

The Episcopal Diocese of Texas
Diocesan Council
February 11, 2011
John 20: 19-23

We have a large task in front of us tonight. Each year Diocesan Council has a gravitas to it as we gather to consider our common life. At Council we reflect on all the work that has been done in God's name over the past year, and we consider future work to which we are called. We also have the hard stone of the Word of the Lord which has been read tonight. Anytime we read God's word we are asked to hone the edge of faith against it, allowing God to make us more useful tools for the work of the kingdom. These two components are present each year at Diocesan Council.

However, tonight we have added a third focus to our work. We are here to give thanks to God for the long and fruitful ministry of our dear friend and Bishop, Rayford High, and to give thanks to God for his amazing wife, Pat. I understand that a special sub-committee will give an update at council tomorrow reporting on the canonization process for Pat. We are striving to have her declared a saint simply for living with Rayford this long.

These are all big things. And I am, as many of you are, well acquainted with talking about big things with Rayford. The dilemma for me, however, is that when Rayford and I talk about big things, we rarely talk about them *here*. Usually we are on a porch of an evening, looking over a friend's ranch with a good glass of scotch and a fine cigar. Otherwise we are by a fire on a cold morning before sunrise with a hot cup of coffee. And we are definitely not dressed like this.

So I need something. I'm just not feeling it yet. I need something different to get the mojo going. Wait. I wonder if this will help. (*change into camo stoles*)

Ah, now we're talking. This is better.

The first thing I want to say is that *Rayford is not dead*. So I suggest we resist the temptation to talk about him as if he is not in the room, or as if he was a groom at a wedding with a bunch of half intoxicated buddies remembering when you used to do really cool stuff. No, Rayford is alive and well, and as far as I know, is not going away entirely. In fact, when Bishop Doyle announced what we would normally call Rayford's retirement at clergy conference, he explained that it's not even called retirement. It's called a resignation. Apparently being a bishop requires you to die on the job. And Rayford is not dead.

Instead, we have the high pleasure of being able to tell you how much we love you, how much we appreciate you, and laugh about the silly things that make you so YOU, while you are right here in the room with us. And we are also here to say what we have learned from you, and that list, my friend is long.

Rayford, I want to thank you.

I want to thank you for being incredibly gracious to me as someone who is a successor to you at St. Paul's. Every rector knows that the relationship with previous rectors can be tricky, if not down-right unpleasant. Consecrate that predecessor a bishop and, well, it could have been ugly. But you have been gracious beyond measure. It's an odd but beautiful thing to get a call from one of your bishops asking permission to help with a wedding or funeral. For those of you who don't know, my permission was not required. But Rayford

has always sought it anyway, and that gives us the opportunity to practice our manners and the gentle dance of permission-giving.

I also want to say thank you on behalf of every child you baptized or prepared for confirmation, every person you led to Christ, every young couple you offered premarital counseling, every family for whom you offered an ear, and to every sinner you granted forgiveness.

I thank you on behalf of every teenager you offered a strong shoulder during that frightening time when they discover, which they all inevitably do, that their parents are actually brain damaged.

I want to thank you for every person you visited in the hospital, every heart-broken person you loved, every unemployed, homeless and hopeless person you offered a hand.

I want to thank you for every person you helped prepare for their own resurrection, every grieving family member who didn't quite see that death as resurrection just yet.

I want to say thank you on behalf of every stuck in the mud old Episcopalian who told you how great your predecessor was, and every recalcitrant sheep you led back into the fold.

I want to thank you for the countless hours you spent planning and dreaming about ministry and church and what God has in mind, every sermon you wrote, inspiring a certain level of anxiety in the congregation, wondering if they would avoid the fish hook.

I want to thank you for every vestry meeting you went to, every school event you attended, every time you put on a grass skirt and a coconut bra to raise money, and every community organization you tried to help.

I want to thank you for turning a blind eye from time to time, and for absorbing the blows of angry, frightened and injured people without striking back.

I want to thank you for your long view of Christian ministry. I thank you for all the clergy and vestry members and active Episcopalians you helped create for someone else's church by your commitment to Campus Ministry.

I want to thank you for every young person in whom you planted a seed, that grew into a nagging hunger and curiosity, blossoming into a call, growing into the vocation of Holy Orders, who are now also faithful servants of God and the church.

And perhaps most of all, I want to thank you for every hand in which you placed the body of Christ. I have had the great pleasure over the past six and a half years of celebrating the Eucharist at the same altar you did for eighteen. The Missal is old and tattered. I have taken it home and repaired it several times, mending the pages back together as best I can. And each page of the Eucharistic Prayer is weathered and brown. These stains are from the countless fingers and thumbs from dozens of priests who have, over the years, faithfully presided at that table, gently thumbing those pages. I know that much of that color came from your hands.

I also want to thank Pat, and Rayford B., Allison and Leslie. Tonight you are all in the room with a large number of people who actually know what it was like to live in the house of a clergy person. It has long been said that clergy are the only people left in America who are allowed to practice bigamy, and in a strange way, it is frighteningly true. The church often acts like a bride, and she will not be denied. Often that is carried on the backs of a clergy person's family. Now we all know Rayford well enough to know that he loves his family beyond measure, and we know that life in a priest's house is not a terrible thing. But we acknowledge publically tonight that it is often a heavy thing, and always a costly thing and we thank you for your faithfulness in hefting the weight and paying the fare.

Rayford, I hope you are really uncomfortable right now. I hope with each statement of gratitude you are regretting your decision to ask me to preach. I hope you are wondering when I will move away from you and turn our attention to Jesus. And that we must do. We must do it, because it is Jesus you have served, it is Jesus you have taught, it is Jesus to whom you have given your life. So it is to Jesus that we now turn.

As we catch up with Jesus' disciples in the Gospel lesson from John assigned for tonight they are hiding behind closed doors, huddled in fear. Everything they had believed had come to a screeching halt. Jesus was dead, and they feared the same fate. As they sat stunned, trying to absorb the harrowing chain of events Jesus came and stood among them, granted them peace, sent them out, and he breathed on them, giving them the Holy Spirit. We are all deeply familiar with this story. Most of us have massaged this text into our own spiritual life, allowing each movement to find that same movement within us and touch us. We all know the ebb and flow from huddling fear to fearless love as the disciples knew Jesus, received Jesus and were sent by Jesus into the world.

That is where my attention lands tonight. Sent.

Actually, it's a little bit different. As I think about this story and think about Rayford, I hear the imperative form. I hear the word "GO".

Apparently it was not enough for Jesus' disciples to know him. Jesus did not come for them to be able to say "I knew Jesus". He did not come into their lives to give them warm feelings about God's love so they could sit back each day and feel complete. And it is frighteningly clear that he did not come into the world to drive his followers into a lock room, huddled in fear. No, apparently he came into the world to make disciples, people who do what Jesus did, and who love what Jesus loved. He came into the world, and he came into that locked room, to send them out to wrestle with the realities of sin and forgiveness, and to share God's love with the world.

Go, Jesus said to them, GO.

As we have gathered stories about Rayford over the last several months the abiding theme is that Rayford would Go. He would go wherever the Spirit led him. He would go to hospitals, jails, gun clubs, country clubs and homeless shelters. He would go dine on fine china or drink out of plastic cup. Whether Lambeth Palace or a friend's back yard, it was all the same to him. He would climb over a fence in the dark, risking gun shot or arrest to check on a parishioner who wouldn't answer the phone.

He would go to funerals, shed his camouflage coveralls and don his vestments and stand at a graveside and love someone into heaven.

He would go with the drivers to deliver meals on wheels.

In fact, of all the pictures I have seen of Rayford at St. Paul's I have never seen a picture of him sitting at a desk. No some of you may think this is because Rayford didn't spend a lot of time in deep contemplation of the great theologians of our tradition. But I beg to differ. I think Rayford is the consummate theologian, because when in doubt, Rayford would go.

Recently I had the occasion for a long visit with Father Patrick Miller as we sat in a hospital waiting room together. As we are prone to do in these periods of waiting, we talked about our families and other things that matter to us. And, because of where we were standing, we talked about the nature of hospital ministry. Patrick told me then that this was the most important thing he learned from Rayford. Go. You just go. No "I'll check on you sometime next week". When they need you, You just Go.

This is one of the primary things we have all learned from you, Rayford. Go. Even if it's inconvenient, even if it's scary, even if you don't like the person you are going to see, Go anyway. Tonight we thank you for teaching us, through your own words and actions, to Go.

So Rayford, tonight, we say to you, Go. Go into your resignation. Go spend some time with Pat. You all just experienced a really scary close call, so Go absorb that, absorb each other, love each other. Go spend some time with your kids and with your grandkids. Go to the river, sit on the boat, listen to the slap of the water on the hull and feel the deep rhythm of God's good earth. Go into the dove field, the deer blind, and the rice fields. Go to Waco when you can. I'll have a good glass of scotch and a cigar waiting for you.

But then go see your Bishop. For God is not done with you yet. God is just planting a new seed that will grow into a nagging hunger and curiosity, and blossom into a new sense of call. Remember, you don't get to retire. You have to die on the job.

And to all of you who are here tonight, I invite you to do what Rayford has modeled for us. GO. We are far too prone to lock the doors of our hearts and our churches for fear of all those things outside that threaten us and challenge us and require us to trust God. But you have seen Jesus, just as the disciples did. Jesus has breathed on you as God did over the face of the deep, as God breathed the breath of life into first Man and Woman, and as Jesus did on his disciples. Receive the gift of the spirit that Jesus gave his disciples so long ago. Feel the ebb and flow from huddling fear to fearless love as you know Jesus, receive Jesus and are sent by Jesus into the world.

GO. Learn from this good Bishop.

Obey this Bishop. GO.