Good evening. It is good to be with all of you as we begin this 199th Convention of the Diocese of Ohio, and I am grateful to Dean Lind and the Cathedral staff and congregation for their hospitality and care of us tonight. Thank you very much. And thank you all for being here.

Yesterday afternoon, in a phone conversation with Bishop Persell, when he asked how my preparation was going, I confessed that, even the twelfth time doing this, it is a difficult task. To this he responded by singing cheerily, “What more can he say than to you he hath said…?” Perhaps some of you are wondering the same.

The last time I stood in this pulpit was July 18th, when we gathered to celebrate the life of our beloved friend and bishop, David Bowman. It is not possible to begin this Convention homily and address without recognizing his conspicuous absence. These annual gatherings were always marked by his thoughtful participation, his wise counsel, his disarming humor, and his pastoral touch. He loved the church, even when it frustrated him, and he loved this annual convening of the body of Christ and our common work of discerning how to move forward faithfully and courageously as agents of God’s mission.

It is important, as well, to recognize his presence with us “in the glorious company of the saints in light,” as we gather here on the eve of the church’s remembrance of Samuel Seabury, the first bishop of The Episcopal Church. In the American succession, Bishop Bowman was number 811, so he and Bishop Seabury were separated by 810 bishops and 202 years. It is a comfort to me to think of them together now, with one another and with us tonight, in what the prayer used at every ordination describes as “that wonderful and sacred mystery” of the church.

Samuel Seabury, while born in Connecticut in 1729, was very much a child of the Church of England. He traveled to England to be ordained at the age of 23, after which he was sent home to New England as a missionary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, the mission arm of the Church of England. He served as a priest in colonial parishes in New Jersey and New York. Nonetheless, when the colonists went to war against the crown, Seabury joined the British army as a chaplain.

Only a few years following America’s independence, Seabury was selected by his peers to travel again to England in the hope that he would be ordained a bishop for the church in the fledgling nation. After a year of frustration and disappointment, his inability to swear allegiance to the monarchy precluded epsicopal orders through the Church of England, so he was ultimately ordained by bishops of the Episcopal Church of Scotland. At the end of two long years, he returned home in 1785 to become the First Bishop of Connecticut, and later the First Bishop of Rhode Island and the 2nd Presiding Bishop.

Samuel Seabury was not simply sentimental about his orders in the Church of England. He had a vision of unity in a time of great division. There was deep division in the colonial church as a result of the Revolutionary War, division in the Church of England due to the colonists’ break with the crown, and division in the body of Christ whose vocation it is to reach beyond divisive principalities and powers in order to bring healing to our fallen humanity. One could question whether apostolic succession was essential to that calling, but to Seabury it reflected the connectedness of God’s beloved, across time and space, who are called together as disciples, generation after generation, not in spite of our challenging differences but perhaps because of them. We are called together to maintain a unity given us in Christ Jesus, who, as the Daily Office collect for mission proclaims, “stretched out [his] arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of [his] saving embrace.” To Seabury, perhaps the unity of the church was worth seeking to preserve, especially in the midst of the great divisions of his time, because it proclaimed that God is bigger than even those divisions, and that God dreams for the children of God to be bigger than those divisions also.

One of the many gifts of Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori’s leadership during the past nine years is the integrity with which she presented The Episcopal Church’s essential place in and commitment to the larger church, and especially the Anglican Communion. Never making excuse for the particularities of our mission context and the ways we minister in and to it, she consistently pointed to the communion-wide differences of the body of Christ as those things that make us all more whole. It is not a singleness of perspective, but a singleness of heart, a unity embracing differences that proclaims to the world that all can live in peace. I cannot imagine that it is God’s intention for us all to think alike. (If it were, you would think God might have chosen a more likely lot!) Rather, God seems always to be challenging and leading us to live together with greater difference, difference that the power of evil will relentlessly employ in trying to divide us one from another.

There is something evocative about beginning this 199th Convention on the eve of the remembrance of Samuel Seabury, just two weeks following the installation of our 27th Presiding Bishop and Primate, and first African American Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, the Most Rev. Michael Bruce Curry. Bishop Curry is a long-time friend to this diocese. There is a photograph of him on the wall outside the Cathedral Chapter Room, preaching from this very pulpit. He has been the guest preacher at the Wilma Ruth Combs Chapter of the Union of Black Episcopalians’ Absalom Jones Celebration at Christ Church, Shaker Heights, the keynote speaker at the Annual Meeting of the Diocese of Ohio’s Episcopal Church Women, and he has led our annual Clergy Conference.

In the sermon he preached at his installation, a piece of which you will hear tomorrow, Bishop Curry spoke clearly about the responsibility of the church to engage increasingly in the work of racial reconciliation and justice. This past year the reality of racial divisions and inequality has been consistently and manifestly evidenced across our country. We see it in both urban and rural communities, in relationships with police, in the inequities of the criminal justice system, in educational institutions, even in communities of faith. This week, from Missoula to New Haven, tensions and protests on university campuses have revealed the enduring and systemic racial divisions many have wanted to believe were addressed fifty years ago. Recently at St. Michael’s University Church, the Episcopal Campus Ministry at the University of California in Santa Barbara, the glass front door was shattered by pellet guns to tear down signs proclaiming “Black Lives Matter,” signs that have been repeatedly vandalized and destroyed.

I have been inspired by congregations in the Diocese of Ohio who have stepped up to participate in constructive dialogue and action. This Sunday, here at the Cathedral, the Dean’s forum will host the Cleveland Police Foundation’s Captain Keith Sulzer, to explore how that agency works to strengthen relationships with the citizens of this metropolitan area. And you may remember that last March St. Philip’s Church in Akron hosted a community discussion on race and policing. Denise Caywood, St. Philip’s Senior Warden, explained afterward to the Akron Beacon Journal that the congregation “wanted to offer some small way to help people sit down and work together toward peaceful resolutions.” I know that congregations from Youngstown to Toledo have similar stories to tell.

The former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathon Sacks, in his book The Dignity of Difference, asked in the aftermath of September 11, “Can we hear the voice of God in a language, a sensibility, a culture not our own? Can we see the presence of God in the face of a stranger?”

Both scripture and our experience teach us that the answer is Yes. In fact, time and again, you and I find that we are made more whole, more complete, by those who are different from us. Ruth the Moabite. The Samaritan traveler. Strangers who change us. By engaging with the stranger on an honest level, we are changed. And in offering ourselves as a stranger, as Ruth and the Samaritan did, with a willingness to engage generously, honestly, and humbly with those whose experience and reality are different from ours, the world is changed. Love God. Love your neighbor. Change the world. The enemy wants us to believe that difference is dangerous. It wants our response to difference to be fear. But “the good news of the kingdom” that Jesus proclaimed in all the cities and villages is that difference is a blessing. Our capacity to embrace difference as blessing is what makes us godly.

In a recent radio interview with Rabbi Sacks, Krista Tippet, the host of *On Being*, asked him to elaborate on his statement, “The greatest single antidote to violence is conversation, speaking our fears, listening to the fears of others, and in that sharing of vulnerabilities, discovering a genesis of hope.”

Sacks replied, “[W]e have in Judaism…a problem in Jewish religious divorce. For reasons we needn’t go into, a husband can withhold a divorce from a wife so that they may be civilly divorced and living apart, but the wife is unable to remarry. And she’s really a living widow. We call her a chained woman, and I have to resolve those things. In the end, the way we resolve them, the really hard cases, is actually just by listening. And that listening gives each of the two parties the feeling that they are heard, and once they’re heard, they can then begin to speak what they really feel. And then they can begin to realize that there are things they still care about in common, not perhaps enough to save their marriage, but certainly enough to remove the animosity from their divorce. It’s extraordinary how a simple act of sitting around a table and speaking and listening can actually solve cases that prove insoluble both by the civil and the religious courts.”

He went on to say, “Likewise,…I’ve sat and talked to people who used to be Hamas terrorists and have become peace activists just because they saw how much of a dead end they were getting themselves into. I just see so much effort at peacemaking taking place at the very elite levels where…nobody really is willing to lose for the sake of long-term winning for both of us. Sometimes I think, what would happen if we generated real conversations at the grassroots level between the people whose lives are really affected?”

*There* is a faith challenge. Listening to the other, with a willingness to lose for the sake of long-term winning for all. Listening to the other, with an understanding that what God dreams of for both of us might cost me something that I need to learn I can afford to lose. Listening to the other with an authenticity and humility that invites the same level of listening by the other. You know, if I can’t listen to the other in this way, how can I possibly ever hear the “still, small voice” of a God who is wholly other?

As Christians we might well say that the stranger is always Jesus. The Baptismal Covenant’s question, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons?” presumes that indeed Christ is in all persons. Perhaps you recall the Irish rune:

I met a stranger, yestre’en.
I put food in the eating place,
Drink in the drinking place
And music in the listening place.
In the name of the sacred triune,
He blessed my house and myself,
My cattle and my loved ones.
And the lark sang in her song,
“Often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger’s guise,
Often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger’s guise.”

There it is again, difference as blessing. When we provide more than tolerance, when we bring the stranger into our selves, genuinely into our understanding and compassion and concern and care, when we make room for the other not somewhere else but in our very hearts, then *we* are made more whole. We are blessed. “He blessed my house and myself, my cattle and my loved ones.” “Often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger’s guise.”

What possession or entitlement or right or conviction am I willing to lose for the sake of the stranger’s security, well-being, and chance to live a full life? What cost am I willing to bear? What vulnerability to the other am I willing to risk in order to find the place where God can hold us both? What vulnerability to Jesus am I willing to risk? And is this what Jesus means by my needing to lose my lives in order to find it?

Jesus taught us that healing the violence of this world is not achieved by building higher and wider and longer walls, whether they be physical, political, emotional, or spiritual. Nor is it achieved by accepting that if the other won’t come to the table, we are helpless. It begins when we bring our sacrifice nonetheless. In my prayers I keep thinking of the infant shot dead in Cleveland this fall while strapped into her car seat for safety, and when I replace her face with that of one of my own children or someone else I love, there is nothing I would not give for her safety. Nothing. Would I do the same if it were Jesus?

If the stranger is always Jesus, what word and action do I, do we as the church, have to offer to heal the violence of which we are all a part?

Living together with difference in this diocese and church, being willing to lose for the sake of long-term winning for everyone, in other words for God, we model to the world what is possible for all. But we do so only when our embrace of difference extends far beyond ourselves and our church, and into the deep divisions of our society and culture. It does so only when we seek and serve Christ in *all*persons.

What empowers us to embrace difference as blessing is confidence in God. It is confidence that God is bigger than anything that divides us; it is confidence that, even in the most desperate situations, God can provide possibility for good; it is confidence that God’s love can overcome even the most hateful action and thought, and heal even the deepest wound; it is confidence that with God, all such blessing is possible, that the harvest is indeed plentiful, plentiful beyond our imagining; and it is confidence that we ourselves are capable of laboring successfully in that harvest, not because of who *we* are, but because of who *God* is. Hear the words of Isaiah read this evening, “It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them…”

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Tomorrow, when we resume our convention in Warrensville Heights, we will hear reports on the 78th General Convention, and the inspiring engagement of our youth and young adults in the larger church. We will hear about the accomplishments of parish capital campaigns, and the progress of our camp and retreat ministry planning; about the continuing work of historic St. John’s and Station Hope in Ohio City, and the work of the Commission on Global and Domestic and Mission. We will consider the budget for the coming year and resolutions addressing clergy compensation and diocesan and parochial policies on alcohol use. And we will learn about the work of the Episcopal Church of the Ascension in Munich, Germany, and its response to the refugee crisis in Europe, to which some of tonight’s offering will go.

We will explore in table conversation how, led by the Commission on Racial Understanding, we might more intentionally address and heal the racism in our society and in ourselves. And we will hear about *Growing a Rule of Life*, the Lenten study program produced by the Virginia Theological Seminary and the Society of St. John the Evangelist, that we are all invited to undertake as diocese, and for which 60 of our congregations have already requested 4000 study guides.

Tomorrow we will welcome clergy who have arrived since our last convention, and give thanks to those lay leaders and clergy who have concluded specific roles in both parish and diocesan leadership. We will recognize the Canon for Mission, Margaret D’Anieri and the Canon to the Ordinary, Bill Powel, who have joined the staff since the last convention. We will welcome a new Chief Development Officer, Laura Hnat, who will provide oversight of the Bishop’s Annual Appeal, help congregations engage the leadership of all those who have invested in the future of the church through the Planting for Tomorrow Campaign, and assist us all in accessing resources from The Episcopal Church and other sources to support the many critical ministries we seek to provide in our parishes and as a diocese.

Finally, tomorrow we will receive a resolution of welcome and commitment to the new Presiding Bishop, as well as one expressing gratitude to Bishop Katharine and her husband, Dick. And we will embrace a resolution commemorating the life and ministry of Bishop Bowman. In doing so we will proclaim the ministry of unity to which each of these people was and is committed, the ministry of unity exemplified by Bishop Seabury, the ministry of unity that we all share, every one of us, as a primary vehicle by which we strive to heal the world.

But tonight, we begin our 199th Convention in prayer and thanksgiving, gathering around a single table, with saints past and present, to eat from one plate and drink from one cup. We gather as Jesus’ disciples, practicing with one another how to live with difference and how to bridge divisions, that we might go out from here to help the world do the same, go out as laborers into a harvest that is as plentiful as is the love of Christ Jesus itself.

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’”

Amen.

The Rt. Rev. Mark Hollingsworth, Jr.
Bishop of Ohio
November 13, 2015
Trinity Cathedral