My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Epiphany Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Most of you know that Kate is the love of my life and my wife you met on Christmas Eve. And many of you know that I had been married before to Debbie, who had a number of health issues during the time of our marriage—a brain aneurysm, 2 heart attacks, and a stroke before they found a tumor as they were trying to figure out a reason for her neuropathy which was not entirely consistent with her stroke. But it was a tumor that they called spiculated, which means it wasn’t round and smooth in nature. That night in the E/R, the neurologist who appeared delivered the news it was probably cancer.

The Big C, as we knew it in her family, frightened me. Driving home I called a friend who knew of these things, and she patiently walked me through the worst-case scenario.

Debbie would get sicker and sicker and need help doing things one would never want or imagine having do because it seems too embarrassing or intimate. But we’d get beyond that. I’d do the things such that they would become routine, and we’d find moments of macabre humor. She might die. And if that happened, my friend finished, I would become part of the club to which no one wanted membership.

I think of my friend’s statement: that there is a vast network of people whose loved ones have died, a tribe of sorts that exists and that I would probably join. We don’t aspire to it: it’s just as a matter of simple fact. There is a band of people with a shared experience all around me, and I now know too what they know and am one of them.

In our Longest Night service this year, we spoke about how we are so dependent upon relationships. Those we wanted, those we didn’t, those we have and flourished, and those that we lost to no fault of our own, but that they are gone. We are constantly seeing people move in, around, and through our lives, and we included in that our relationship with God. The one who we trust. The one who we blame. The one to whom we cry. The one who restores. The one who overlays so many of us here.

Sometimes I wonder what are the networks of people I pass by each day—people run marathons or write poetry and songs, or taught someone else to drive, the people who donated blood yesterday, know someone with an eating disorder, or have a friend whose anxiety cannot be soothed. What is that network like? Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay Friendship, says “the heart knoweth”, and he describes a “language of wandering eye-beams” among people who silently nod to one another in some sort of shared experience. Relationships can be spoken as well as unspoken.

One of my esteemed clergy friends was speaking at last year’s Festival of Homiletics and nailed it when he said, “in baptism, we become part of a people.” each January the lectionary offers us the baptism of Christ and invites us to remember the network we hold in common: a people who believe that when the heavens open in the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, God is doing something new. God already split the waters of the Red Sea with Moses. We also remember when the Jordan River split open, right? Who did that? I’ll help us out, it was Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha.

But by splitting open the heavens, God gets us to go waaaaay back, to the beginning when the earth was separated into day and night. God split the heavens and earth into the firmament above and the sea below, back to that originality—and laying claim to Jesus within that. In the rite of baptism, that same elemental water touches us and initiates us into the tribe of people who believe in Jesus’ Messiahship.

We are part of a relationship, one that engages our entire being, and we are part of a club that is both spoken and unspoken. By going back that far, God invites us into this confessional collective into which we show up with every day. But what does that really mean? It is a worthy question. But we need to ask it each year, and I believe particularly in this one. In any given year people will have become graduates or parents or spouses or champions. Or lost. Displaced. Widows or Widowers. This year, many became for the first time protesters and questioners as the world as we explained it to them made no sense.

This was a year of awakenings for so many. We have circled around yet again to ask whether health care, education, clean water, sustainable earth, racial equality, and trust in first responders are goods we hold dear. We have begun to ask as well whether affordable child care and sexual consent and addiction treatment and economic equality and careful control of powerful weapons are also goods we ought to hold dear, dear enough to put money and policy behind them. We are connected as a people who say one thing, but in the name of God often do things God might have nothing to do with.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

We all have a prophetess in our lives who can foreshadow the future, who can see God, and we talked about this last week, who are the Anna’s in our lives. For it is in that both unexpected and surprising spoken and unspoken warp and weft of our lives that we navigate. And we are closer than we think we are to one another. The club to which you don’t seek membership is often just around the corner when you join the club you want.

Being a baptized people in this moment means we are invited to think of our collective confession—as every age before us has done, yet also uniquely in this moment. Create in me a clean heart, O God. What will our resolutions be for this year ahead as the covenanted, relationship, community of the baptized, as those identifiable to one another as people who believe that God did a new thing in Jesus? Will we finally live out mercy, kindness, compassion, charity, hope and love, or will we be too frightened to speak up and act up, because life in God belongs only on our lips and not our hearts? The choice is always ours.

Thanks be to God,

Amen.