

To All the Christians of Trinity Episcopal Church, gathered in Bend, Oregon,
Grace to you and Peace from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, I have longed to visit you over these many years, but my lengthy journeys have kept me from it. Despite those travels, I have kept you always in my heart and prayers. I have received reports of your work and I mean to attend to that work and ministry when I come to be among you.

My dear friends, I am all too aware that we live in a time when there are very many, scholars and pundits alike, who scorn or even ridicule the greater Christian community. No few among these critics have predicted the demise of the Christian church and with it, Christianity itself.

How is it we wonder that these pundits and critics have arrived at that conclusion? Chiefly because they count shrinking attendance and declining revenue. Don't they realize that the Church surpasses itself when it is under duress? Look back over the centuries and you will see that in times when the church flourished by the values of the world then it often suffered from a lack of spiritual strength. At the same time, look at the times when the church has been under threat; it has instead flourished in the hearts and minds of those who are oppressed. Very few of these pundits even note that the greater church, including the Anglican Communion, is thriving in the direst circumstances in Africa and all along and below the equatorial line. I strongly urge you in the name of Christ to put aside your fears for the future and put on the armor of faith. Christ as God cannot fail, and Christ as the Church is God's promise to the world.

Now I must caution you sisters and brothers that even the well-meaning can blunt the Gospel message by seeking to make that message somehow more appealing, to make the Gospel truth palatable by the criteria of the world, to see worship as a form of entertainment and prayer as an avenue to self-affirmation. Attractive as these alternatives may seem, they are not from God but from well-intentioned people. Take caution here for the Christian life is not first one of self-satisfaction, but a life of service, and not a life of being served but instead a life of loving service for one another.

How then shall we live our lives in times like these? How shall we be a healthy community among ourselves and be seen so by others? We can grasp the sign of our hope in the communion of gathering at the altar. Christ sets the table, and all are fed as they need. We share equally in the body and blood of Christ with no one sitting higher or lower than any other. Isn't it the case my sisters and brothers, that our faith is not prized as something we first espouse with our lips but first with our actions? Isn't faith about how we live for one another as Christ lived for us? I urge you not to make faith into something other than this, the trust we put in Christ as God and in one another.

Along with the presumed threats of decline to the church come the threats of decline in our world. People everywhere appear to crave a kind of hard and imperious leadership. We look at the world around us and find in this challenging time that the way of the world's leadership is to

draw attention to itself, putting its own needs before others. Does that sound like Christ? Does that sound like the Gospel? Do we see the life of the Beatitudes in these claims? Let me explain this to you: when Christ taught us that our strength lies in our service to one another, he meant just that—we are strongest when we love others with compassion and care. Does Christ reward those who first claim rich rewards for themselves? By no means! Christ loves those who first love others. Remember the word of your fellow Christians: JOY. Jesus first, others next and yourself last. Though these words fly in the face of the wisdom of the world, they come from the mind of God.

Many of you are naturally hoping and waiting for new leadership, a new pastor to lead you. And so you should, but first ask yourselves, what is the character of the church you would wish to be? And ask how that leadership will become and stay strong? Remember, one of the first tools of real strength comes from mutual trust. None of us can by ourselves be more than we can be when we love one another. Practice gratitude with one another and you will learn the first steps of faith.

Learn this lesson well: as I have written many times, we are all parts of a larger body. Some of us serve as hands, some feet, some eyes and ears, and still other parts. Remember this, that no one part is more important than another. Take away a foot and the whole-body limps. Take away an eye, and the light of your mind is half again dimmer. If you want your new leader to thrive, be one with one another. No one, especially the clergy, can be strong without the whole body working together in faith and love.

I send greetings to my beloved friends Bill Carrington and Riki Strong, and all your vestry leadership. They personify what I have written in that they serve not to meet their own needs but to meet the needs of others. Importantly, learn to look around you and to look carefully for those who are new to the church. A few simple words of welcome and affirmation nourishes souls and minds.

Please remember, that I pray always for you. Christ is with you. You do not need to stand by your own strength but instead live by the strength of the Christ who loves you. Remember that absolutely nothing, no power, no leader, no spirit, or any other force above or below, or in the world, can ever come between you and God.

I greet you all with the kiss of peace. Signed by my own hand. Amen.

The Rev. Jeffrey Bullock