all of this together and to articulate a vision for our future, or at the very least to help guide us as we move toward greater shared leadership and shared vision.

Some have felt we are not moving fast enough, that we have not actually done much with the information and data we have gathered, and that is certainly a fair perspective, and maybe even right. I stand before you knowing my leadership can always be better. There is no position I have ever held that has made me so aware of my inadequacies, weaknesses, and failures. But I would also say this: what some might see as a stall was not totally unplanned. We, in my mind, needed to build trust, to dig deeper into ourselves, and needed to have a better grasp of how we are seen by those that don't subscribe to this faith, before we could begin to set out on a new journey. In short, we needed to know what to pack, and perhaps even more, what to leave behind, so we could go where God is calling us to go.

You will hear more about this in the Outside Church Walls (OCW) presentation, but I wanted to tell you about an experience we had in our group, at one of our meetings, while at that task and on this journey. We invited an atheist to come and sit with us at one of our meetings; a man that amazed us at his commitment to helping the world. I can tell you he gives us a run for our money by what he did in what we call outreach. He had developed a good relationship with George Anne McDonnell, and he was invited, by her to come and sit with us. He was brave to do so. He met with us for several hours, and after he was done, I thanked him for his courage, and for his commitment to dialogue and to all he was doing for the good of the world; but I said, I think you have been holding something back. Would you, if you could, give us a bumper sticker, a quote, you know, sum it up, what you see as our problem, with our message, to people like you, and others in the world. And so he thought about it some and then he said, "Your elevator speech sucks." I felt we had the deepest and most productive discussion after he said that, and I have not forgotten it.

You may not agree, but I think we need to listen to him. I, and some of the OCW group, have shared this story and so our youth have picked up on this and you may actually greet a few of them in the elevator; they have taken this and are going to make actual attempts at actual elevator speeches, in the actual elevators! So get ready, when riding those elevators in this next 24 hours because our youth are practicing their elevator speeches.

From there the OCW group was inspired by a video in which Simon Sinek talks about great organizations and leaders. His main point is that we tend to be good at the how and the what: how do we do this, what do we do. You can spend lots of time and energy on that. In the church this plays itself out in the hope for the next new program, or the next rector or the next youth director who will be able to solve the problem. What Sinek suggested is that the great organizations don't start with that, but instead start with, "Why?" Why do we do what we do? Why do we come here? Why do we give so much of our lives to this?

Willibrord, and those saints like him, knew the answer to their why. We all have one. It is not an easy thing to always articulate or know but this group has been inspired to ask that we try; as a group, and as individuals. Why?

This is what inspired our theme for this convention, that story from Canterbury Cathedral and their search for a vision, which came to them in these simple words: We do what we do, so that all might see Jesus.

We know we are supposed to be about that, but it is worth asking, worth spending time, reflection and prayer, and perhaps the most important start we can make, to know our answer to why? Because, like Willibrord, we have places to go, things to do, a faith to share, in such a way, that those who see us, might sense that the Kingdom of God has come near, and might, in us, see Jesus.