

"Faithfulness and Reconciliation"

A Sermon

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The Third Sunday of Lent

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Romans 5:1-11 and John 4:5-26

My parents divorced when I was nine years old. While divorce was not unheard of, in my rather small, conventional southern town - and while not a scandal, it was certainly a topic of discussion. It was a very difficult time in the Levenson household and to be honest, I think few of us knew very well how to handle it. One path we tried to choose was not to discuss it much, particularly in public. I still remember coming into Mrs. Brice's third grade class room the first day after the divorce - trying to act like everything was the same, while knowing it wasn't - trying to speak without addressing what happened, knowing that many were talking about it anyway. It was the large elephant in the living room that we tried to ignore. In time, we learned how to discuss it more openly, and of course, in time, I wasn't the only kid going through that kind of thing. I have also learned in time, that it is important to acknowledge elephants in living rooms.

And we've got one in the Episcopal Church. It was in Friday's paper, and on CNN, and on FOX News, and NPR and you will continue to hear more about it. The first call I got on Friday morning went like this, "Is it true?" "What?" I said, (fortunately, I had not read the morning paper). "Is it true we have been kicked out of the Anglican Communion?" At the time of receiving the call, I was joyfully shopping for vegetables with my lovely wife at Bailey's (and by the way, this is why I do not give out my cell phone number!). I had not seen the paper and no one had one. On the anxious ride home, Laura and I began to ponder all kinds of "what ifs" and "what has happened" and "surely nots."

Once I read all I could read, I called Bob Graves, who was scheduled to preach today and asked if I could exchange a Sunday with him. That's why you see his name, but not his handsome mug here today, and I am grateful to him for being willing to exchange with me. What has happened in the last few days in the Anglican Communion can at best be described as serious, at worst, and to

some, a crisis. I felt it was important on this Sunday for you to hear from your rector. I was to have been off on vacation after last week, but to do so, and to not mention what has been going on, would have been ignoring this elephant in our midst.

What I am about to say is not easy. The last few days have been very, very difficult for me. I don't want to hurt anyone and I would love for us to all just get along and I also would much rather have heard Bob Graves this morning. But there are forces and things at work about us that we simply cannot ignore, and that in the coming months, and years, will absolutely require our patience, our humility, our prayers, our faithfulness and our commitment to reconciliation with God and one another. I begin by saying you are perfectly free to disagree with me. We do not have to agree to worship together in this place. I realize I have a place of leadership in your midst, but I continue to learn something new almost everyday. I pledge to stay open to conversation and to disagreement; and simply ask that when we do disagree, let us do so in a spirit of generosity and love; and when we agree, let us affirm and uphold one another in the same spirit.

Let me recap these few things. (1) What has happened. (2) Why it has happened. (3) What has happened as a result of our actions. (4) What is asked of us. And, (5) Where do we go from here. Now that may sound like a lot, but I am going to briefly touch on these points, and following the most important part of our worship, the gathering around our Lord's Table, I will stay in the Church for any questions or discussion.

First, what has happened. We have not been excommunicated or "kicked out" of the Anglican Communion. Last count, there were 77 million Anglicans worldwide. The US part of that pie, is quite slim - about 2.3 million. There are four instruments of unity that serve our worldwide Communion - the Lambeth Conference (all of our Bishops that meet every ten years); the Primates Meeting (regular meetings for the senior archbishops of the 38 provinces, of which we are one), the Anglican Consultative Council which meets every three years and includes three representatives from each Province and lastly, the Archbishop of Canterbury in his international role as, primus inter pares" or "first among equals."

The American Church has been asked to voluntarily withdraw from participation in one of these instruments of unity - the Anglican Consultative Council or ACC until the next Lambeth Conference, scheduled for 2008. In short, we have been disciplined and we cannot, nor should we, make light of this in any way.

I know there are some who say "Why should we care about what the rest of the Communion thinks about us? Why can't we just live and let live?" In the Preamble to the Constitution of the Episcopal Church, it notes that we are

"constituent members" of the worldwide Anglican Communion. We cannot simply ignore this reality. We are part of a larger family, and our larger family is trying to tell us that we are, whether we intend to or not, hurting them and hurting the mission of the Gospel.

Secondly, why has this happened? This is the most difficult part of this sermon to deliver. Because I have friends who are homosexual, and friends who have family members who are homosexual, they may interpret this as homophobic or discriminatory. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is entirely possible to stand in different places on these issues and not only worship with one another, but also be in communion with each other, love each other and try to work to understand each other. It is not easy - and there are not easy answers. But what has happened grows out of our Church grappling with issues surrounding human sexuality, that is the chief elephant in the room.

In the midst of their report, our Primates were clear that there are two separate, but related issues going on - first issues of sacramental rites (chiefly ordination and same sex unions) being offered to persons who are active homosexuals, and second, how to be inclusive of homosexual persons within our Church family. As to this last issue, they could not have been any clearer, "We...wish to make it quite clear that in our discussion and assessment of the moral appropriateness of specific human behaviours, we continue unreservedly to be committed to the pastoral support and care of homosexual people. The victimization or diminishment of human beings whose affections happen to be ordered towards people of the same sex is anathema to us. We assure homosexual people that they are children of God, loved and valued by him, and deserving of the best we can give of pastoral care and friendship." I can assure you that is the position of this rector, this parish and this Diocese.

But, the Church is calling on us to hold this pastoral care and friendship, in tension with the authority of the worldwide Anglican Communion, the traditional teachings of the Church with regard to human sexuality and the authority of Scripture.

At our General Convention in 2003, those gathered voted by a slim margin, showing great divisiveness in our own house, to both allow for continued studies of same-sex union liturgies and for approval the consecration of the man elected as Bishop of New Hampshire, V. Gene Robinson, who was homosexual and living with his partner. It was by no means a slam dunk and neither "side" could, or should, claim a victory.

In October of 2003, the 38 primates issued a unanimous statement reaffirming the traditional teaching on sexuality as defined by the 1998 Lambeth Conference, that "...in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage; and cannot advise

the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions." I need to add here that this is the clear position of your rector, our Bishop, and all of the Bishops of Province IV, which includes virtually the entire southeast and all five Dioceses in Florida.

The Primates warned that if the Consecration of the Bishop-elect of New Hampshire went ahead, together with continued rites for blessings of same-sex unions, that the Communion had "reached a crucial critical point" and that "the future of the Communion itself will be put in jeopardy." In November, following this stern warning, the Bishop of New Hampshire was consecrated, and our own Presiding Bishop participated, bringing about the forecasted jeopardy of our Communion.

As a result, our Archbishop Rowan Williams established the Lambeth Commission on Communion made up of Anglican leaders from around the world to advise on ways forward. The result of that Commission was the Windsor Report, which was released in October of 2004. That report included many recommendations and was accepted and endorsed by the Primates at their meeting this week. There are no "competing reports," as it is inclusive of the mind of the Church right now, and as Archbishop Williams noted in his address to the Primates last week, that it is arguably "the only game in town."

Chief among the strongest recommendations of Windsor was a plea to for the American Church to acknowledge the pain it had caused the greater communion and explicitly express its regret; to immediately put a moratorium on similar ordinations and/or same-sex blessings; to express regret where Bishops had crossed into Dioceses without permission to offer visitations or sacramental acts; to offer a moratorium on those kinds of visits; and to work tirelessly to maintain our unity despite all of these differences which now exist. Parts of our Church leadership responded quickly to endorse these recommendations, other parts did not. Thus, we have now been asked to step back and prayerfully consider what we have done and how it has affected our Anglican family and what steps we should take to restore our greater unity.

Thus, thirdly, let me take a moment to consider what has happened in the American Church since these actions? We were told by the proponents of the actions of General Convention that if it was "of God" that it would bear fruit. I confess, I have not seen this fruit.

Virtually every gathering at each Diocesan Convention has been dominated not by the greater mission of the Church, to reach souls for Christ, but by these issues. Divisiveness, discord and discussion dominate most clergy gatherings. Over a dozen Provinces in the Anglican Communion have already declared themselves either out of Communion with the American Church or in a state of impaired communion.

Giving to the national Church dropped by 12% in 2004; and giving to most,

including our own, Dioceses has decreased. While there are pockets of Church growth, and Christ Church is one of them, nearly 44,000 folk left the Episcopal Church in the last two years, and average church attendance has dropped by over 35,000. We are seeing no measurable growth of our American Church, and even with all their problems, there are nearly as many Roman Catholics in the state of Florida now, as there are Episcopalians in the US. Not only our interfaith dialogue (with Muslims and Jewish folk), but also our ecumenical dialogue with Romans, Orthodox and other Christian denominations has been sorely hampered.

Those who supported these measures have deeply hurt the Body of Christ. Archbishop Williams, with heart-breaking clarity, spoke of this Thursday a week ago, "There are consequences in hurt, misunderstanding, rupture and damage. It does us no good to pretend that the cost is not real...So I don't think it will quite do [to] say ...that a risky act ought to have or can have no consequences...the effects [of what has happened] are serious and they are hurtful. And part of the cost involved in repercussions of recent events is...that it has weakened if not destroyed the sense we are actually talking the same language within the Anglican Communion....People are no longer confident that we are speaking the same language...and the deep lost-ness and confusion that arises from that and the anger that arises from that is something that does not in any sense help the long-term health of the body or our search for truth together in the Body."

At their recent council meeting in the Diocese of Virginia, our own Peter Lee, who voted to support the consecration of the Bishop of New Hampshire stated this, "Looking back at the last year and a half, I see now that the Episcopal Church, in the confirmation of the Bishop of New Hampshire, acted without proper regard to the need for mutual submission to their concerns of the worldwide Anglican Communion. I regret that..."

And in an interview with George Carey the week prior to his visit with us, he said that the church's implicit endorsement of same-sex unions by approving Robinson as a bishop was wrong, saying "I believe it was a mistake, it is a mistake" and "...is...indicative of the spirit of the world taking over the spirit the church."

I agree with Archbishop Williams, Lord Carey and Bishop Lee, and their assessments. But the deed has been done, and now we see the damage that has been done, so what is asked of us?

I think now is a time for no one, on either end of these terribly difficult and divisive issues to stick out their chests with pride and attempt to proclaim winners or losers; to get up on our haunches; to seek to battle. I believe those who looked at those strong recommendations of the primates, and ignored them, and those who may do so now, were and are acting arrogantly and

without regard for the authority of our greater Communion, our brothers and sisters around the world, and the authority of our tradition and the authority of Scripture.

Now is the time to step back; to pray; to listen; to discuss in a spirit of love and mutual respect. And it is a time for humility - great humility. That means some of us may not get our way. I can assure you, in many respects, I have not "gotten my way" in what we have seen playing out in the Episcopal Church in the last few years, far from it. If you don't get your way - the answer, I think, is not to cut and run. I will also agree with Lord Carey who said to many of us, the answer is not further division, but a deeper commitment to faithfulness and to unity. So, then, lastly, where do we go from here?

I think we are called to faithfulness and to reconciliation. Our Scripture lessons today, oddly enough, point us in those directions. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus encounters a woman torn in many directions. She's a Samaritan, so she's already seen by most as an outcast. And within minutes we learn that she is living with a man, and has already had five husbands. She's obviously on a spiritual quest, but has so much in front of her, that it is hard to know where to begin. Jesus says to her, "Begin with Me." He tells her that when the world is spiritually thirsty, they need to turn to Him - because He is the Living Water.

That is why, with today as an important exception, what you hear primarily from the lips of this rector and my fine associates, is preaching, teaching and counsel toward a personal, deep and intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. That is the core mission of our Church - Christ Church Parish; and of the greater Church. Last week we welcomed the largest confirmation class in the last fifty years - perhaps the largest in our history. In their confirmation promises there was no word about commitment to Christ Church Parish, to the Episcopal Church or to the Anglican Communion - but a pledge to commit ourselves to Jesus Christ, and follow him as Savior and Lord. That's it. That's our hope...not an issue, not a position, not a particular Church, not a denomination - Jesus Christ. And I think, I believe, that is what we are doing at Christ Church Parish - and so I ask you to remain faithful to this place and the Lord Who is its, Who is our, Head.

Lastly, I think we are called to be reconciled to God and to one another. What also arose in the last few days from our Primates, is a call to work toward unity despite our differences. There is no question, that we, the American Church, is responsible for threatening that unity. That is why we have been disciplined, and I believe rightly so. I think the path, however, to restoring that unity, is our humility, our prayer, our faithfulness to Scripture, and our submission to Christ. It is my prayer that our leaders will have the foresight to step back and look at what has happened, and when and where necessary, change their direction. If they do not, I think we are in for further division. The only path away from that division is reconciliation, grounded in Christ. That is why, in Paul's letter to the

Romans, he writes, "For while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

I think this crisis moment, and I do not think it is exaggeration to call it that, is calling us all - all of us; those on the right, the left and in the middle; those who care deeply, and those who do not care at all; all of us - to our knees; to reconsider who we are and who we are called to be; to strip away the outer layers of Churchianity, which are so often decoration and to some degree idolatry; and recommit ourselves to the beating heart of Christianity - a pledge to love God and love our neighbor; to know Christ and make Him known; and to give our lives for the sake of the Gospel.

One thing that came to me afresh last week during Lord Carey's visit; is that God takes care of His children. To not worry. To give ourselves to Him more and more. To trust God and trust that is enough - it is His Church and He will take care of it; in all of its brokenness and corruption; in all of its beauty and wonder; in all of its infidelity and faithfulness; He will take care of His own.

By God's grace, may the heartfelt prayer of our lips, be evident in our lives; and may we commit ourselves to faithfulness and to reconciliation grounded in Christ Jesus our Lord - that, is, our only hope.

Amen.