



ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
DELRAY BEACH, FLORIDA
5 Lent - Year C - March 24/25, 2007
Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm. 126;
Philippians 3:8-14; Luke 20:0-19
March 24/25, 2007

Preacher:
The Reverend William H. Stokes, Rector

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God based on faith....

Philippians 3:7-9

“Episcopal bishops reject Anglican demand” the headline of a page 2 story in the *Palm Beach Post* read on Thursday. Below that, it said, *“The U.S. Church could face demotion or expulsion from the worldwide family of churches.”* *The New York Times* ran a similar story. The headline read, ***“Episcopal Church rejects demand for 2nd Leadership.”*** Actually, of the two headlines, that of *The Palm Beach Post* was the more accurate.

The Post headline indicated that what occurred this past week in Houston was an action of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church. *The New York Times* incorrectly inferred that what happened this past week in Texas was an action of the whole Episcopal Church. It is an important distinction.

In many ways, the error and misunderstanding of *The New York Times* underscores what is at the heart of the current dilemma facing the Episcopal Church and its relationship with the wider Anglican Communion.

In other parts of Anglicanism, Primates and bishops govern autocratically and without a great deal of accountability to others. This is the case in Nigeria, where Archbishop Peter Akinola, who has been the principle antagonist of the Episcopal Church, is Primate of the 17 million members Anglican Church of Nigeria. What Akinola says, goes, in Nigeria.

That is not the case in the 2.3 million member Episcopal Church. We are governed democratically and have been since our founding in the days following the American Revolution. Prior to the Revolutionary War there was no Anglican Communion. There was only the Church of England on American soil. Clearly, war with England made the continuance of the Church of England in America problematic.

Immediately after the Revolutionary War, those who had been members of the Church of England in America, both clergy and laity, began to organize. In Maryland in 1785, those who had been Church of England in America gathered together in convention. They adopted the name “Episcopal Church” – the word “Episcopal” being derived from the Greek word for “bishops” – and called for the meeting of a Constitutional Convention. They designated Philadelphia as the site where they would meet.

In Philadelphia, from 1787 - 1789, groups of lay persons and clergy gathered and drafted the Constitution and Canons of what would become the Protestant Episcopal Church in America - a fully autonomous and self-governing church, which had ties of affection to its English mother and her ways, but which was not at all ruled by her. Please note that these Constitutional

Conventions were being held at the very same time and in the very same city that the United States Constitution was drafted. Our governance as a church reflects this. We are a democratic church, with a bicameral legislative governing body.

One of the two governing houses, the oldest house by the way, is the House of Deputies. It is made up of clergy and lay people elected from each diocese. The “junior house” is the House of Bishops made up of all the bishops of the Episcopal Church. It is “junior,” because before Samuel Seabury was consecrated as the first American Bishop by Scottish bishops in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1784 (after English Bishops refused to consecrate him because he could not swear to the “Oath of Supremacy”), there never were any bishops of the Church on American soil. The English never sent any bishops here, not once, during the whole of the colonial period. Americans who felt called to the priesthood in the Church of England on American soil prior the American Revolution had to get on a ship and make the dangerous journey to England so that a bishop could ordain them.

The General Convention in 1787 sent two priests of its number, William White, Rector of Christ, Church, Philadelphia, (who had been a Chaplain to the Continental Congress), and Samuel Proovost, Rector of Trinity Church, New York to England to again, petition the English bishops to consecrate them as bishops. This time, the English bishops consented without requiring White and Proovost to take the Oath of Supremacy - an oath that acknowledged the King as the supreme head of the Church. When White and Proovost returned to the United States, they joined with Samuel Seabury to make up the first House of Bishops which consisted of those 3 members. These three also joined together to consecrate Thomas Claggett of Maryland the first Episcopal bishop consecrated on American soil. Claggett’s consecration,

by the way, brought together the Scottish and English lines of succession. In the catholic tradition with its apostolic succession of bishops, it takes three bishops who are in that historic succession to consecrate another bishop.

From the time of the first General Conventions forward, in the American Episcopal Church, governing authority would be shared by bishops, priests, deacons and laity. There would be no Archbishops. There would be a “Presiding Bishop” who would preside over the meetings of the House of Bishops and represent the Church to the nation and the wider world. All bishops in the Episcopal Church, as had always been the tradition in Anglicanism, were understood as having equal standing and authority. The Presiding Bishop is, to this day, a “first among equals” and does not have authority over any other bishop in their jurisdiction. The same, it should be noted, has always been the case with the Archbishop of Canterbury and any other bishop in the wider communion, at least up until now. This understanding is now being threatened.

Anyway, we are a democratic church with a bicameral governing body. No official position of this church may be stated, and no action of this church may be taken outside of General Convention, which meets every three years. That’s why *The New York Times* story headline was wrong when it said, “Episcopal Church rejects demand for 2nd Leadership.” What happened this past week was an action of one House, the House of Bishops. It was not an action of the Episcopal Church. It couldn’t be. General Convention has not met since June when it was in Columbus, Ohio.

When the Archbishop of Canterbury and the other Primates of the Anglican Communion gathered in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in February and developed a “pastoral scheme” for the Episcopal Church and demanded that actions be immediately taken by the

House of Bishops that affected the whole Episcopal Church, and when they called for an alternative Primate to come into the Episcopal Church and to have oversight of those dioceses and parishes who feel disaffected by the decisions of General Convention and who refuse to acknowledge Katharine Jefferts Schori as Primate, they were making demands that could not possibly be met. Their schemes and plans were, and are, in absolute violation of our democratic polity and processes.

In doing this, they are attempting to centralize the governance of the Anglican Communion and arrogating authority in a way that is unprecedented in our history. No matter how anyone feels about the questions and issues of human sexuality and the decisions made by recent General Conventions of the Episcopal Church, this attempt by the Primates and by the Archbishop of Canterbury to accrue power to themselves and to control and interfere with the Episcopal Church and its polity and governance, should alarm us all.

We need to remember that, historically, “communion” within Anglicanism has existed because the member provinces desired it. The four so - called “Instruments of Unity” in Anglicanism – that is, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the 38 Primates of the 38 autonomous Anglican Provinces, the Lambeth Conference of Bishops which meets every ten years, and the Anglican Consultative Council (elected lay, clergy and bishops who from each of the Provinces who meet every three years) – these Instruments of Unity have never had any formal authority over the Episcopal Church or any other member province of the Anglican Communion. They have always been only advisory. For the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Primates to now begin to develop a “Pastoral Scheme” controlled by and accountable to them and to attempt to impose this pastoral scheme on the Episcopal Church under threat of

sanctions and punishment, which is what they are, in fact, doing, is unconscionable.

At their meeting in Houston this past week, the Bishops of the Episcopal Church passed three Resolutions which represented an appropriate response: They indicated a strong desire to remain a part of the Anglican Communion. They also firmly stated that acceding to the demands being made in the primates’ pastoral scheme would be “injurious to the Episcopal Church.” They asked for a meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In a letter which was distributed at the conclusion of their meeting, the bishops gave five explanations for their refusal to accede to what the Primates were demanding. As the House of Bishops wrote:

“First, it violates our church law in that it would call for a delegation of primatial authority not permissible under our Canons and a compromise of our autonomy as a Church not permissible under our Constitution.”

“Second, it fundamentally changes the character of the Windsor process and the covenant design process in which we thought all the Anglican Churches were participating together.”

“Third, it violates our founding principles as The Episcopal Church following our own liberation from colonialism and the beginning of a life independent of the Church of England.”

“Fourth, it is a very serious departure from our English Reformation heritage. It abandons the generous orthodoxy of our Prayer Book tradition. It sacrifices the emancipation of the laity for the exclusive leadership of high-ranking Bishops. And, for the first time since our separation from the papacy in the 16th century, it replaces the local governance of the Church by its own people with the decisions of a distant and unaccountable

group of prelates.”

“Last of all,” the House of Bishops stated, “it is spiritually unsound. The pastoral scheme encourages one of the worst tendencies of our Western culture, which is to break relationships when we find them difficult instead of doing the hard work necessary to repair them and be instruments of reconciliation. The real cultural phenomenon that threatens the spiritual life of our people, including marriage and family life, is the ease with which we choose to break our relationships and the vows that established them rather than seek the transformative power of the Gospel in them. We cannot accept what would be injurious to this Church and could well lead to its permanent division.”¹

I am taking the time this morning to share all of this with you because I want you to know that what is going on is important and has serious implications for all of us. I also want you to know that I fully support the decisions and reasoning of our House of Bishops that came out of Texas this past week.. Moreover, I am proud of them and appreciate the courage they are showing both in expressing our strong desire to remain in relationship with the wider Communion and our commitment to this, but also our unwillingness to compromise values we hold dear and essential.

I know that many have been troubled and distressed by the decisions that have been made by recent General Conventions. I am truly sorry that this is so. I don't like to see people hurt. It is important that we are all sensitive about this, that we are mindful that people have been wounded and hurt over these matters, as gay and lesbian persons have been wounded and hurt throughout the Church's history.

Nonetheless, the decisions made by the Episcopal Church through its General Conventions have been the result of a lively and faithful democratic process and polity involving the full participation of

bishops, priests, deacons and lay persons under what I trust and have confidence has been the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our polity and processes have served us well throughout our history. I personally believe the decisions that we have made have been right and just. If you wish to have a fuller sense of my thinking about these matters, there are copies of a paper I wrote after the Primates' Communiqué from Dar es Salaam was released available on the piano and at the back of the church.²

I will not pretend that the Episcopal Church is perfect. I will, however, affirm my love of Christ as he is known through this church and my allegiance to its doctrine, discipline, worship and governance. Historically, we have offered the world a broad-minded, democratic catholic church in love with freedom. We have been an attractive and welcome alternative for many who see in us as a sharp contrast to centralized systems of authority and governance; to Popes and Cardinals and bishops who have little accountability beyond themselves. We have been a church of hope for those who have noticed in other expressions of catholic Christianity that laity, and women in particular, have virtually no authority or role in governance.

That is not who we as American Episcopalians are. It is not who we as Episcopalians should want to be and we should strongly resist those today who are trying to lead us in the direction of centralization and autocratic governance by an Archbishop of Canterbury and a council of Primates.

I believe our peculiar way of doing things, our ability to engage in rigorous conversation, to grapple with difficult issues and challenge one another, and our democratic processes that involve every order of ministry, represent a gift to the wider Church and the world. There has been a distinct absence of Christian charity on the part of many in the wider the Communion

toward the Episcopal Church, and especially its governing bodies. The Episcopal Church has been vilified and threatened with punitive measures, including, perhaps, formal separation from the larger Communion and its organs if it does not accede to the Primates' requests and the terms set forth both in the Primates' Communiqué and in the Windsor Report. I believe the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Primates are acting oppressively and repressively.

As the Episcopal Church, we will be determining over the next months and years how to respond in ways that are faithful to the Gospel and to our core identity as Christians. This may mean that, for the sake of our beliefs and convictions, we allow the Archbishop of Canterbury and the instruments and agencies of the wider communion to discipline and diminish us. While that would be regrettable, for the sake of justice, it is, I believe, time for us to follow in the steps of Jesus; to focus less on power and more on service and servanthood; to take up our Cross and to work with partners throughout the worldwide communion who accept us for who we are and what we are about.

I *do not* believe that the Episcopal Church should walk away or take formal action to separate ourselves from the Anglican Communion. As St. Paul writes, *No part of the body may say to another part, "I have no need of you"* (See 1 Corinthians 12:12-26). I believe we should continue to assert our membership and participation in the wider communion. Many parts of the Communion sympathize with us and don't like the way we are being treated. They will continue to be in relationship with us and to work with us no matter the decisions of Rowan Williams and the other Primates.

If the Archbishop of Canterbury and majority of the Primate's feel compelled to take action, let them do so and let us accept their decisions with grace and equanimity even if we think they are acting unjustly.

This is the Christian way, not the anger and bitterness, and destructive behaviors that have been too prevalent both in the Church and in the wider society.

Our House of Bishops has shown both love and respect for the wider Communion, but also courage and faith in standing up for their convictions and for the integrity of our church and its polity and processes. They have expressed their affection for the wider Communion and their willingness to try to find ways to meet the pastoral needs of those within the Episcopal Church who feel alienated from the Episcopal Church. They have shown their rightful and dutiful responsibility to Christ and his Church by saying to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Primates, *“You are exceeding your authority and threatening injury to this Church and its polity and we cannot allow this.”*

As we bring Lent to a close and “prepare to greet with joy the Paschal Feast,”³ it is my hope and prayer that we will not be afraid...It is my hope and prayer that we will trust in Christ, trust that the Spirit is at work in all of this, “leading us and guiding us along the way,” leading us to a new and bolder love of Christ and his resurrection power; knowledge that only comes when we share his sufferings; sufferings which are always in solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed...with the victims of injustice.

It is my hope and prayer that like St. Paul we will strain forward to what lies ahead, always pressing on toward one goal, and one goal alone, the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus!⁴

And as we pray for our beloved Church, its laity, deacons, priests and bishops; as we pray for the Archbishop of Canterbury. For the Primates and for the Anglican Communion; as we pray for a return to a spirit of respect and forbearance which, has always been a hallmark of Anglicanism, and which should, it seems to

me, be the hallmark of any truly Christian Church, let us have confidence that as St. Paul assures us, *“...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus”* (Romans 8:38-39). Amen.

-
1. See “Bishops’ Mind of the House Resolutions” and the accompanying “Communication to the Episcopal Church from the March 2007 Meeting of the House of Bishops” at the Episcopal Church Website http://www.episcopalchurch.org/79901_84230_ENG_HTML.htm
 2. Stokes, William H. “Persist on Love and Take the Lowest Seat: Responding Faithfully to the Primates’ Communiqué following their meeting in Dar es Salaam” See <http://chipstokesblog.blogspot.com/>
 3. See “Proper Preface for Lent” Book of Common Prayer” p. 379
 4. See Philippians 3:13-14