

Remarks and a prayer by Bishop Rob Wright of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta opening the day's session in the Georgia House of Representatives - Feb. 20, 2013

Speaker Ralston, Ladies and Gentlemen, Brothers and Sisters: Good morning!

I greet you this morning in the Name of God. And while we may know this God by many names, God is not divided. "God is the same yesterday, today and forever." God is One in love and justice and truth. I greet you in the Name of the God who divided the day from the night and gifted us with this new morning. It is this God who now invites us all to rejoice and be glad in this new day, with its new mercies and opportunities for new beginnings.

As the 10th bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta, I bring you the greetings of 56,000 men, women, children, teenagers and feisty seniors in 109 worshipping communities. People from all over this state, from Montezuma in the south to Dalton in the north and up to the Tennessee line. From the Alabama border to just west of Augusta. Georgians from every walk of life, every political persuasion, every income level: your constituents.

I want you to know that in the Episcopal Church as a part of our weekly worship, we pray for you. And so, it is delightful to see the faces that I pray for this morning. We pray for you because you have an awesome responsibility. Because you hold the public trust and enlarge the common good. And so as you execute the work God has called you to do, regardless of political stripe or jurisdiction, be reminded that we are praying for you.

We are praying that God would continue to preserve you and bless your leadership with wisdom, courage and compassion. We pray that you will keep your focus in an ocean of meetings and details, that you will walk with the powerful but remember to keep the common touch, that you will hold on to your souls and your most generous selves in the face of the insidious temptation to care narrowly for your own constituency.

We're praying for you because, like so many of you, we know that God answers prayers, and we believe that God has and is giving you power to live, to lead and to lift this state and this nation from strength to strength.

I emphasize prayer this morning because it is in the quietness of prayer that we hear God whisper God's desires for us and for our world. That was true for Moses, Muhammad and Jesus. James Oglethorpe heard God's whisper at our state's founding when he heard *Non sibi sed aliis*: Not for self, but for others. Dr. King heard God's

whisper at his kitchen table one late night when he heard, “Stand up for justice, stand up for righteousness and I will be with you.”

We know that God is still whispering to God’s people in that same “small still voice.” I hear it when I pray, don’t you? And when the whisper comes, it’s never words of condemnation. It is always words of affirmation, always words that build up, always words of good stewardship of ourselves and of the weakest among us.

The problem with God is that what God whispers to us God then demands that we shout from the rooftops. (Matt. 10:27) As I listen to the quiet, I hear God whispering to us that we shouldn’t make an idol out of the Constitution. The framers of our republic were not infallible men. And they left much unfinished. An assembly as diverse as our gathering today was not provided for in the un-amended constitution! But the right to gather as we are today was won by prayer, action and compromise.

The real task of democracy today is not to mummify the Constitution with our fear but to revive its best hopes with our courage and compassion and continue the labor of the founders responsibly in the here and now.

So as America and Georgia aspire to continued greatness, greater safety for her citizens – greater safety for her children – must be a priority, which means we must enact meaningful changes to our gun laws as a nation and as a state.

It is hollow to respond to parents who have lost children to gun violence that their dead child is somehow just the price of keeping the Second Amendment intact. And it is unseemly to bury our law enforcement men and women knowing we didn’t given them every advantage over the criminals they face.

On what reasonable grounds can we argue against background checks before the purchase of a weapon? To issue a weapon to someone without a modicum of scrutiny is not an exercise in liberty; it is an exercise in folly. I urge this body: Lead the South again from this gold dome, provide for the law-abiding gun owner and sportsman while at the same time making Georgia more safe.

When God whispers to us, those whispers make us bold – bold not arrogant. Arrogance says I can and I have. But God-inspired boldness speaks of what God can do and what we can accomplish if we will partner with God. God-inspired boldness gives us the courage we need to confront and defeat the giants in front of us. And it gives the wisdom to recognize fear’s greatest temptation: to justify cowardice and selfishness.

But we have not been given a spirit of fear, as the Bible tells us, “but of power and of love.” If Moses had succumbed to his fears, he wouldn’t have led Egypt’s ancient revolution. If beautiful Esther had become a prisoner of her fears, she wouldn’t have

saved her generation and generations yet to be born. Scripture tells us that “perfect love casts out fear.” Only love is dense enough to displace fear.

And that is my prayer for all of us today. That God would give us each enough love to sustain our struggle against fear towards righteousness. Brothers and sisters, as you walk the political landscape of our state, inspire us with boldness as you make provision for the ignorant, the indigent and the immigrants of our state. Step over your fears and do what is right on behalf of the elderly, the poor, the orphan, the veteran, the prisoner and those who love differently. The time is always right to do right. This is what Jesus of Nazareth invites us to do.

The Apostle Paul at the close of his 12th chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians wrote, “Strive for the greater gifts...and I will show you a more excellent way.” And that more excellent way is to always show forth God’s praise not only with our lips but in our lives, to give up ourselves for God’s service, and to walk and lead before God in holiness and righteousness all our days.

I would ask now that we could pray together:

Wonderful God, whom we know by many names. Who is the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all men and women. We know you to be good and faithful, gracious and full of mercy. Look down on the state of Georgia and bless her richly. Where she is corrupt, purify her. Where she is in error, direct her. Where she is right, strengthen her. Where she is in want, provide for her. Where she is divided, reunite her. We ask all these things in the Name of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. AMEN.

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