

What image or story from the Bible enlivens and enriches your own faith? What is the Good News found within this story that we are called to share with the world?

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The parable of the sower (Mark 4: 1-20) has become a metaphor for me during our discernment together. I remember it as I see the ears of corn in your Diocesan seal, and as I read about farmers in your profile. The parable is, for me, an image of our mutual discernment: God sows the seed; the seed depends on the soil; some seed grows; and there is always a harvest. God is working with us and through us to produce fruits of the kingdom. The question is: are we called to be in ministry with one another?

Parables often include some humor or overstatement which can break our anxiety and help us to see in a new way. In the parable of the sower, Jesus' message feels both absurd and urgent. For example, here he is teaching about sowing seeds in the middle of a lake. It seems he couldn't wait to share this story! More than that, the sower he describes seems to have no plan, no strategy for growth. We might wonder if Jesus knows what he's talking about. Jesus says, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" I find myself leaning in, hanging on his every word. Maybe this is a story about seeds, or soil, or the grain. Maybe this is a story of the kingdom of God. Maybe this is a story about us.

The parable of the sower is a story of hope. By God's grace, our lives are good soil that produce fruit for the kingdom of God. There is no doubt there are times when life feels thorny or when I feel scorched; there are even times when life feels like a desert. Yet, the parable opens our imaginations to sacred possibilities: God's faithfulness is poured into our lives even as we do not perceive it. As the parable draws to an end, I imagine the sower keeps spreading seed, no matter what happens. The reckless sowing of seed is an image of the unexpected ways and opportunities for God's redemptive activity to happen.

The stories of West Missouri's faithfulness attest to the grace found in the parable of the sower. From the beginning, this Diocese has wildly sown the seed of the Gospel. Despite the barriers of racism, rural settings, and internal divisions, this Diocese committed itself to the Gospel and continues to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ in every community. Now, we see the fruit of your faithfulness: food pantries, racial reconciliation retreats, and PrideFest, these are the seeds of the Gospel being spread generously across West Missouri. Your faithfulness is producing an incredible harvest; and, there is more to come!

If you elect me as your next Bishop, we will join in these ministries and others. We will invigorate Hispanic ministry in Southwest Missouri. We will pursue reconciliation and diversity in our Diocese. We will keep nourishing the people of West Missouri, both their bodies and souls. We will sow seeds of the Gospel together; we will grow, together, in the mercy and grace of God. The parable of the sower is for us, for now, right here in the middle of the heartland.

Why do you think there are declining numbers in the Episcopal Church and what is your vision for supporting Episcopal communities to find new vitality? What are some examples of how you have addressed this in other settings?

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Decline, while scary, is a natural part of the cycle of life. We can attribute our decline to many factors including: economics, cultural values, and fear of change. These are real parts of our lives that invite us to be anxious. Christ's life, death, and resurrection is God's response to the reality of decline in our lives. His life confronts human decline in every way: he feeds the hungry, heals the sick, and raises the dead to new life. Indeed, His resurrection is the power of God's love over death, over the decline we fear the most. Through the ministry of Christ, we are transformed by God's mercy and raised to new life. By God's grace and mercy, decline is never the end of our stories.

Discernment helps us discover where God is acting in our midst. This process is an invitation and opportunity to wonder how God is calling us into the future. There is no one way or right way to perceive future ministry. Instead, Christ invites us to face the realities of our lives with confidence and faith in His resurrection.

The Cathedral where I serve as Dean was built by Bishop Pierce in 1885 as "*a house of prayer for all people.*" When I arrived, two areas of decline were evident: a historic property overwhelmed by deferred maintenance and a lack of mission clarity. The urgent needs of our property meant we quickly embarked on a Master Plan process: we evaluated our property and created a vision for its future use. To discern mission and ministry, we convened a group of leaders from within the Cathedral and the wider community of Little Rock. We gathered a vast array of data and information: congregational surveys, feedback from faith and civic leaders, and meetings with Diocesan leaders; then, we used this information to influence our mission. This process led us to a wide variety of ministries. Our parishioners donated furniture and cleaned a house on our property making space for an Afghan refugee family. Through federal and city grants, we have remodeled an empty building to expand our Early Childhood program. Our partnership with the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance led to a grant that turned an empty lot on our property into a community garden. We are growing food, filling empty buildings with people, meeting our neighbors, and rebuilding our community. Once we met Christ among our neighbors, we found compelling and life giving ministry all around us.

At Trinity Episcopal Church in New Orleans, we wondered how we could serve our young families. There was a small group that met regularly for Bible study and a yearly retreat. There were also parents looking for resources to enrich their children's spiritual lives. I partnered with our Children's minister to form "*Parents and Church Together.*" The goal was to empower parents as spiritual leaders in their homes. Together we explored ways of creating a family culture, practiced ways of listening, and developed disciplines for our faith. This community

quickly became a place where we built confidence in our community while equipping parents for the future.

We can follow these processes and others in the Diocese of West Missouri. Indeed, you have already started. Your discernment has identified four missional pillars: proclaiming the Good News, forming disciples, serving others, and striving for justice. Imagine what might be next: young people empowered to lead, restored mission and ministry, and communities united in genuine love for one another and their neighbors. These are just a few examples of all God is doing in your midst. Be assured: God is not done with West Missouri.

The Diocese of West Missouri is full of diversity from our politics to our geographic setting, from our congregations' sizes and financial resources to the people who compose those communities. How will you engage in relationship-building as you work across these differences and get to know the diocese?

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I find myself drawing close to Christ in every person I meet through the journey of life. This is true of friends and strangers alike. I remember a time when I sat across from an unsheltered man for breakfast. We were both attending a Bible Study. This gentleman shared with me his need for God's forgiveness, to know that he was loved by the One who made him. And so, we prayed together, for reconciliation and to experience God's grace. When he left that morning, I knew that, as we held hands and prayed for one another, Christ was in the midst of us. I know we experience Christ's presence and leadership when we seek Him in one another.

I was elected to the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Lexington in 2017. During this time our bishop was suspended, and we discerned the need to dissolve our relationship with him. This was a very painful time. His suspension exposed more than his misbehavior; our own dysfunction and turmoil was evident. We had given him full responsibility for our decline, lack of collegiality, and disengagement. Meanwhile, there were many perceived barriers and divisions in the Diocese, including rural vs. urban, city life vs. mountain life, missions vs. parishes. We had divided ourselves from one another. Once our Bishop was suspended, our only choice was to examine our shared life, to take responsibility for our Diocese. The Standing Committee led the way.

We were motivated by love: our love for Jesus and one another. This love, God's love, empowered us to engage in hard work that leads to healing. We made relationships our priority, seeking to be as inclusive and collaborative as possible. We spent time together, traveling across the Diocese to learn about one another's communities and ministries. We, along with members of our Executive Council, held various listening sessions multiple times throughout the Diocese. Sometimes these were opportunities to reflect on our past and imagine our future; other listening sessions were devoted to creating a parish profile and Mutual Ministry Reviews. We created a series of "altar and pulpit swaps" where lay and clergy leaders would serve in one another's communities on Sunday morning. Because of these faithful, collaborative efforts, we discerned our next right steps, solidified our diocesan values for mission and ministry, and elected a new Bishop. Most of all, we renewed our community. Christ led us to one another and, by that grace, Christ drew us close to Him and His ministry.

I know that you have had a similar experience: a Title III action towards your last Bishop. As I read your profile, I find a Diocese taking responsibility for your shared life and committed to empowering collegiality and collaboration. Your faithfulness to your Diocese and to one another has renewed your commitment and mission to love God and your neighbors. I can imagine our

shared ministry: laughing at parish picnics; having hard conversations about theology, ministry, and budgets; serving together in food pantries, schools, and hospitals. Together, we will continue to empower West Missouri towards the hard, holy work of loving one another as Christ loves us.