

Good morning!

From the 10th chapter of the Book of Hebrews, “Asi que no pierdan la confianza, porque esta sera grandemente recompensada.” – “Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours: It brings a great reward.” From this sentence of scripture, my sermon this morning is entitled “Daring Greatly.”

I

You may recognize those two words from President Theodore Roosevelt’s speech delivered in Paris in 1910: He said, “It’s not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles... The credit belongs to the one actually in the arena...who actually strives to do the deeds... who at the best knows the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails (if she fails), at least fails while daring greatly....”

Or, you may know the phrase daring greatly from the title of Brené Brown’s groundbreaking book on vulnerability. “Vulnerability,” she reminds us, “is not a weakness. Our willingness to engage our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage, our clarity and our purpose.” Living with and through vulnerability is what she calls “wholehearted living.”

We are gathered this morning to formally acknowledge that God is making deacons and priests out of us. Through us, lay and ordained. The rest of us have come here to rededicate ourselves to partnering with God’s reconciling and liberating work. That through us, Christ will be enfleshed and enlarged. We have not come here for our own aggrandizement but to contribute to the celebrity of Jesus Christ. That we might be better instruments in the world for God. Embodying Jesus Christ in the world. If that is so, it’s no wonder, then, the author of Hebrews wants us to consider our confidence first. How can you dare greatly without the gift of this confidence we have? To dare greatly as a Christian is to “remember forward and hope backward.” Christian confidence is fastened to the past victories of the faith. First and foremost, the bedrock of the confidence of the baptized comes from the birth, life, ministry, crucifixion and

resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Any other confidences are pretense. Distractions from fact. False charms. Through Christ you and I are sure that God is “with us, for us and ahead of us.” By Christ we are assured that God is forgetful when it comes to our sins. In Jesus we are sure that the fellowship that binds us together is more durable than any other substance. Because of Christ we are reminded of the capacity that lies within each of us. That, “greater things” is what Jesus said we could do by virtue of His compassion and our “fearful and wonderful” construction. Our confidence is “that nothing is impossible with God.”

And then there is the “great cloud of witnesses.” The men and women, frail and feeble, bothered and bifurcated just like us, but who are on record as having trusted God and found God trustworthy. History is littered with them: Abrahams and Sarahs. Yochebeds and Moseses. Marys and Josephs. Each daring something for God. Each believing in the real world, a yet more real God.

But there are other men and women, closer to us on history’s long highway. People who inspire us to Christian confidence. Who is on your list? I’m not talking about nice people. Being nice and being Christian are two different things. I’m talking about people who put reputation, relationships and resources on the line that the kingdom of God might come just that much closer. People who *are* the St. Francis’ prayer... “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace....” Who is on your list? We’re in Georgia, so we should be emboldened by people like James Oglethorpe, Charlayne Hunter-Gault or Dr. and Mrs. King. But those are just the names we know. There’s no way to fully account for the people, the names and faces we wouldn’t recognize but those who because of Christian confidence and the great dares they endeavored we have inherited the precious gift of holychutzpah. “The Lord has done great things for us and we are glad indeed.”

II

The prophet Habakkuk understood that daring greatly has everything to do with vision. He knew vision inspires us to purpose, and purpose anchors us in transition, chaos and resistance –even ordination. From Habakkuk’s conversation with God we have these words, “The vision must be plain so that the runner can read it. There is still a vision for the appointed time.” “La vision tiene un plazo fijado camina hacia la meta.” It’s reasonable for those about to be ordained to wonder what will God’s ministry look like through you? And it’s reasonable for those of us who have been ordained for a number of years to still wonder: What would God have me to be and to do at this time in my life? What will I be when I grow up into the full stature of Christ? These questions and their answers are critical if we are to dare greatly for God. But every vision, every aspiration, is born out of a current reality.

The Church Pension Group has just issued a study entitled *A Troubled Profession? Episcopal Clergy and Vocation at the Turn of the Millennium*. Among its many findings, it reports that “clergy are frustrated by the gap between what they would like to do in their daily work lives and what they actually do.” It goes on to say that clergy “would like to do more ‘mission’-oriented work and less institutional maintenance.” And that doing mission-oriented work makes a real difference, they say, and is critically important in a world of dynamic equilibrium.” The study suggests that because there is this gap in what we would like to do and how we actually spend our days, clergy experience inordinate ill- health, obesity and depression relative to other professionals.

This begs the question: What keeps so many of us imprisoned as machine maintainers, people pleasers and paper pushers? Where does that vision come from and why have we accepted it? Colluded with it? This too-common way of being clergy has come at a tragic cost to our souls and to the souls of the people we serve. What has it cost you and the world to not dare greatly?

But we know why this has happened. To dare greatly is to risk greatly. And to risk greatly is possibly to lose greatly. To lose greatly is to be weak, and to be weak is to be nothing. Because of course, I am only what I do. This is the flawed logic, and this is the lie

too many of us have swallowed. This is the lie we rehearse and some even preach. So then we play it safe.

Brené Brown discovered in her research that “wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness.” And when we finally understand that we are more than our successes or our failures. Then the inhibiting shame gets vomited up. Then we can unabashedly launch our next great dare for Jesus Christ. We can take a risk and launch an experiment. Be something different.

Brothers and sisters, the matter of our worthiness has been settled. Cosmically, completely and forever settled. Jesus put it this way: You are valuable. Not perfect. Not good. Not self-sufficient. Not invulnerable. But, valuable! Pay close attention here because courage attracts critics. And the status quo will elegantly defend itself as you try to break free from the alligator’s jaws. Watch the news and listen how the Pope is being attacked for advocating for the poor. To some folks you have to be a Marxist just to talk about wealth disparity. If daring greatly was easy everybody would be doing it. But some of us are ready for a change. Ready for a new vision. Some of us are sick and tired of being sick and tired. We know we’re not fully engaged. Our lips and our lives are divided. Our minds and behinds are going in different directions. What can we do? We need a Savior, “a word that re-describes the world.” “Who will save us from the body of death?” St. Paul asked.

When you leave here, listen in your quiet time. Listen in worship. Listen today. The Spirit is whispering to us without condemning us, you are meant to dare greatly. “You are more than conquerors through him who loves us.” “Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever.” God can do anything but fail. “If God can deliver Daniel, then why not all of us?” So swing for the fence. Lean in. “The righteous live by their faith.” Be what you are made for. Dare and greatness are together in you. “Christ for the world we sing, Christ to the world we bring, with loving zeal.” That is the vision! Everything else is a detail!

III

God is a genius, you know. God didn't come to us as the conquering warrior on a white stallion. God didn't come as the philosopher/know-it-all king. God came to us as a baby. Lived among us as the son of a day laborer. And died at the hands of a faith community in collusion with a bloody empire. He came among us vulnerable because "vulnerability is the birthplace of love, strength, belonging, joy, courage empathy and creativity."

Today the church remembers the disciple Thomas. Some people call him doubting Thomas. Not me. He's more than that. Was it really only doubt to want to see and touch Jesus' wounds? I don't know about you, but we wouldn't have much to offer this broken world if it weren't for Jesus' wounds. Without Jesus' wounds the church is just a clique or a club. Without Jesus' wounds the church would have poetry but no power. The bookshelves in the bookstores groan under the weight of self-help books. But we know we need more than self-help. We need help with our wounds. Wounds of the past. The woundings that are happening right now, all over the world, and the wounds yet to be inflicted. But, thanks be to God, we have an Emmanuel, God with us in our winning and our woundedness.

I don't know about you, but I wouldn't be much of a Christian if it weren't for Jesus' wounds. It's Jesus' wounds that help me to endure my own wounds. Somehow I find that I can go on, knowing that Jesus himself "went to his own and his own received him not." Somehow I can face my own black nights in Gethsemane because I know Jesus had his time in that soul-making silence. I don't know about you, but it is precisely because of Moses' felony, Paul's thorn, John the Baptist's incarceration, Sarah and Elizabeth's infertility, Pontius Pilate's duplicitousness and Peter's cowardice that I can talk about and face my own wounds. And facing them through a grace that is all gift, then I find I can befriend the whole wounded world. The world, not only the church! It's empathy that breaks the grip of shame. And so "we comfort wherewith the comfort we have been comforted with." It's precisely because we the baptized have found Christ enough for our wounds that we can proclaim that Jesus is medicine for all wounds. We're all Thomas. All of us.

For the Ordination of Deacons and Priests
December 21, 2013 | The Feast of St. Thomas
The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta
The Rt. Rev. Robert C. Wright
Bishop, Diocese of Atlanta | The Episcopal Church in Middle and North Georgia

And when you touch Jesus' wounds and you allow Him to touch yours, then you get to say as Thomas said, "My Lord and My God." Touching Jesus' wounds changes question marks into exclamation marks! We need more exclamation marks in the church. Not on paper, on signs or in sermons but in our lives, in our clergy.

For you about to be ordained, and for all of us here, there is no dare so great as to live our lives wholeheartedly. Wholeheartedly. Not cowered by shame or guilt. Not silenced by convention. But wholeheartedly. Lay and ordained. This is the wellspring of health. If the Episcopal Church is to have a vibrant future, nothing less than this will do. But you must decide today. Will you dare greatly?

"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."

"O for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemer's praise, the glory of my God and King the triumphs of His grace."

Works referenced:

Biblical texts for the Feast of St. Thomas

Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*.

Ron Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*

Rob Bell, *What We Mean When We Talk about God*

The Church Pension Group, *A Troubled Profession? Episcopal Clergy and Vocation at the Turn of the Millennium*

For the Ordination of Priests and Deacons
December 21, 2013 | The Feast of St. Thomas
The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta
The Rt. Rev. Robert C. Wright
Bishop, Diocese of Atlanta | The Episcopal Church in Middle and North Georgia