

We Are One In Christ
A Presentation to on the Occasion of
The Silver Jubilee Celebration of the Diocese of North America and Europe
of the Mar Thoma Church
The Very Rev. Douglas Travis
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My grandfather was born on April the 11th, 1901. On December the 17th, 1903, when Granddad was 2 & ½ years old, for the very first time in human history Orville and Wilbur Wright achieved heavier-than-air human flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Granddad lived to hear Neal Armstrong utter his famous words, “[O]ne small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind” on July the 21st, 1969 as Armstrong became the first human being to walk on the surface of the moon.

Think about that! Granddad was born before human flight was possible and he lived to see the moon landing.

In 1986 I bought my first computer – and IBM XT. It was a wonderful computer and served my purposes admirably, never once giving me a bit of trouble. I paid \$7,000 for it! Today, 26 years later, my Apple iPhone is immensely more powerful than that XT was and it serves a variety of purposes that XT never could. It also costs roughly 7% of what my first computer cost.

This matters, because when one lives in a world changing as rapidly as is ours, one is on a journey whether he wills it or not. We are all of us on a journey. Indeed, we are all of us on several journeys simultaneously.

When Bishop Theodosius first issued me an invitation to speak to you today I asked him what he’d like me to talk about.

He shared with me that “Journeying with Christ” is the theme of the Silver Jubilee Celebration of the Diocese of North America and Europe of the Mar Thoma Church. He also asked that I talk about how best to empower the second and third generation of Mar Thoma Christians in this country “to understand the role of the Church in the growth and extension of God's kingdom and to understand the modern challenges in carrying out the divine ministry in the world.” Now I have to confess, this poses a challenge for me. The last time any of my ancestors immigrated to this country was in either the 1880’s or the 1890’s, and most of my forebears have been here since before the Revolutionary war. Indeed, one of my ancestors was in New Amsterdam before it became New York! I’m also a sixth generation Texan. In the conventional sense of the word, for many generations the journey which is immigration has not been a part of my family’s history. I simply don’t know what it’s like to exercise the courage and determination to move my family from one continent to another, from one culture to another.

But there are other journeys that are common to the Christian enterprise, and you and I are very much together on these journeys. We are all of us on the journey from our births to our deaths. Implicit in that journey is the pursuit of psychological and spiritual maturity. For Christians this is Christian maturity, best pursued by devoting ourselves to the journey into the mind of God. And we’re especially privileged because in that journey we have Jesus Christ as our friend and our fellow pilgrim and we make the journey in the power of the Holy Spirit. The journey to Christian maturity can also be termed, as I recently heard Bishop Theodosius call it, the journey into “God consciousness.”

While our families’ histories may differ, in this culture you and I have been subjected to the same profound, constant, and overwhelming change – change which takes us on a journey

regardless of whether we consent to travelling! For in today's world, whether we like it or not, we all constantly travel. I mean this literally – I often spend three and four days somewhere other than at home. But I also mean it figuratively. Subjected as we are to the constant barrage of change that marks our society, we cannot but travel from one level of technological complexity to the next.

Simply put, in what is now called the “post-modern” world, it is impossible to stand still in one place. It seems that nothing stays the same. This is the world we inhabit, but we inhabit this world together, brothers and sisters in Christ, created in the image of the same God. We are all of us going on a journey! Let us go forward together – with our Lord's example, presence, and strength to sustain us.

From this standpoint of being brothers and sisters in Christ, but also children of a rapidly changing world and culture, I'd like to ask three questions:

- 1) What's a denomination for?
- 2) What does the Christian journey look like?
- 3) How can we boldly, ever more and more together, go into the Christian future together?

WHAT'S A DENOMINATION FOR?

In 2005 while the rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in The Woodlands, we hosted a *Renovare* Conference at which the keynote speakers were Richard Foster and Dallas Willard. It was an incredible experience.

Foster is the famed Quaker pastor and author of such books as *Celebration of Discipline*. He and Willard have been close friends for over thirty years. Willard himself is an ordained Southern Baptist minister and professor emeritus of philosophy at The University of Southern California. But more than that, he is the author of life-changing books such as *The Divine Conspiracy*.

Imagine this: over 800 Christians from 21 denominations and at least 180 different individual congregations gathered . . . to do what? Essentially to discuss Christian discipline and the formation of small groups. But a *Renovare* Conference is about much more than that. *Renovare* means “renew” in Latin. These conferences are precisely designed to renew the Christian Church by calling Christians to lead together the lives of “discipline” all “disciples” of Jesus are called to live. The conferences achieve their purpose by being a mini-ecumenical movement in pursuit of the unity of the Church. Rather than achieving its goal by beginning at the top of any given denomination's hierarchy, *Renovare* starts at the bottom with common Christians. Baptists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, and Quakers gather beneath one roof in one house of worship to celebrate our *common* heritage and our *common* devotion to one Lord. Amazingly when we're all side by side I can't tell the difference!

Ellen Chary is a professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary and an Episcopalian. With four other Christian thinkers Ellen was featured on the cover of the February 8, 1999 *Christianity Today* as one of “The New Theologians”. The sub-title of the article was this: “In a realm once dominated by theological liberals, many of today's top scholars are orthodox believers.” But despite being theologically conservative, Ellen is critical of what she calls the tendency of the contemporary Church to be ever more “fissiparous.” What does “fissiparous” mean? It's a technical term from biology, but if we take the term outside its scientific locus it means “tending to break up into parts: DIVISIVE.” Ellen's point? We

Christians are forever forming new denominations or new congregations because we find ourselves disagreeing either with our own denomination's stance on a given issue, or we find ourselves at odds with fellow members of our local faith community. And so in a supposed devotion to "God's truth" we determine that we have to form a new congregation or denomination. I grew up in a little town in the Panhandle of Texas. In this small community where no denomination really needed more than one congregation, one denomination had two. Why? Because there were those in the original community who, upon discovering that "Sunday School" is nowhere mentioned in the Bible, determined that they needed a new congregation devoted to honoring this otherwise obscure truth!

Bill W., the spiritual genius who first organized Alcoholics Anonymous, had real problems with much of the traditional Church. Why? "The problem with organized religions, Bill Wilson once complained, ***'is their claim how confoundedly right all of them are.'***"¹

Wouldn't it be glorious were Christians to be able to gather *en mass* devoted not to being right but to knowing, loving, praising, and emulating their Lord? Wouldn't it be extraordinary if Christians from all denominations and parishes were enabled, in the power of the Spirit, to gather together to remember that "There is one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all . . ." (Ephesians 4:4-6)

Well, believe it or not, this is exactly what Foster intends with *Renovare*, and it's exactly what's achieved in a *Renovare* Conference. One emerges from a *Renovare* conference conscious that ***all our great Christian traditions have their contributions to make.*** And the challenge, at the most basic level, is for Christians to gather with Christians to celebrate our variety of gifts, seeking not to splinter into ever smaller bodies, but rather to find the common ground, the common Truth, Who unites us all.

Clearly "T"ruth with a capital "T" matters! Both Foster and Willard would land on the conservative end of most reflective people's theological spectrum. But perhaps we Christians do our best work in spreading the Gospel by granting the benefit of the doubt to those with whom we disagree and by always listening to them – something you're doing with me today and for which I'm very grateful.

Foster's hope is clearly that an ecumenical movement of some variety can begin at the grass roots level. In his marvelous book *Streams of Living Water* he identifies six different traditions in the larger river of Christian experience. They are the contemplative, the holiness, the charismatic, the social justice, the evangelical, and the incarnational or sacramental traditions. My own Church, the Episcopal Church, probably finds the incarnational and the contemplative traditions most congenial. (I would be intrigued to know where you all place the Mar Thoma Church.) I benefit from the wisdom and experience of the adherents of all the traditions. My soul has found immeasurable solace and wisdom in the evangelical musings of Dallas Willard, and I am increasingly drawn to such social justice projects as Habitat for Humanity. Again, all of the traditions have enriched me.

This is a lesson I'm increasingly convinced God has been at pains to teach me. My roots are Presbyterian (three generations of ordained pastors!). Most of my teachers in graduate school were Roman Catholics. But perhaps the most dramatic instance of an ecumenical force working on my soul occurred while I was serving a parish in Dallas. The Church next door was Church of Christ. One day their youth minister came to my office to tell me, "Our congregation has just completed a year of prayer and fasting to discern God's call for us as a community, and we've concluded that God is calling us to pursue Christian unity." I doubt there are words adequate to

¹ As quoted in Kurtz & Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p. 5.

express the incredulity I felt. I simply didn't believe him, and so – while I was courteous – as soon as the conversation was over I ignored what he had to say. As I did the next two or three times members of their church entreated me to enter into conversation with them. But finally I realized they were serious, and so we began an experiment. I preached in their Church. Their pastor (a wonderful and holy man) preached in ours. We had a joint Thanksgiving Day worship service. Our congregations began to become true and fast friends. And then one day their pastor shared with me that one of his favorite authors is the great evangelical Anglican John Stott (author of numerous books including *Basic Christianity*). My friend wondered aloud, “Do you think we might be able to get Stott to come address our congregations together?” I was dubious but figured it couldn't hurt to issue an invitation, so we did. Imagine our surprise and delight when this famous English preacher and thinker accepted our invitation!

After he finished delivering to our joint congregations one of the most wonderful sermons I've ever heard on the meaning of the Church, as we were drinking tea I asked him, “Dr. Stott, what impelled you to accept our invitation?” He said simply, “When I received an invitation from an Episcopal parish and a Church of Christ congregation to address a joint gathering of their communities, I thought to myself, I must accept this invitation. ***This is the Church.***”

I am especially delighted to be invited to address my sisters and brothers in the Mar Thoma Church. It gives me great joy that we are in full communion, one with another, and I rejoice that we are “one Body” (Ephesians 4). As members of the same body, the body of Christ, we are all on the same journey, the journey into the mind of God with Christ as our teacher and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let's turn now to that journey.

THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul famously writes, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (1st Cor. 13.12)

Then we will see face to face. When the Kingdom is realized, when Christ is all in all, then we will truly see each other as we truly are. Then we will truly love each other as we truly are.

Have you ever noticed how, even with identical twins, if they're beyond a certain age you ***can*** tell them apart? History, attitude, character – all of these come together to mark each of faces, and our faces mark each of us radically unique and distinctive individuals. We acknowledge and embrace another person's reality and identity by looking her squarely in the eye, by taking in the details of her face, by coming to ***know*** her.

In a less well-known passage, from his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul observes that coming to be able to see God face to face is at the very heart of the Christian journey. This is the journey that assumes, fosters, and nourishes our transformation. Listen to what Paul writes:

“[W]hen one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being ***transformed*** into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:16-18)

We are all of us – you and I – being transformed into the **IMAGE** of the Lord by seeing the **GLORY** of the Lord, even though we only see that glory as though reflected in a mirror. But the more closely we gaze, the more we see God’s face, and the more we see God’s face, the more we see God reflected in our own faces and in the faces of those around us. This is the Christian journey, to come to see God, to come to know God truly, and by knowing God truly to know ourselves and each other in God’s light and in God’s image. The connective thread is love, Christian love, the very love of Christ himself flowing through our arteries and veins.

I just read to you 1st Cor. 13:12 – “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” Listen now to the very next verse, 1st Cor. 13:13 – “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and *the greatest of these is love.*”

1st Corinthians 13 is, of course, the great chapter on love. I don’t know if this is true in the Mar Thoma Church, but in the Episcopal Church 1st Corinthians 13 is read at virtually every wedding. The problem is, Paul’s not talking only or even primarily about romantic love, the love between a man and a woman, the love between *lovers*. Paul’s talking about the love between fellow Christians, sisters and brothers in Christ, fellow members of the body, fellow members of the same church.

“Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

When this love manifests itself between two people – regardless of their age, their sex, or their position in society – what do you have? You have friends, true friends.

ABIDE IN MY LOVE THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY AS THE JOURNEY INTO FRIENDSHIP

The older I get the more I see Christianity as being about friendship – friendship with God in Christ and, in that friendship, friendship with each other. And nobody describes this friendship better than . . . Jesus! Listen to John 15:9-17:

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

What does it mean to be the friend of Jesus? I’m going to take a few minutes to really parse this passage.

⁹*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.* ¹⁰*If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.*

Abide in my love! Dwell in my love! Make my love your all in all. As I dwell in you, so shall you dwell in me! We all know the famous passage from John which in the King James version was translated, “In my Father’s house there are many mansions.” (John 14:2) The word there translated as “mansion” is the noun form of the verb that is here translated as “abide”. What does it mean to abide? To dwell, to make some place your permanent place of residence. For you and me as Christians this is the still point in the ongoing journey that is the Christian life, the center from which everything else flows.

And how do we do this? By keeping his commandments. But what are his commandments? Much more than just rules – much more. This is the thing I love about the image of “dwelling”. It’s much more than just keeping the rules and doing the right things. It’s a matter of constantly being in God’s presence, of being constantly aware of God’s presence, of being in active relationship with God. To my mind, this is the God consciousness that Bishop Theodosius so eloquently describes.

Jesus says all of these things to us for a reason. Why? ***“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” (John 15:11)***

The Christian life is to be an inherently joyful life, the Christian journey an inherently joyful journey. It is God’s will that we be joyful! But let’s be clear: joy is more than just being happy. If I want a new car, and I get it, I’m happy – for a while. But cars wear out. Joy comes from the deep-seated sense of having come into the presence of God, of finding oneself firmly rooted in the divine mystery, of knowing that one is loved, totally and completely, as one is, as one was created to be.

This joy is rooted in more than just being aware of the presence of God – it’s rooted in being aware of the presence of God ***in each other***. This matters so very, very much. In his first letter, John puts it very, very simply:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. **THOSE WHO SAY, ‘I LOVE GOD’, AND HATE THEIR BROTHERS OR SISTERS, ARE LIARS; FOR THOSE WHO DO NOT LOVE A BROTHER OR SISTER WHOM THEY HAVE SEEN, CANNOT LOVE GOD WHOM THEY HAVE NOT SEEN.** 21The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1st John 4:16, 20-21)

What does Christian love look like? The commandment to love one another was scarcely new with Jesus, and it’s scarcely unique to Christianity. What makes Jesus’ example different is that ***he*** so perfectly models this love. (cf., John 1:14) “Love one another ***as I have loved you!***” In Jesus God shows us what God’s love looks like! And what does that love look like?

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you slaves any longer, because the slave does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. (John 15:13-15)

To grasp the full significance of this passage we have to understand something about ancient Rome. Fully a third of the people in the Roman Empire were slaves. A third! It was

simply an accepted reality, a necessity to the economy. The Roman Empire would never have survived without the institution of slavery. A horrible reality, but for all of that nonetheless true.

In many versions of the Bible this passage is softened by translating the Greek word “**doulos**” as servant. But the word doesn’t mean “servant”. A servant was a “**diakonos**” – the word from which we get our word “deacon”. A servant was somebody hired for a wage. He could quit if he wanted to.

A slave can’t quit. A slave is property. In ancient Rome if you killed one of your slaves you weren’t guilty of murder. You were guilty of imprudence for you had destroyed a valuable piece of property. Nothing more.

Now notice what Jesus says. “I do not call you slaves any more.” The disciples are sitting with the very Son of God Himself, God become incarnate in human form! If God wants to call us slaves we don’t really have much room to protest. After all, God did create us! We are God’s!

But what does the Son of God say? “I no longer call you slaves but *friends!*” Friends! Imagine what it must have been like to sit in that upper room that night and hear these extraordinary words! These were not members of the upper class! These were not rulers or wealthy people! These were common folk – fishermen, tax collectors, day-laborers. And the very Son of God himself is elevating them up to his level by making them his friends!

You and I are the friends of God! Friends of God! Why?

Listen to what comes next:

“You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”
(John 15:16-17)

Sisters and brothers, we did not choose Jesus. He chose us, you and me, and he still chooses us so that we might bear fruit, fruit that will last. The invitation he extends to us – to be friends with him – *he expects us to extend to others*. There’s a price to being friends with Jesus. If we’re going to be friends with Jesus, we have to agree to be friends with his friends, and so far as I can discern he extends his invitation to everybody. When all is said and done, Jesus is really not very discriminating! He appears to love everybody!

And here’s the rub – he expects us to do the same.

This is the fruit that lasts: so extending the invitation to the kingdom that the kingdom grows and grows and grows because more and more people know just how much God loves them.

Going Into the Future Together

This brings me to the last passage I want to scrutinize with you today. As were all the earliest disciples, so was Peter was a devout Jew, and like all devout Jews, Peter did his best to eat kosher, that is, Peter abided by the dietary laws of the Old Testament. So imagine Peter’s surprise in Acts 10 when he realizes he is hungry, suddenly falls into a trance and sees a sheet lowered from heaven with all kinds of unclean animals in it and hears the words, “**Get up, Peter; kill and eat.**” Peter’s response? “**By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean!**” Peter’s dilemma is that Leviticus 11 prohibits his eating the animals in that sheet. But then notice the words he hears: “*What God has made clean, you must*

not call profane.” This happens to Peter three times! (I love this about Peter – it gives me hope for myself! Peter always has to told things three times before he gets it!)

What’s happening here? God himself is telling Peter, “The dietary laws of the Old Testament no longer matter to you. I have made these animals clean. You may eat them.” But God has done far more than just change the dietary laws of the Old Testament, for notice what happens next. As soon as the vision is completed men sent to Peter by Cornelius, a Gentile, appear to request that Peter accompany them to Cornelius’ house, for Cornelius has had a vision commanding him to send for Peter! Now Cornelius was a Roman centurion, a gentile! As a good Jew, as surely as Peter was commanded to not eat certain foods he was commanded to neither associate with nor visit a Gentile, but Cornelius has invited his relatives and close friends to be with him when he meets Peter. What does Peter say? “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; ***but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.*** So when I was sent for, I came without objection.” (Acts 10:28-19)

Peter has gotten the message. The Jews who have known Jesus had to come to understand that in his death and resurrection all people have been declared clean because Jesus died for all people! You see, in the earliest church the question was, do I have to first become a Jew in order to become a Christian? And the answer revealed to Peter and to Paul was, no, you do not have to become a Jew first. Peter and Paul came to understand that many of the old ways which they had thought essential to their faith simply were not. And it was with this message that they began their incredible journeys all over the Roman Empire declaring the Good News that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!

Many of the things that we think are essential simply are not. Coming out of the great Reformation of the 16th century we Anglicans drew a sharp distinction between matters essential and adiaphora. Adiaphora is simply a Greek word for “matters indifferent” – things that in the grand scheme of things just don’t matter that much. On the essentials – the things which mark the essence of what it means to be a Christian – we Anglicans and we Episcopalians will not compromise. But on matters indifferent we’re more than willing to trust and follow local custom.

What are our essentials as Anglicans? There are four that together comprise what we call the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral:

1. The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as "containing all things necessary to salvation," and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.
2. The Apostles' Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.
3. The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself - Baptism and the Supper of the Lord - ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.
4. The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.

In other words, we Anglicans will compromise on just about anything except:

- 1) The centrality of the Bible as containing the things necessary to salvation
- 2) The Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed
- 3) The Lord’s Supper and Baptism
- 4) The centrality of Bishops

I never will forget Professor Martin Marty at The University of Chicago reminding us that in 19th century America Italian Americans were much more likely to actively attend the Roman Catholic Church than were their cousins who remained in Italy. As strangers in a strange land, first and second generation Italian Americans discovered that church played a profoundly important role in their lives by giving them a sense of home, of family, of belonging. But as you would expect, successive generations remembered less and less of the old country and were more and more assimilated to their new culture. Insofar as the culture they were entering – American culture – was a good and healthy culture, being assimilated as Americans was a good thing. With this process the church may not have played as large a social role as it once had, but the process creates space for the church to play a new role in the lives of the children and grandchildren of immigrants. Perhaps successive generations are freed to focus more on what is essential in their tradition. The Apostle Paul reminds us that “in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:26-28)

There was absolutely nothing wrong with Italian Americans attending the Roman Catholic Church because it provided them with community, a common heritage, and a sense of belonging. It made all the sense in the world. But as successive generations became less and less Italian and more and more simply American, I surmise that they had greater opportunity to attend Church for the simple reason that here they meet God in Christ and here they know their sisters and brothers in Christ, regardless of national origin.

I do not know what the matters essential in the Mar Thoma tradition are, but I know the Spirit has gifted you with certain marks which are uniquely yours as members of your ancient and wonderful church, and I know that the rest of us Christians hope you’ll continue to share your tradition and your gifts with us. As time marches on and Kerala becomes more and more a thing in your past, it is the gifts and marks of your tradition that will come to matter more and more. Embrace them fully – and share them generously.

Few things delight me more than that the local Mar Thoma congregation in Austin worships in the chapel at Seminary of the Southwest. Few things delight me more than that our two churches are in full communion with each other. I cherish our already deep but still developing friendship. All of us in this church are Christians. My simple hope is that as time passes you will embrace the essentials of your tradition ever more resolutely, share them ever more generously, so that together we can rejoice in declaring that there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

In conclusion, and in the power of the Spirit I simply want to say, thank you. Thank you for bringing your wonderful culture and your wonderful Christian tradition and Church to the shores of this continent. Thank you for sharing your remarkable energy and intelligence and creativity. But above all, thank you for being my friends in Christ.