A few words of introduction. First a word of abundant thanks, perhaps two words of abundant thanks. First, thank you for the gift of continuing education, the gift of going to conferences, in this case in Detroit, but further afield as well. Those of us that are called to go to conferences now and again may at times, as I certainly do and did, see them as obligations of our work. But at times we are blessed to see that they are great gifts of our work as well, opportunities to see and to be with those who are seeing things that we may not see and doing things that we may not do, and calling us to be more than we may be today.

And such was an opportunity for me yesterday, as I was a participant in a new conference that has just begun in Detroit, organized by Bill Danaher, the Reverend Bill Danaher, Rector of Christ Church Cranbrook, the Institute of Advanced Pastoral Studies. I heard that title, I didn’t say this to Bill when he invited me and encouraged me first to come, I said to myself, "Really? We’re establishing a new institute? And it’s advanced, it’s doing something more, but what the heck are we going to do about pastoral studies? Really, what is this?"

But I trusted Bill, and when he said, "Come," I said, "Okay. You are my friend, and I will come." And thank you, Jesus, that I went. Yesterday was a brilliant day, and so what I had thought I would say this morning on what I consider to be one of the most profound texts that we have in the gospel, the moment that Judas walks out of that room, the moment that Jesus allows Judas to walk out, in spite of having 11 strong men with him, knowing what is on the heart of Judas. The moment Jesus allows Judas to be Judas, even in his brokenness. "Now," he says, "God is glorified."

That moment, perhaps of all moments, is the crux of the gospel, when Jesus allows Judas to be Judas. So inspite of thinking that this is perhaps the most profound, or one of the most profound, texts that we have to explore, I said it’s not the word for today. And so thank you for allowing me to go yesterday.
to what I believe for me was just a deeply enriching conference and one that will stay with me for some time. But that comes with a request of you.

I asked this of the eight o’clockers, and I ask it of you, and that is your grace with me this morning. Because part of the homiletic responsibility is not only to choose what to say, it’s also to choose what not to say. That is, what Peter Gomes, my homiletics professor said, part of the homiletic profession is preparing to go out on a hunt. You fill your quiver with arrows, but you only use that which you need. You don’t use all of them, and part of the practice is to choose which ones. My friends, I haven’t had the time to distill with the precision and attention that I would like to, all that I’m about to say. And so I’m sure I’m going to say things that in retrospect any one of us will say, "Well, you could have skipped that portion, like what you just said." There are going to be parts of that, and so I appreciate your grace in bearing with me through those parts.

I also appreciate, ask your grace, for going longer than we typically go. Some may wish that we were a Baptist church now and again, so that we might strip off the garments that hide the fire of the spirit within us, and this would be a day that I am doing that. So I beg your grace and forgiveness as I have you here at my whim, if you will. So I am grateful for you and your grace to me.

So now yesterday. Yesterday was a conference that allowed us to gather with three great minds in the Christian Church today. Christena Cleveland, an Associate Professor at Duke Divinity School, a leading thinker and teacher and, perhaps most importantly, practitioner of reconciliation, particularly in the area of racial reconciliation today. Reverend Dr. Jonathan Walton, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and the Pusey Minister at Memorial Church in Harvard University, recently appointed as Dean of Wake Forest Divinity School. And the Reverend Dr. Gregory Jones, Professor and Dean of Duke Divinity School, where he has committed himself to preparing Christian leaders for an ever-changing world and an ever-evolving church.

They gathered us great with knowledge. That is, they possessed a unique ability to see and discern and name the world as it is, in order that we can respond to the brokenness or the root causes that exist in the world today. But they didn’t just come with unique knowledge, they came with wisdom, wisdom to discern through the muck and the difficulty and the vast abundance of ideas, to highlight for us some of the most critical needs for the church today, and even more, for the world. And so it was a
great day, one that I am still ruminating on. Sam, my little one ... hey buddy, good morning ... patiently endured my reflections last night over the dinner table, and so thank you as well, Sam.

Gregory Jones began his time with us by reflecting on the state of the world, and he noted something that we all know very easily, that the world about us is broken. Who doesn’t see it? There is more terror in the world today than perhaps at any time. The levels of displacement in the world are almost beyond number. The number of men, women, and children that have been displaced from their homes, either by poverty, by war, by climate change, is staggering. The extreme inhumanity that we experience today, not only in the form of terror and violence that plagues some communities, but the grave poverty that expands across the world, the disparate economic resources and opportunities just for daily life, let alone abundant life, is inhuman.

The natural result of this, of course, is increasing isolationism, this hunkering down to preserve our own life here, and thereby the abandonment of our neighbor to whatever resources she may have. And I say "she", because overwhelmingly, the face of the dispossessed in the world is a woman or young girl of color. And in this state of brokenness, our natural human response is to preserve ourselves, to isolate ourselves from that brokenness out there and leaving women and children and the men to whatever resources, limited, insufficient, inadequate as they may be, that they possess.

And if we look out to the world, and our young ones will tell this to us so clearly, the world is literally melting before our eyes. It is falling apart. The massive sheets of ice or glacial calving that is occurring is a metaphor. Not only is it a literal truth, but a metaphor for the world that we live in. It is breaking apart and melting before our eyes.

But it’s not just out there, Gregory Jones reminded us. It’s happening in the institutions of our life. Look at our government, look at the institutions that gather us as a community, and they are rupturing. The ancient bonds of affection that have tied communities together, that sent us to war together, are crumbling, are disintegrating day by day. We’d say the same about the church. We look around the church, and the constant lament is that it is not what it was. Not as many people, not as good this, not as deep a community, whatever, a crumbling of the institution of the church as we have known it.

But it’s not just the institutions of our world. Listen to the stats of individual lives. The opioid epidemic, that’s not an institutional rupture, it’s a personal rupture. Lives that are encased by fear and
desperation or loneliness and self-abasement are turning to the seemingly only resource that they have, and that is oblivion. Listen to the stats of mental health. Those who are facing anxiety or depression are through the roof, and our college student are facing the brunt of it. We are standing here launching, and I say "we", because they have been raised in our community, for you into the world. Their parents had been striving for it. Ainsley, William, Joelle, who's not with us, and Henry.

We’re launching them then into the world, but do you realize that the levels of mental health need and anxiety in colleges today are higher than they’ve ever been? An easy stat that points to this is the number of youth that are college students that are transferring in their first year of college. Again, higher than it’s ever been. The breakdown of the world is not just out there in Antarctica and Greenland, it’s not just in Washington, DC in the pillars of our government and our society, it’s happening in the hearts of women and men and children.

Our world needs something, and the critical mind of today has to figure out what is it that the world needs? What is that the world needs on a macro level, and that begins with what does the world need on a personal level? What is it that I hope that Ainsley and William and Joelle and Henry and each of us grows to possess? And Jones starts by saying, "In order for us to figure out what the world needs, we have to figure out what the real breakdown is." The calving of a glacier is a sign of something deeper. It’s a sign, of course, of rising temperatures, but the rising temperatures are a sign of something deeper. And what is it?

And he pointed out, I think profoundly, three poisons, three evils that are infecting the world today, three poisons that demand critical attention. They are poisons that demand critical attention, so that we can do the things that will be demanded of us to save the world. The first poison, fear. Let me say something else here for a moment. These poisons that Jones identifies are natural human responses to what we see. If you see a fire, there is a natural inclination of fear. So fear, as a first poison. The fear and anxiety that we experience in the world today is an epidemic. It is in every conversation, and it infects nearly every relationship we have. It is what leads us to the isolationism that we see. We are afraid of our neighbor. We are afraid.

When I first arrived in Grosse Pointe, I was told of an age-old norm or more of our community, and that was lock your doors at Alter. We were afraid of our neighbor. Let me rephrase that. We are afraid of our neighbor, and so we hunker down. We build up walls and close ourselves off, for fear that
whatever is burning out there would come and burn in here. And so we seek desperately to preserve what we have, the values, the way of life, our family, as a colleague said, our family language, people, and nation. We seek to preserve as much of our past as possible. Fear is a poison.

So is mistrust. Look at the news. Who speaks of trust? Even more, who lives with trust? It’s hard to find. Distrust is being bred across the systems and institutions of our life. We are being taught to distrust as our natural response. Distrust the system, distrust the government, distrust the news, distrust your leaders, distrust your church, distrust the stranger who is coming with outstretched arms or hands in need. Don’t trust them. The poor and the neglected can’t be trusted in this world, we are told.

Heck, in this own building, distrust has been at the root of our life for decades. Sisters and brothers, consider this. We come into this space with outstretched arms, gathering around the font to remember the love of God that is bestowed upon us, to gather at the foot of the altar with outstretched hands to receive the grace of God in desperation, and yet the character of so many of our relationships is distrust of one another. We can’t even trust Christians at the footstool of Christ. Distrust is a poison.

Finally, Dr. Jones identifies the third poison, the poison of cynicism, the simple thought that nothing will work, that all our ideas and resources are inadequate to the challenge; that we might as well pack it up and go home, that it’s all a huge waste of time. Really, what does it matter if I throw more trash into the trash can? Whatever, that plastic bottle that’s in my hand, it really is not going to make a difference, because the world is too far gone. And so we don’t act. We simply keep on keeping on with the ways that are breaking down the world about us.

Fear, distrust, cynicism, poisons that are infecting the world. And here was the terrifying part, as if you’re not afraid already. I am, I was, and then Jones said this. "The ordinary virtues, honesty, hard work, perseverance, sincerity, uprightness, those things, the ordinary virtues of life that we’ve taught every one of our youth, the very ordinary virtues with which we were raised with, the ordinary virtues have no power against those poisons." Hard work will not overcome fear. Sincerity won’t dispel distrust. Uprightness won’t break down cynicism. They are not enough. So what is?

Now, let me say, that is not to say that the ordinary virtues of life, uprightness, honesty, perseverance, the list goes on, aren’t of value and won’t be part of the future and the solution. But in and of
themselves, they are not enough for the challenge. Those of you that are Marvel comic universe folk, you can let your mind go on and on and on and on about all that we saw in those recent films about what is enough. But the ordinary virtues have no power against the poisons of fear, distrust, and cynicism.

So what now? In the face of fear, we need hope. Now, by hope I don't mean simple optimism. Simple optimism is a denier of the reality and complexity of life. Simple optimism is like me going to Kilauea and Volcano National Park in Hawaii and looking out at the vast expanse of lava that has destroyed this beautiful rainforest, and looking so finely that all I see of it is a little green fern that is breaking through and saying, "Oh, perfect. Life is good." Optimism is not enough, because optimism denies the reality that the pessimist knows.

The pessimist may not see the fern breaking through, but they know the destruction that that lava causes. They know how thick that molten rock has become, and they know how long and how nearly impossible it will be to change that lava field into a rainforest again. The pessimist says simply, "There's no point in even trying." But they know how hard the problem is, because they know how large the problem is. And the optimist needs that truth, and that is the foundation of hope. Hope looks and sees the world as it is, with the knowledge and conviction that what was and what is, is not all that there will be. We need hope in this world.

In the face of distrust, it might be tempting to say that in the face of distrust, we simply need trust. Trust one another. I'll ask you, "How is that working for you?" Every one of us, even our kids, sadly, certainly mine, know the failure of human relationship. Every one of us in this room has been wounded by another, some of us so egregiously that to be in the room with that other is more than just a danger. Dare I say, it's an impossibility or a near-impossibility?

But even in the more ordinary places of hurt and failure, we know the failure of love. The spouse, the mother, the father, the child, we have all failed in our love for one another, and we have hurt one another. And the response to that, to that wounding, the natural response is distrust. We say to our partner when we have been wounded, we say to our father or to our mother when we have been wounded, "Can I really trust you again?" It's natural. And here's the thing that overcomes it, I believe. Not blind trust, rather, forgiveness and mercy and grace.
It is the action of the wounded, the action of the one who is in fear, that begins the work of rebuilding trust. When you have hurt someone, the relationship begins to be restored when they reach back out to you and say, "Your past, or our past, is not our future. The pain that you have caused me is not our future, and I will not hold you to that pain tomorrow." The beginning, the rekindling of trust begins with an act of mercy for our neighbor, an act of forgiveness for the one who has wounded us. In the face of distrust, we need grace.

In the face of cynicism, we need innovation. I struggled with that at first. I thought, in the face of cynicism we perhaps need imagination, but Gregory Jones was right to say, "No, we need innovation, which is imaginative work put into action. It is imagination enacted." We're seeing it all about us today. We know, for instance, the auto industry knows that the future of transportation is not in the past, and so they have created whole systems of innovation, places where engineers and designers and thinkers are allowed to imagine a future that is not today and to dare to put that future into action by trying new things. It's a great beauty of a concept car. It may never come off of the line, but it pushes us. Just the sheer act of trying to create it pushes us into a new realm, into a new future.

We need that innovation. Our cynicism, the idea that it won't work, demands our innovation, the daring, the courage to act creatively, in spite of the reality that some of those new ways will fail. So what are we to do here in this place? Because I tell you, we are not alone going to change Washington. We alone are not going to change the climate. But we have a critical role to play, even within these simple walls. You see, our role as a Christian community is to build up hope that conquers fear. We are within these walls to build up hope in such a way that we can live with our fear. Let me rephrase that, actually. To build up hope in such a way that we can overcome the fear that we face, that we can live beyond our fears.

This place must be about building up hope, and how do we do that, brothers and sisters? We begin that work of hope-building by remembering, by remembering all of the work of life that has preceded us. It is what we do day in and day out. We come and remember the saving work of Christ, not just at the end of life, but in the midst of life, for Lazarus and the woman who had a hemorrhage, and the blind man, and the woman caught in adultery, and the man who was chained in the graveyards of his society out of fear. We begin to rekindle hope when we remember the eternal work of God to bring life out of darkness.
It is equally the work of envisioning God’s new creation. It is remembering the work God in the past, but looking, envisioning with God a new creation, not simply the work and the future that our climatologists say is inevitable, but remembering God’s vision. This is the work of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles that we have. It is the work of St. John the Evangelist and the lesson from the Book of Revelation that is in your hands [inaudible 00:33:54] today. It is the work of envisioning God’s new kingdom being built. How do we establish hope? We remember God’s work in the past, and we look for God’s new creation unfolding around us and beckoning us into the future.

How do we develop mercy? This may be among the hardest, perhaps. How do we develop the compassion and mercy for our neighbor that allows us to begin to reestablish trust with them? It begins in the solitude of our heart in confession. We don’t talk about confession often. We do it somewhat perfunctorily, week in week out in the confession. Sadly, we’re not going to say it today. Confession demands our honesty about ourselves. The brokenness is within me, not the brokenness that is within you. Confession is about the brokenness within me: that I suffer from grief, that I suffer fear and distrust, that I suffer animosity towards my neighbor.

Confession begins with the admission that I am not adequate, and I am not God. And in that, we begin to transform our relationship with our neighbor, because they too are not perfect. They too are not adequate. They too are not God. Only when we can approach them with mercy, the very mercy that is given to us in our inadequacy and imperfection, only then can we begin to establish the grounds for trust. And so we practice confession, we practice humility, in order that we might live with mercy for one another.

Finally, innovation. Our role in this place is to imagine new ways of living, to imagine what a new life of grace and mercy and love with our neighbor would be like, to imagine what it would be like to not lock my doors in Alter, to not cross the street when I see a person of color coming my way. To imagine it, but not just to imagine it, to say, “I’m going to practice that one today. I am going to risk living in a new way in the world.” We are about crating hope, developing mercy, but also developing the capacity for innovative life that has the hope of ushering in a new world and a new kingdom.

Our role here in this place is to proclaim, to restore, and to build up hope. It is to develop a merciful community, to develop a merciful community with the grace and courage to dream and to act in new bold and innovative ways. Our world is breaking. Our world needs what we have here, and it begins...
with us learning, restoring, rekindling hope, practicing mercy, and dreaming and living in new ways with our neighbor. Thank you and amen.