

(orchestral music)

- Let us pray. Almighty God from whom every good prayer cometh and do pourest out on all who desire it, the spirit of grace and supplication, deliver us when we draw nigh to thee, from coldness of heart and wanderings of mind that with steadfast thoughts and kindled affections, we may worship thee in spirit and in truth through Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen. ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ (choir singing) ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ (orchestral music) (choir singing) Let us humbly confess our sins to almighty God our heavenly father. Praying that he will make us to know the faults we have not known and that he will show us the harmful consequences of those things in us, which we have not cared to control. Let us pray. Our heavenly father, who by that love hast made us and in thy love wouldst make us perfect. We humbly confess that we have not loved thee with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and that we have not loved one another as Christ hath loved us. Thy life is within our souls but our selfishness hath hindered thee. We have not lived by faith. We have resisted thy spirit. We have neglected thine inspirations. Forgive what we have been, help us to amend what we are and in nice spirit direct what we shall be that thou mayest come into the full glory of thy creation in us and in all men through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus, his son clean as us from all sin. Amen.

- Let us hear the reading of God's word as we find it in the 30th through the 35th verses of the 32nd chapter of the book of Exodus. On the morrow, Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin and now I will go up to the Lord. Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." So Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Alas, these people have sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold but now if thou wilt forgive their sin, and if not blot me I pray thee out of thy book, which thou hast written. But the Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book, but now go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you. Behold my angel shall go before you, nevertheless in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them." And the Lord sent a plague upon the people because they made the calf, which Aaron made. Amen and here ends the reading of our lesson for this day. May God's blessing be added upon us as we have heard the reading of his word. (orchestral music) (choir singing)

- Let us unite in this historic confession of the Christian faith. I believe in God, the father almighty, maker of heaven and Earth and in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord who was conceived by the holy spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. The third day he rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God, The father almighty. From then he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen. We

are always thrilled to hear the gospel proclaimed significantly and excitingly. We heard such proclamation yesterday. We anticipated with eagerness again today. We are deeply in debt to you, Dr. Holmes for being God's messenger among us.

- My friends, if you will grant me a moment of personal privilege, I want to take this opportunity to express my very deep appreciation to you and to Bishop Hunt and Bishop Blackburn, to Dean Langford and professors, Richie and Ingram, the board of managers of this convocation for the many hospitalities and kindnesses that have been extended to Mrs. Holmes and me during these last several days. I am especially grateful to you as a congregation. For your attentiveness and participation during the hour we have already spent together and now this hour, in the act of Christian worship. It has been a very high privilege for me to be the preacher for this convocation. And as is often the case, I find myself returning home having received far more than I've contributed. Because Metropolitan Memorial in Washington DC has been designated as the National United Methodist Church. And because all United Methodists or honorary members of that church, I would hope that when any of you are in the nation's capital, you would plan to drop by and see us. Each of the pews in the church is designated for a different state in the Union and almost every Sunday morning, we have some visitors sitting in the North Carolina pew. I would hope some Sunday morning to look out and see some of you sitting in that pew in the days ahead. Most of all, let me simply say, I'm grateful for the privilege of having been with you for this occasion and Bishop Hunt for your very generous introduction. I just want to assume this morning that all of us can identify with that business tycoon lying on a leather couch, the look of furious frustration on his face as nearby sits a psychiatrist with a notepad on his knee listening to the man, cry out in elemental agony. My Protestant work ethic has made me a bundle but my Christian conscience won't allow me to enjoy it. And as affluent Christians in a world of scarcity, I want to assume this morning that all of us can identify with that tycoon, with his schizophrenia, the polarity and tension of a Protestant work ethic on the one hand which for as long as we can remember has been urging us to gain and to acquire more and more and more while on the other hand, a Christian conscience which continues to remind us that the time may come when we will be required to sell all we have and give the money to the poor. I'm sure you understand this morning that that schizophrenia, that polarity and tension is something that I experience in my own life as well. You know, I'm not here today in rags. I haven't missed too many meals. And I'm never more aware of that tension in my own life than when in days like these, I am reminded as I have been reminded so dramatically at this convocation. And that I profess to follow a carpenter who died indigent and intestate. That I profess to live by a book which is clearly on the side of the hungry and the poor. The dispossessed and disenfranchised. You know, the one thing worse that I can think of than being an affluent Christian having to live with this kind of tension is to be an affluent Christian who has somehow resolved or rationalized away that tension. Slender thread that it is. It just may be that the tension is itself a sign that we are at least somewhat still in touch with the gospel and its demands. So I assume the tension, it is my predicate this morning. And the question then becomes, how do we respond? What is the locus of our motivation? As affluent Christians in the Western world, what is the locus of our motivation for mission in and to the world? Is it guilt? As parish colleagues, you know how easy it is for us to play on people's guilt, especially when we share that guilt ourselves and know how easy it would be for me this morning to attempt to play upon your guilt. And I suppose we could have ourselves a regular masochistic emotional blood bath of self indictment, and I could whip and lash and flail and maybe we'd feel a little better for that kind of a catharsis for a little while. And it's not that I'm above doing that today.

It's simply that I have the feeling that guilt can be a very neurotic and sub Christian motivation for defining the Christian mission. So let us look a little further. What about gratitude? What if I were to try and play today upon your gratitude? That's an easier thing to do and far less threatening. And you know how attracted we are to the images of the the high helping the low, the strong helping the weak, the rich, helping the poor, the wise, helping the foolish. What appeal there is for us in images of the benefactor, the arms giver, the lady bountiful standing high above the suffering of humanity and looking down with sad but gentle eyes saying, "There, but for the grace of God go I, I will be benevolent, generous, and kind." The only problem with this motivation and perhaps you already got a whiff of it. It has the smell of condescension, paternalism or maternalism if you prefer. The Achilles heel of this motivation is that when we bend down and talk baby talk and offer our handouts to people less fortunate than ourselves, have you noticed in our day, how many of them are just ungrateful? And how many of them act as though they are deserving of the very things that we have offered to share with them. And more than that, how many there are, who simply say, "forget it. I don't want it." I have an altogether more radical expectation of what it means for you to identify with me. The smell of condescension. I dare not try and play this morning on your sense of gratitude and generosity anymore than I dare try and play upon your sense of guilt. Then what am I gonna play on? It just may be that we're now at that point in the sermon where I can't play on anything at all. I think the time has come for me to simply tell the story of our faith. Knowing that every time that story is told it is accompanied by the freedom for those who hear it to say yes or no. And even as I'm the preacher this morning, it's just occurred to me, I'm also the listener. And as I proclaimed this word, William Arthur Holmes today like every other person in this place must finally say yes or no. The story goes in the cosmology of the new Testament. God did not look down on a suffering sinful world. He came down and he identified with the humanity of his creation. All the way, no holes barred to the hilt. Jesus did not say there, but for the grace of God go I, He said, "There I go born of a woman." The word made flesh. Identified with a bone and blood and life juices of humanity itself. God did not bend down and talk baby talk to us, he came down and the talk he talked was human talk and it was plain And crystal clear. And as much as you have done it unto the least of these, my brethren, you've done it unto me. I'm all mixed up with them. They're all mixed up with me. Whenever you deal with God, you deal with human beings. And whenever you deal with human beings, you deal with God. And as of this morning, he still has not changed his mind. And my friends, when we are confronted by a love like this, we do not love in guilt, we do not love in condescension. To paraphrase the DT Niles, we love as beggars who have received a gift that we can't help but share with other beggars. In Leonard Bernstein's "West Side Story", Maria, the Puerto Rican Juliet stands looking out the window of her tenement at her Irish Romeo as he goes dancing down the street in an ecstasy of love. While standing nearby her, her sister-in-law screams out a list of evils applicable to men in general and to Romeo in particular, until finally with tears in her eyes, Maria turns to her sister-in-law and cries, "Whatever he is, I am." Are those words, not reminiscent of our text this morning, where Moses says to God, now Lord, everything that you have said about your people, Israel is true. They are a stiff necked hard-headed, cantankerous bunch of people. But if you can see your way clear to forgive us and then there follows the granddaddy silence of all silences, as Moses waits and waits and waits. And then finally says, "But if not, Lord, then block me from your book too, for I am with them." And in the distance, one can almost see Jesus hanging from the cross and hear him cry, Father, forgive them for they know not what they, they do. Whatever they are, I am. When we're confronted by a love like this, we do not love in guilt. We do not love in condescension. We have met the man in need of love, and he is us. And we love his beggars who have

received a gift that we can only share with other beggars. How radical and relevant this word? Well, What about the homosexual issue? I know it is complex. Beyond the issue of ordination, regardless of how we come out on that, beyond that issue will of the time ever come, when heterosexual Christians can say of homosexuals, Whatever you are, I am. Not in terms of sexual identity or preference necessarily, but at least in terms of fellow human beings. Will the time ever come when the white majority of this nation can say of black and brown and red, whatever you are, I am. When men With a masculinity so long propped up by putting women down can say of women, whatever you are, I am. Does this remove the schizophrenia and tension between a Protestant work ethic on the one hand and a Christian conscience on the other? No. I am convinced this morning that we are destined to live with that polarity and tension until the grave. But my friends let us never forget that the locus of our motivation for Christian mission, indeed The horizon of our humanity at its best, lies in the direction of our being able to say with Moses and Maria, And even our Lord, Whatever you are, I am. Let us pray. Almighty God, Father and mother of us all. As we soon prepare to leave this place and and go back into a world, standing on tiptoe to see if Christians mean what they say. We do not ask to be made super human but only deeply human. To love as we've been loved. And to go as beggars who have received a gift that we can share with other beggars, amen. (orchestral music) (choir singing)

- We deeply appreciate, the moving inspiration and helpfulness of the music, which has been given to us again by our singers and their talented director and the gifted organist. The Lord be with you. Let us pray. All almighty God our creator, savior, and comforter. We bless thee, for the gospel of redeeming and sustaining love, which reaches us in our sinfulness, our fearfulness and our despair. And restores us to purity, courage and wholeness. As we lord and magnify thy holy name and return unto thee, the humble confession of our human faultiness and failure, we ask that thy spirit, at work once more through the miracle of worship may make our lives clean and new and meaningful again. Our hearts are burdened today for those who are sick and suffering around the world. And especially for those near to us. We thank thee for the wonders of medical and surgical science, hospitals, doctors, nurses, but most of all, we thank thee for thyself, The Great Physician to whom we can entrust our dear ones with childlike assurance, that there is a love which never, never lets either them or us go. We pray the prayer of faith just now, for Mary Jean Blackburn, thy child. And for all of those who love her best. Lend skill to the surgeons, and if it be possible in thy will, let the light of health break through the darkness of disease. In any event, may she be held in the center of thy love and care, now and always. Guide us in this day and through the future. Sanctify to our growth, the fresh word from thyself which we have heard this week. Make us instruments of thy peace in troubled hours. Use us in ways beyond our imagining until thy church becomes vigorous and young again. And the kingdom of thy dear son rises from the ashes of earthly injustice and agony. We make our prayer in the sovereign name of him who taught us to pray saying, our father who art in heaven, halloweth be thy name, thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us, not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (orchestral music) (choir singing) The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen. (orchestral music) (choir singing)