

Sermon, Seating of a Bishop Diocesan  
The Rt. Rev. Greg Rickel  
3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 16, 2007  
St. Mark's Cathedral, Seattle, WA

First of all, I greet all our brothers and sisters who have come to be with us today from the various faith traditions, from the community at large and from many far away places.

There are multitudes here from so many parts of the Rickels' lives and the life of this diocese. We are so grateful for you, making your way to be present yesterday and today.

I thank our Dean Robert, the staff and people of this cathedral. For the multitude of leaders in this diocese who worked to make this day a reality, and for all Episcopalians in this diocese who form the foundation for everything we do, I give thanks.

Today we celebrate many things; for one thing, I cannot tell you how good it is to finally sit down! But more than that, we celebrate who we are as a people of faith. We come together on a day dedicated to Ninian, a bishop, Bishop of Galloway to be exact, who long ago after a mentorship with Martin of Tours, set out with great expectations. He, along with Patrick, is one of the links of continuity with the ancient Roman British Church and the developing Celtic Christianity of Ireland and Scotland.

He seems, from what we know, to have been a bishop steeped in prayer with a commitment to the monastic life, but also very active in the surrounding land, evangelizing and winning over many as followers of Christ. Legend has it that he trained many missionaries, including the one that eventually converted St. Columba.

In the lives of our saints, we often hear the positive, the good, the outstanding, the absolutely stunning and unbelievable.

We rarely hear of the difference between what they had dreamed of and what actually occurred, the difference between the beginning expectations and the real result. It could be we need their stories to be this way, a bit one-sided.

Expectations. These are tricky, tricky things.

Yogi Berra said of expectations, "You got to be careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there."

Mark Twain said that climate is what we expect, weather is what we get.

And Charlotte Bronte said, "Life is so constructed that an event does not, cannot, will not match the expectation." It is her quote this sermon is most in touch with and most directed toward.

Some years ago, even before our son was born, Marti and I were enjoying dinner at a BBQ joint in Austin called the Green Mesquite. In the next booth was another family of three, with a little girl of about 3 to 4 years. The mother in this trio was obviously pregnant and soon to be delivering.

The little girl bounced up and down and was discussing the fact that she wanted her mother to have a boy. She kept saying, "I want a brother, I want a brother, I want a brother!" over and over.

Her mother was trying anything to get her off this chant but she just kept on. Her mother finally persisted and then asked her this question.

"Sarah, I want you to think of all the little boys in your school, which one would you most want your brother to be like?"

By now, we were trying to act uninterested but we waited with bated breath, even knowing we did not have a clue about her school or anything else about her. After this question, the bouncing stopped, there was a long protracted silence and everything in the restaurant seemed to get quiet waiting for her answer, as if like the old E.F. Hutton commercial. She finally in a rather timid voice said, "I think I want a sister!"

It was a striking example of the expectations we have when we enter new realities in life, the dream of relationship rather than the reality. Clergy will know it well as the couple that presents themselves to you, and you discover rather quickly a couple is in love with the wedding more than the marriage.

No one should be faulted here; I think it is built into us as humans to glorify the new. It is most likely a very good thing. Were we to know the whole story before setting out, we probably never would.

Expectations. These are tricky, tricky things.

I was reminded recently by Ralph Carskadden that 40 years ago this month—in fact, 40 years ago tomorrow—the Seattle Center, in particular Key Arena, was filled with Episcopalians from all over this country as they gathered for the 1967 General Convention.

Archbishop Michael Ramsey was present, and women were not (at least not as deputies; that had not changed). There were certainly no women priests, and another man from Texas, Presiding Bishop John Hines, called the church to a radical look and action on poverty and racism. As the amazing circle of life goes, John Hines' son, Chris, is here today, a member of St. James', Austin, a colleague and friend.

It is good to look at that gathering 40 years ago for its daring, for its promise and for the comparison that makes us know that though we have come so far, we have a long way to go.

There were great expectations during and after that General Convention, and many naysayers as well. There were great expectations, and what it all accomplished is debated even to this day.

Expectations. These are tricky things.

The church is never at rest, although it seems we always desire for it to be.

We have many challenges before us. In just a few short days, Nedi and I, and the other bishops here and in our church, will gather in New Orleans with heavy questions to consider.

It has rarely been different, even though our generation always seems to see it as bleaker than the last. I guess every generation might be guilty of that.

One of my dearest colleagues from Austin, Larry Covington, who is also with us today, wrote to me Friday and said, “You are called to lead God’s good folk in a time of confusion, anger, hostility, disappointment and injustice. So, truth to be told, a time no different than any other in the history of this wonderful and strange vehicle we call the church.”

In the recent document sent out by the House of Bishops for our contemplation of these days and these issues entitled “Communion Matters,” the third Bishop of Olympia, Stephen Bayne, was quoted. He once observed that the church often has been torn apart by honest convictions, held by conscientious persons aligned against each other, certain that “what each sees to be right must be maintained inviolate. And how often afterwards, when we look back on that history, we see how wide of the mark both sides were... But we do not come to this wisdom by simply abdicating our convictions. Rather we are led to it by the Lord who gently guides and teaches us as we are quiet and prepared to be taught, and prepared to keep the [fellowship] inviolate,” leaving room at the table for those on both sides.

There are many Expectations for this meeting. These are tricky things.

I could not help but think this week as I watched Bishop Warner so eloquently sum up his love for this church, this diocese and his staff of that story of the retiring bishop who leaves to his successor three envelopes on the desk. He tells the new bishop, “Keep these envelopes and whenever you encounter a crisis open one.”

And so the transition occurs and sure enough the first crisis comes and the new bishop opens the first envelope and it reads, “Blame it on being new.” The new bishop does just that and all again settles, but sure enough a new crisis emerges and so the new bishop pulls out his second envelope his predecessor had left him, and it reads, “Blame me.” The new bishop does, and all is well. But sure enough a new crisis arises and the new bishop pulls out the third and final envelope, he opens it up and it reads, “Prepare three envelopes.”

I don’t know if Bishop Warner has left the three envelopes but he has left many good things, many foundations for which I am grateful and blessed, as are we all. I thank him, for you, and I think we should honor him now.

I have a list of people and things I give thanks for every day. Since May 12, a name has been on it for which I am so grateful. I am so glad to be on this journey with a companion and colleague, Bishop Nedi Rivera.

Expectations: we all have them today; so do I. But they are tricky things. I do not mean to suggest for a minute we should not have them. In fact, I think we must have them, but that saying I think is so true, whatever they are, they will never match true life, they might just be much better.

In my time between St. James' and this new office, I read books about the Pacific Northwest, our new home, trying to learn as much as I could. I read history, like *Skid Road* by Murray Morgan and collections of essays. I read *The Good Rain: Across Time and Terrain in the Pacific Northwest* by Timothy Egan.

In that book, Egan tells the story of Seattle and especially the feud and competition between Doc Maynard and Arthur Denny. The city was split with one portion being developed and run by Maynard and the other by Denny. Maynard was a bit of a free spirit to say the least; just about anything would go there. Denny was a bit more staid. Egan writes:

“Within a few years, Maynard’s section of Seattle was wide open, a lumberjack’s version of an eternal lost weekend. Denny’s section was proper, picket-fenced. On Maynard’s plat was the house of Madame Damnable, a two-story, Southern-style mansion and bordello that became one of the most popular destinations north of San Francisco, and the seat of local justice. On Denny’s plat was built an Episcopal Church. While the bordello thrived, the church folded for lack of attendance. Seattle,” Egan writes, “still ranks at the bottom of all American cities in number and percentage of churchgoers.”

Some things have changed and some have not. We have many expectations; these are tricky things.

We need them. I have them; you do, too, but they are to be handled with care.

Like little Sarah bouncing up and down in the booth next to us, with expectations for which reality has little interaction, we need challenge on those at times from the gentle voice that helps us see our dream another way. And for all of us, just as for Sarah, the bouncing does eventually stop; the time comes when we are faced with the marriage and not simply the high of the wedding.

Here are things I think about in this new relationship when the bouncing stops for me, and the silent introspection begins:

I am sure of a few things in those more level moments. I am sure we will often disagree. I am sure we will see things differently at times. I am sure, of all the challenges we know are before us, there are many more for which we have not a clue.

Here are things I'd like to believe about myself, things for which I am sure I will be deemed fallen many times but for which I would like to exude:

The first are the 10 Rules for Respect which have been printed and will be in many places. These are a written guide from another pastor in another denomination, which I loved and adapted. I hope to live by them and to challenge you around them, as you do me.

We need to be healthy models of Christian speech and action to each other and the world.

I hope to be present as I can, to work hard, to visit you, and mostly, whenever possible, to listen more than I talk. I hope to model before you a person who cares for himself and his family.

As much as you may not like hearing this, this new vocation and call for me is not the most important thing in my life. It is very important, I love it and want to work at it long and hard, but it is not the most important thing. I owe it to you to hear that from me. I hope you all, clergy and laity alike, will do the same for yourselves. I hope the clergy will model it for their people, and that the people will allow them, encourage them and insist on them taking care of themselves. I hope to be the pastor to the clergy in every way that I can. I hope to be a learning person, open to learning always.

We have great expectations and yet, as we are so often reminded, we live in the "None Zone." We have many challenges and expectations. We need them; let's learn from them, for all of us in a sense are like Sarah, bouncing in the seat, chanting our expectations, not always knowing what we are asking for, but surely the day will come when the bouncing will stop and we will have that long silence in which we can discern and learn, and refine our next steps. This will be our life, too—bouncing, dancing, silence, introspection, challenge.

Expectations. These are tricky things.

We need them, they demand our attention, we should learn from them, but they are not our God.

As I sat at home pounding away on my computer, forming this sermon and thinking about today, my son, Austin, came into the room. He said, "Dad, you really need to come out here on this deck and watch the sunset; it is really beautiful."

I am not always wise about such moments, but this time grace prevailed and I did stop, and he and I gazed on this new paradise in which we live, at a sky that was painted by God in the most amazing colors—colors I am not sure ever existed and may never again.

And I thought of another point in Egan's book when he says, with all due respect to my Texas friends, "What is important about Seattle, and the Northwest, they say, is not glass and steel and money—those are the elements of Texas—but air and light and water."

This moment, that sunset, are rare and amazing and totally unexpected.

I pray that we will not fear boldly holding our expectations; that we will be gentle with each other as we do; that we will listen to the voices who call us to look at the sunsets, the moments we don't expect, for those are waiting for us, you and I, and it will be sheer joy to find together all that God has in store for us on our horizon.

You have been and will be in my prayers, and I thank you for yours. I look forward to our life together.