The 57th Diocesan Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Southwest Florida

**“Aiming for Harmony: A Primer on Holy Conversation”**

Punta Gorda, FL

*Romans 12: 1-2, 14-21*

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Today, the Church remembers Vita Dutton Scudder, a late 19th / early 20th century woman who worked hard for the rights of others, especially trade workers, and immigrants. So, to commemorate this labor heroine the Church has chosen this passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans that speaks about presenting your body as a living sacrifice. In all seriousness though, as so many of us know, when you spend time working on behalf of others, especially those who cannot help themselves, we are walking in the footsteps of Christ – and that has always had a cost. Yet, a part of that cost cannot be our relationships with everyone else, and all too often it is. It is almost as if we do not know, or have forgotten any other way. We resort to violence too quickly. We turn to harmful speech to readily. And in this age of social media and the relative anonymity the internet provides, we type things that do real damage to others. We have seen all too recently that politicized violence does not solve problems, does not bring unity, does not quell misplaced ideas. In fact, it does the opposite of all of those things. Forgetting the lesson of Malchus and his ear, we are too ready to sacrifice the bodies of others, too ready to forget that our faith demands that we be willing to sacrifice first.

So, into our culture today of hateful rhetoric, agitated crowds, and seemingly irreconcilable philosophies comes this whispered word from Romans: *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all people.”* What are we to do with that? We could do what we seemingly have done of late: that is, let the words fall flat on the ground and be trodden beneath angry feet. Or we could try something else, not forgetting that we are to first present ourselves as a living sacrifice.

There is a lot of good advice in this section of Romans on how to live into this idea. You could take any one of these verses and develop a whole new spiritual discipline on each one. But I want to hone in on this eighteenth verse that I mentioned about living peaceably with all. Now, you don’t have to start this discipline in an impossible way, like, I don’t know, going out to the other party’s political rallies and trying to speak your reason onto their rhyme. I want to set you up for success not failure. No, you don’t have to do that at all. In fact, I’d suggest we already have our training grounds. Our parishes. These are our communities of love and support where we cherish one another, even those with whom we disagree. You know that right? These ought to be safe places. We act that way, right? That’s where I want to encourage you to start.

Now, the first thing to do, the first step in all of this is going to be very familiar to you: it’s prayer. Pray that you may, in so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Start every day that way. Pray that the Holy Spirit will empower you to do this. Give over whatever sense of control you are holding onto and pray for God’s love to overtake you, so that you may live peaceably with all. The second step is where the rubber starts to meet the road. Start a conversation with someone who you suspect possesses different politics than you, and make that conversation about anything but politics. Talk about your kids, your grandkids, your favorite baseball player, your favorite artist, anything but the divisive issues of the day. This gets you started on knowing one another as people, as children of God, as neighbors. If you struggle to do this, remind yourself, they kneel at the same altar as you to receive the same grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love of Christ as you do, and you stand in need of it as much as they do. Find something in common through conversation and take delight in it. When you go home, pray for this person. Ask God to bless them. Ask God to soften your hearts. And then do it all again next week.

We have lost the art of knowing people who differ from us. We have lost the ability to hear others’ stories without trying to interpose our own opinions. A bit earlier in this twelfth chapter of Romans it instructs us: “*Be devoted to on another with mutual love, showing eagerness in honoring one another.”* Practice that! And not just with people who think like you do. Get to know one another as people first, not as a voter registration card. Revel in the idea that you might actually enjoy this person’s company. Thank God for putting you in the same parish. Spend weeks, months if necessary, doing these two things: praying for one another, and getting to know one another.

Lest you think I am advising you to become like the ostrich, the third step gets a little trickier, and I think where a lot of people fail is they too quickly advance to this stage. If you don’t have the solid foundation of a God-blessed relationship, this stage is bound to break down. It just is. That’s the sharpness of the culture we’ve created. The third step is to talk about things of import, about which you may disagree, even disagree fundamentally. This cannot be done with the goal of changing someone’s mind in a five-minute conversation. We know that doesn’t work and yet, probably because of our fallen nature, we keep trying it. This is slow work. It took us a long time to get ourselves into this fix and it’s going to take a long time for us to extricate ourselves from it. Listen to what writer David Remnick recently said: “Grace is not weakness but resolve…and politics, too, depends on a willingness to coax one another toward better ground. In that work of persuasion, of politics—slow, imperfect, yet necessary—we attempt to close the distance between what we are and what we might still become.” We coax one another, we don’t yank one another. We recognize it is slow and imperfect work, and that we might not necessarily be God’s gift to it, but with God’s help, we can practice it and get better. As Christians we recognize the spiritual truth that we are sinful beings who don’t have all the answers and need the help of others in order to conform our lives to the strictures of the Gospel. As citizens of this great country we somehow forget that and think our opinions are the embodiment of political perfection. See that disconnect there? We need to work on that. Our goal according to Romans is harmony, but remember, harmony is not uniformity; harmony is found when different notes combine to form a more full, a more beautiful sound. *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all people.”*

We’ve got plenty we need to talk about, and we can’t afford not to. The cost of ignoring each other is just plain too high. But first, we have to know each other as people, and even before that, we need to pray. So, Church, let us pray: *O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; empower us to talk with each other in holy conversation learning something about the other that helps us to see one another as you see us; fill us with your Holy Spirit that we may be willing to lay down our false sense of control, our need to always be right, and our inflated sense of self; Lord, work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; in the holy name of Jesus, your Son, who condescended to present himself as a living sacrifice for our sakes. Amen.*