



The Dean's Address to the Annual Meeting of the Parish on Sunday 20 June 2021

You know, we call this address the State of the Parish. But you know the state of the parish as well as I do. We're good. We're really, really good. I feel really good about where we are. More importantly, we're hopeful.

I feel like we are in a hopeful place—the state of parish is strong. But there lives in that strength an excitement about what is to come. And it's to that question that I want to turn tonight.

So, it's official— I have been here for eight months or so and last week, I got the bullseye vest formally put on me as the chief sheep dog here. It's probably time I answered the question that I get asked the most, which is what is my vision for St. Peter's?

Let me just start here. There are a few things that are clear to me in that question. But the clearest thing in that question is probably that I can't give you the answer some of you want. And I'll explain. Tonight, I want to talk about something the staff is utterly sick of hearing me talk about and that is, (don't say it before me) mansions and ranches. Keep those two words in your head – mansions, and ranches.

One of my passions has been studying the church and church leaders, and by the church, I mean the church in its widest expression in Heaven and on earth; all those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ. One of the most thoughtful and faithful thinkers in the arena of ecclesiology, which is the study of the church, is a gentleman who died several years ago whose name is Lyle Schaller, and I won't bore you with Schaller's whole taxonomy of church sizes. But it is one of the most useful descriptions of the different sizes of churches.

I've had the privilege of serving in various capacities, in all kinds of different sizes of churches, and he talks about the cats, (that's the smallest one) and then the collies, and then the gardens, and then the houses, and then finally we get to mansions and ranches. I'm going to give you just a little thumbnail sketch of his two classifications of mansions ranches. I'm going to ask you to think about which of these you think best describes St. Peter's.

Schaller describes a mansion as a church, (in his day, this was 40 years ago, the numbers aren't so important) between 250 and 450 people on a Sunday. Mansions can be healthy and stable churches. But in these places, the vision for the place typically belongs to one person. That's the senior pastor. The role of the organization, the role of the staff, and the role of volunteers is often—I say this pejoratively, but it doesn't have to be negative—but the role of the organization is to fulfill the wishes of the Lord of the mansion. He gives the vision, and they follow.

Schaller explains that often, events drive the ministry of a mansion. And growth comes through people coming to those events or seeing beautiful buildings. He writes this and see if this rings a bell: "people passing by, are often impressed by the sheer size and impressive appearance of the structure. They may wonder what goes on inside, but most are too shy to ask on their own initiative. A substantial number are convinced simply by looking at the building, 'that's too rich for my blood.' And they walk past in search of a smaller church." That's his description of a mansion church. I wonder if that rings a bell.

Compare that to what Schaller describes as ranches. These are churches typically north of 600 on a Sunday. And surprisingly, they operate very differently from the mansion. The unifying thing is no longer the gathering event or the building, but the overall goal of the place. Everything is goal driven. The goal for a ranch is simply one thing and one thing only, and that is to raise cattle. Right? That's what a ranch does. That's all it does. That's what it's good at doing. But there exist lots of pieces that lend toward that goal.

According to Schaller, the head pastor of a ranch is often less visible. And it is often other area leaders that are more prominent in their area. Instead of always being out front, the Rector's job, (we would use the term Rector) is to be sure we're all making cattle. So that's my job then if it's a ranch, is to make cattle and make sure that there's nobody sort of farming asparagus off to the side. Asparagus is fine. But it's not what we do. We make cattle. In a ranch, most folks often feel more connected with a particular ministry than to the whole congregation on a Sunday morning. So rather than events, it's individual ministries themselves that are the big deal. That's the attraction for a ranch sized church.

Clearly, we have had a foot in both of these camps. There are ways in which we have operated in both. But I think it's safe to say as I look at it now eight months in, that we have mostly operated as a mansion. And I know it may sound like I'm casting a picture of criticism for what we've done in the past. It's not that at all. It's just that, well, mansions can be very healthy and fruitful churches, but in terms of sheer numbers, and more importantly, our call to impact the world beyond us, it's clear to me that we must be a ranch. We must make the transition. The mansion focuses first on being a mansion. And there was a time for that. But the ranch focuses on the product. The ranch focuses on what it is called to do. And that's to raise cattle.

Look, I'm not calling you all cows. Maybe I am just a little bit but only by analogy. Only by analogy. The product—the cattle—are disciples of Jesus Christ. There are people saved from hell. That's what we are to produce. The point is that we don't need to establish an attractive and prominent presence in Tallahassee. We have it. We don't need to focus on developing excellent worship. We have it. We don't need to learn as a staff how to pull off a superb event. You know how, and if last week was any proof, even after 18 months of sort of pandemic forced hiatus, we still know how to ride that bike.

I think we can say we have effectively accomplished the things that we needed to accomplish as a mansion. But it's time to think like a ranch. When asked for my vision, I have killed myself at this church and other churches to come up with some pithy, catchy bumper sticker phrase that in six words or less tells you everything you need to know and describes everything we need to do. But I guess in the end, it's just this: Be a ranch.

Be a ranch.

That means that the initiative, and the vision isn't all mine. If it is, we're in trouble. And God's vision and my sole focus is to be sure of our mission. It's grabbing souls from the icy clutches of hell and bringing them into eternal life in Jesus Christ. That's what we are to do. It will be so much easier to protect what we have, or to try to recapture something we feel we've lost.

But God's call is so much more radical. Y'all, St. Peter's isn't back— It's barely begun. My friends, we have a gospel imperative, and no pithy slogan can do better than what the Lord has already given us to make disciples of the nations. That's his command; to make disciples of the nations. So, with every event, with every ministry, my question is going to be: where's the beef?

That's it. Where's the beef?

Because the world needs his disciples. We live in an incredibly fractured, dysfunctional, grumpy, even hateful time. The truth itself in our culture is not even a common ground. Not when we live in our social media and cable news driven echo chambers and we are continually fed outrage. So, amid these fractured times, being a rancher means that we come humbly before the throne of God asking to be healed ourselves, that we would offer that same healing to a hurting world around us. Even those, especially those who are nothing like us. Those who might walk by and say, "This is too rich for my blood." Our heart should break for that— even those we are told to hate.

Being ranchers means we might actually be the ones of whom our Savior spoke, when he said by this, by this, all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. Being ranchers and focusing on the single goal of making disciples might mean that we would shock the world by refusing to be grumpy, even when we disagree.

Now, this is no easy feat, to transition from a mansion to a ranch. But it is simple. It's very simple. It means thinking of ourselves less, it means focusing on the world around us. It means focusing on the product which is disciples for Jesus Christ. Like the Blues Brothers, we are on a mission from God. So, my beloved fellow ranchers, I have no anxiety, absolutely no anxiety about the future of St. Peter's. I have no anxiety at all. So long as I believe that Jesus is on his throne, I can't. The success of any human endeavor might collapse. I myself might fail phenomenally in every effort. But the success of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church cannot fail.

It cannot fail.

If we are part of that kingdom, our success is given by decree by God Almighty, from the depths of eternity in the halls of heaven. He has spoken, the church will advance! Our only option is whether we're going to be part of it or not. The gates of hell cannot withstand the onslaught and march to which we have been called. So, when asked for a mission statement I offer you instead, or as a mission statement, the gospel of Jesus Christ, according to St. Matthew, the 28th chapter beginning at the 16th verse, you may have heard this before. "After Jesus rose from the dead, the 11 disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw Him, they worshiped, but some doubted," even perhaps as some might doubt here tonight. "And Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you,' including the command to love one another. "And behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

So, let's be a ranch, because Jesus is with us. Amen.