Good morning Saints! I’m delighted to be with you this morning. Thank you so much to Bishop Brian for this invitation. I’m in my last days of a sabbatical and trust me, there are but a few people I’d say yes to and break sabbatical and your bishop is one of them. He’s been a mentor, colleague and friend for nearly 15 years now and I treasure his wisdom and vision. I was in touch with Bp. Jeffrey Lee yesterday and want to bring his greetings to you as well as the good people from the Diocese of Chicago. Our dioceses have much in common—particularly in our desire to reimagine what being a faithful Episcopalian and loving Christian community looks like and in addressing the social justice issues of our day.

Part of my role in overseeing the diocese of Chicago is tending to how we share our story of who we are, what we do, and why we do it—communications. Needless to say, I spend a lot of time on social media. And I can generally tell how my day is going to go by looking at what is trending on Twitter. Tracking what’s trending on Twitter shapes my morning prayer.

#StandingRock
#PhilandoCastile
#MichaelBrown
#TamirRice
#TrayvonMartin
#SyrianRefugees
#SandraBland
#TyreKing
#BlackLivesMatter
#BlueLivesMatter
I see a new name in a hash tag and my heart races every time. Who else, who else is gone—who else is a victim of the unholy Trinity of guns, poverty and racism? Behind these hash tags are people. People with lives. People with stories. And we know the importance of story. To hear and hold a person’s story is the beginning of being known. To hear and hold someone’s story is the beginning of compassion. To offer your story and be deeply heard is the beginning of empathy. Our call, embedded in the baptismal covenant, is to see a person beyond a stereotype, to see the person behind the hash tag. If we are to imagine the world reconciled and loving, we must be free. Emma Lazarus, who also spoke about huddled masses, reminds us “Until we are all free, we are none of us free. ” We practice a false liberation unless all of us are free to bring our stories to the table. To be who we are called to be—loving, liberated and life-giving members of the Jesus Movement. This is where racial reconciliation begins.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says this:

“The church – followers of Jesus – are in the bridge-building business by being followers of Jesus. God built a bridge between divinity and humanity in Jesus. Reconciliation isn’t just singing Kumbaya and everyone being nice. Reconciliation is about the hard work of working through our differences honestly and with integrity.”

But this is a slow work. And while the lives of the anguished cry out and the bodies of the slain accumulate and the hash tags add up, it is hard to have the patience for this slow work of reconciliation. The fact remains that some things, like getting to know a person, need time. Time to share our stories, histories, dreams. Living, as we do, in a sound-bite driven, headline scrolling, over stimulated world, I’m no longer surprised at how polarized, divided, and suspicious of one another we have become. Sharing our stories and getting to really know one another seems like a luxury best reserved for what little discretionary time our lives may have to offer. But deep down we know sharing stories of who we are and where we’ve come from is not a luxury, it is a necessity to understanding how we have come to our present and how we move forward together.

Our gospel lesson this morning, that beautiful scene on Easter day when Jesus’ dispirited disciples move once again from brokenhearted to believing; from devastated to rejoicing, reminds us that Jesus is ever with us in the brokenness and ever with us in the work of
reconciling the world. And every time we gather and break bread together and tell the sacred stories of our lives and of our tradition—and I don’t care if the meal is fried chicken, communion bread, fry bread, fresh fish from the lake, every time we gather to eat and listen to one another we are doing a sacred thing and Jesus is present and resurrection becomes possible. Indeed, I’ve come to believe it may even be part of the answer.

Nearly 10 years ago, the multi-racial congregation I served in Syracuse, NY, embarked on a year-long conversation on race and reconciliation. We were spurred on by the Pastoral Letter on Racism of 2006 issued by the House of Bishops. So each month for a year we had prominent speakers and preachers like V.P. of the House of Deputies, Byron Rushing address the issue of race, we took on an oral history project to record the stories of African American members who had been displaced from their homes and community during the urban renewal projects of the 1950s. We hosted anti-racism trainings for the province and spent two months in a weekly anti-racism dialogue circle. These were and are good things to do to build understanding and relationship across differences of race and class.

The concluding program was a panel discussion with local and national leaders from the Episcopal Church and the Syracuse community. The Rev. Dr. Michael Battle, known for his work on Ubuntu theology (I am because we are) was our moderator. When we got to the Q&A, the question was asked, after all we have done, what really, can we do to end racism. And Michael’s answer was brief—eat with one another. At first, it almost sounds too easy. Eat with one another? Michael went on to say that eating is an intimate act—taking in food that allows us to have life—and talking with one another while we do it—forms relationship. It sounds crazy. It hardly seems like a prescription for ending the over-militarized policing of poor communities of color. It seems improbable to ease the strains of segregation, poverty and joblessness that is fueled by systematized prejudice. It seems unlikely to erase the genocide of Native American peoples of this land. It seems weak in the face of photos of Syrian children seeking refuge on our shores. And it appears too naïve to change the discourse of hatred, individualism, fear, and contempt that marks our national and local dialogue.

Eat with one another, share your story, listen deeply, change the world. Repeat. In these simple actions, we become known to one another. Now hear me, even this cycle doesn’t make things perfect. I would guess that most of us have had at least one experience of being around a family
dinner table where there was little, sharing, listening, changing or being known happening, so I don’t want to sugar coat the notion that gathering for a meal is an easy fix. But it can be one of the most solid paths to relationships we humans have.

Meals, like the ones we have already begun to share at this convention and the one we will partake in just a few moments, can provide the opportunity for us to put ourselves, our families, and our communities back together again. One person, one relationship, one meal at a time. On the night before Jesus died we remember the lingering meal he shared with his friends. We remember how he broke bread, poured wine, showed what being a servant looked like and commanded them to do the same. Examples abound in scripture of Jesus gathering and lingering with friends and loved ones over food and drink. The rhythm of the day was largely shaped by these meals where relationships were being built and sustained. So it is no wonder that the disciples would recognize the risen Christ by the actions they knew not only in their minds’ memory, but in their body memory— their heart memory.

Eat with one another, share your story, listen deeply, change the world. Repeat. So, Episcopal Church in Minnesota, you want to talk about racial reconciliation? You want to co-labor with Jesus in reconciling the brokenness of our world? Well, I hope you’re hungry. Hungry to really know your neighbors. Hungry to really strive for justice, freedom and peace—like it’s your job with benefits. Hungry to see hope in not just the next generation but the generations already moving into the world. Hungry to experience change, transformation, and resurrection in your life and in our church. And hungry to hear the voices of the marginalized.

Let me make it plain. The voices of the Native Americans of this community, the African immigrants, the African Americans, the Latinos, the women, LGBT sisters and brothers— these voices, these stories that have too often been diminished, silenced, or told to wait for a later that never comes, they— THEY— must be among the first stories we listen to. Listen for understanding, listen for learning, listen to have our hearts broken open, listen for a path of true reconciliation. So many want to extinguish these voices and stories. Our very church is guilty too—for not being reflective, for assuming, for standing idly by, we silence the voices of the marginalized all the time. Even the church—especially the church—must check its privilege. Jesus calls us to do something, be something, different.
So what does that look here? I think it looks like inviting someone—a person or a family—to join you for a meal on a regular basis. Not just a month, not as a program. But decide—decide to create community with someone who is different from you. For over a year, my family shared Sunday dinner round robin style with two other families. Of the six adults we hailed from Kyrgyzstan, Ohio, Alabama, the Bahamas, New York and Massachusetts. We were white, black and Asian, Methodist, Anglican and Muslim. The only thing we had in common was that three of us worked—in different departments at the university—we had young children who we desired would grow up in a diverse environment. So we dined together every week for over a year. Learned and ate each others foods. Learned how to see the world a different way. We’ve all left Syracuse now but the bonds between us are still tight. Each of us, having been changed by that time of dining together, are stepping into social justice spaces in ways we might never have done.

Eat with one another, share your story, listen deeply, change the world. Repeat.

We dishonor the lives of those who have gone before if we allow the hash tag to have the final word—to be the only thing we remember. The disciples who met Jesus on the road, ate with him, shared their personal stories and had the scriptures broken open anew were forever changed by that encounter. Those moments became part of their resurrection story. To live the faith commended to us is to know that excruciating violence and heartbreaking narratives of despair to the contrary, resurrection is possible for us, and a new world is in the making right here, right now. So set the table, make room, pull up a chair, put away your cell phone and your watch. Slow down and take your time. Bring your hungry, hurting, loved as a child of God self to the meal and be ready to listen and be ready to share. Your brothers and sisters and the risen and victorious Jesus are waiting for you. #Believe.