

BISHOP'S REMARKS for the ANNUAL MEETING of THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST. PAUL

January 24, 2023

On January 13th a number of us gathered here at the cathedral's Lawrence Room to affirm and rededicate ourselves to the partnership which this cathedral and our wider diocese have begun to forge with the Massachusetts Poor Peoples' Campaign. It was a joyful and encouraging gathering, after which most of us made the short walk across the street to observe the official unveiling ceremony for The Embrace, a monumental new sculpture on the Boston Common.

The crowd was large, the energy was good, and the mood was joyful. In the ten days since then, social media platforms of every description have been abuzz with controversy over The Embrace. Some folks love it. Some folks hate it. Some praise its tribute to inclusion and justice. Others deride its abstract qualities. I will say right off that, while I had been skeptical myself at earlier artists conceptions which I had seen, I have been converted to the power and message of the sculpture.

Now, it's art. And the appreciation of a work of art is a deeply personal and subjective thing. I have no need in this moment to convince you one way or the other about the artistic merits of the sculpture. But I want to say that I find a deep resonance between the goals and intent of that sculpture and the mission and ministry of this cathedral church. I am grateful for that resonance, and for the physical and missional proximity which we share with The Embrace.

As you doubtless know, the sculpture at one level commemorates the fact that Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King met here in Boston in the 1950s. He was a doctoral student at the BU School of Theology. She was a fellow at the New England Conservatory of Music. Dr. King later said of Boston, "I was educated here, and it is one of the cities which I call home ... but it would be irresponsible of me to deny the crippling poverty and injustice that exist in some sections of this community."

So it was that on April 23, 1965, Dr. King led a march in which some 22,000 people converged on the Boston Common, standing up for civil rights and racial justice. It is reported to have been his first march outside of the South. At a second level, then, the sculpture commemorates that historic event and the spot where it happened. The Embrace is set within Freedom Plaza, a tribute to 69 local leaders who have devoted themselves to working for civil rights and social justice in greater Boston from 1950 to 1975 – among them our own Byron Rushing and Frieda Garcia.

Beyond Martin and Coretta's Boston 1950s courtship and a major Boston civil rights event in 1965, however, The Embrace delivers a strong message not only of the past, but of the present and future, of things that are important. Here are five: It speaks about prophetic witness; it speaks about the vital nature of partnership in the work of justice; it speaks about the place of the arts in this work; it speaks about the importance of location; and it speaks about the power of love.

I want to say – I am grateful to say – that this cathedral church delivers the same five messages.

The Embrace, in honoring the Kings and their leadership, affirms **prophetic witness**. When this Cathedral hosts gun violence actions on its steps; when it demands that our city work harder to end homelessness; when it stands with and for LGBTQ persons; when it leads the diocese in engaging with

anti-racism in its past and present; and so much more – when we do these things, we affirm *our* call to prophetic witness.

The Embrace, in its entwined mutuality, depicts **the importance of partnership**. When MANNA becomes an official partner of the Winter Walk; when MANNA works with the Barbara McGinnis House to offer spiritual support for respite care; when we collaborate with the Poor People’s Campaign, or Episcopal City Mission, or the B.I.D.; when the cathedral innovates with others around the diocese to create the St. Paul Center for Theology and Prayer; and so much more – when we do these things, we push back against isolation, and against a false and futile sense of our own lack of consequence. We live out instead the vital importance of collaboration and partnership.

The Embrace, in its fusion of art and justice, reflects **the role of fine arts** in advancing God’s Realm. When this Cathedral hangs a banner inviting one and all to sing with its splendid Schola; when the Crossing holds a Queer Storytelling event; when MANNA sustains the Black Seed Writers Group and Open Mic night; when the production of “Young Shepherd’s Tale” debuts in this space; when summer hymn sings are held on the porch; in all these and so much more, the divine spark of creativity which is at work in fine arts is affirmed as a vehicle for God’s work in this place.

The Embrace, in its situation on the Common and not elsewhere in the city, declares **the importance of location**. When Bishop William Lawrence made St. Paul’s the cathedral seat of the diocese – not the grand church in Copley Square, and not a lovely riverside setting in Cambridge offered for the purpose – but this church, here, facing onto America’s oldest public space, and gazing uphill at the State House, it was a declaration of calling. When this Cathedral hosts Legislative Action Days; when we gather those preparing to advocate and testify up the hill; when our steps provide space for the Coalition Against Gun Violence, or facilitate voter registration; in these ways and so many more we acknowledge that it matters where we are located, and that God has a calling for us in this location.

Finally, the Embrace proclaims **the power of love**. It recalls a particular hug, between two particular people, on a particular day. But it reaches beyond that moment to declare love as the foundation of all that is good and right. When this cathedral creates communities of love – in the Crossing, in MANNA, in its Sunday congregation, in hosting for two decades the Muslim Friday prayers, in acting as the central gathering place for our diocesan community, in opening its clear glass doors to our city and beyond – in these ways and so much more, this cathedral proclaims love as the answer.

The sculptor Hank Willis Thomas has said that in fashioning an abstract representation of Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King’s embrace, Thomas invites us to “stand in the heart of their hug.” The ministry of this Cathedral Church of St. Paul likewise invites all those who enter this place, all those who pass by, and all those who witness its ministry – and that of our wider Diocese of Massachusetts – to stand in the heart of God’s hug. I am profoundly grateful to Dean Amy McCreath, to every staff member and every leader in this place, for holding out your arms to the world and inviting others to share in God’s embrace.

The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates