

A Sermon by Fr. Davenport, July 26, 2009

Pentecost VIII, Year B, Proper 12

2 Samuel 11:1-15

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 6:1-21

+ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the spiritual benefits of being an Episcopalian is that every third summer the church's primary governance body, the General Convention, meets. Almost as certain as death and taxes, it stirs the pot. At one stage, I took sides, often forming quite one-sided sympathies. But over many years, I've noticed two things. First, church politics usually tempts me to divert my attention from what's most exciting about being a Christian and from the first principles of the gospel. Second, despite the headlines General Convention produces, I'm not sure that its work makes much of a difference to my experience of Jesus, to my service to Jesus and other people, even to my parish life.

I am concerned about the strife and controversy in the church, and I'm saddened that there are deep divisions and that some are leaving the Episcopal Church. Philip Jenkins is a prolific and widely esteemed historian of Christianity. He recently wrote a column, tucked in the back pages of *The Wall Street Journal*, about the Episcopal Church's situation.¹ I share his confusion that "it is not wholly clear who is seceding from whom." While as many as 100,000 people are leaving the Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Church itself "is defying the global Anglican Communion," separating itself by not refraining from ordaining openly gay clergy.

"Whatever the rights and wrongs of this particular case," Jenkins writes, "it is anything but rare. At no point in Christian history, at least since the apostles left Jerusalem, has one single church plausibly claimed the authority of all believers." The Church has always been messy, agitated, full of controversy and - alas - full of invective, directed inwardly as well as outwardly. That the Church has continued not merely to survive, but thrive and expand tremendously, I can only attribute to the Holy Spirit. In this, I rejoice.

But even a superficial read of scripture shows us the apostles and disciples fighting among themselves even before Jesus died. Winners write the history, and over time they might seem to us to be destined. So what were initially minority positions sometimes become orthodoxy and sometimes are forgotten. Arguments for tradition or for interpreting tradition in new ways take generations to resolve.

In the decades after Jesus ascended, St. Paul championed the unpopular position that circumcision wasn't necessary to be a Christian. Eventually his side won, but only after intense acrimony. In the fourth century, the Arians, now considered to be heretical and schismatic, may have been more mainstream, more numerous, more scripturally based than the Trinitarians. Of course, the Trinitarian position eventually defeated the Arian position, but it was hardly obvious, not at all a foregone conclusion.

¹ Philip Jenkins, 'Their Separate Ways,' *The Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2009, p. W11.

In the eleventh century, the Church divided formally into east and west, a formal division of a reality that had existed for centuries. After this division, each half divided further, continuing steadily to divide, and many, if not most, of these claiming to be the true church, the most complete expression of God's will, one pomposity after another. Perhaps every Christian is schismatic, but let's not think about that possibility too much and instead blame the other guy for causing the problems.

It reminds me of that Beatles' song:

Try to see it my way
Only time will tell if I am right or I am wrong
While you see it your way
There's a chance that we may fall apart before too long
We can work it out

That is, "you work it out my way, or else!" It's satire: it'll only work out if you see it my way. If you see it my way, we stay together. If we see it your way, we fall apart. Do we allow the possibility that we might be wrong? Do we allow for the possibility that we have something to learn from those with whom we differ?

Jenkins reminds us how the New Testament suggests we respond to controversy. In Acts 5, the Jewish high priest had the apostles arrested, and a Jewish court tried them. When questioned, the apostles' answers enraged the court, and the court wanted to execute the apostles, but a Pharisee, Gamaliel stepped forward and urged restraint. He made a speech reminding people of previous controversies and schismatic movements within Judaism and how they had petered out. Gamaliel said, "[if this movement, this following of Jesus,] is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God." (Acts 5:38-39) In other words, these troublesome, annoying apostles, if they are following their own agenda, it'll fail. If it's God's agenda, you can't stop it. Nothing can.

Writing in the 14th century, Thomas a Kempis left us the cliché: Man proposes, but God disposes. Everything is in God's hands. He's not abandoning the Church. That's the message in today's gospel where Jesus walks on water, walking over the infinity of time, walking over chaos, to be with the disciples. The disciples are in a boat, symbolic of the Church being tossed to and fro, and Jesus says, "It is I." I am with you. "Do not be afraid."

Our controversies don't have to worry us and stress us out. We can trust God. It requires our patience, but he'll take care of things - in his own way, in his own time. In the meantime, we take care of things under our control, like dealing with our own issues, our relationships, our mission, our faithfulness to God, our service to others, rather than distracting ourselves, pointing fingers at others. It's Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer:

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;

Taking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next.

Serenity and sanity come from having the self-awareness to know the limits of our judgment and competence. We can worry about troubles and problems “out there,” or we can focus on our own relationship to God, on things over which we have some control.

Restraint, self-control, caution about judging, being mindful of our relationship to God are all themes in the story of David’s injustice to Uriah. Today, we heard part one of it; next week we’ll hear the conclusion.

David sent his army out to battle his enemies, and unlike what is expected of kings, David remained lounging in his palace. Today we see an incongruous picture. David, one of the great heroes of the Bible, is impulsive, indolent, dissolute – softened by the perks of being king and neglecting his responsibilities.

One afternoon David awoke from his nap and spied a beautiful woman taking her bath. This Peeping Tom had many wives, but not this woman. Bathsheba is Uriah’s wife. She’s off limits. David’s desire, however, was greater than his respect for Uriah, Bathsheba, or God’s law. He exercised no restraint, no self-discipline; he took what he wanted. Bathsheba became pregnant, and this created a crisis. The king would not be able to keep his soldiers at the front fighting his wars if they couldn’t leave their women in safety at home with the king.

David called Uriah home from the front and told him to bathe his feet. In Hebrew, feet is often a euphemism for another body part. David gave Uriah a fairly explicit order to sleep with Bathsheba, but Uriah refused to enter his house, to see his wife, and he refused on honorable grounds: there’s a war, his superiors and friends were sleeping in the open, the ark of the covenant (the presence of God) is dwelling in a tent – how could he feast and be with his wife? Uriah slept in the street that night.

Foiled, David resorted to the cad’s oldest friend – alcohol. David got Uriah drunk the next night, trying to weaken his resolve, but even drunk Uriah was disciplined, principled, honorable. He wouldn’t see Bathsheba. Again, he slept in the street outside the king’s palace. David was inside, sleeping on his cushy bed.

Since Uriah wouldn’t cooperate, David raised the stakes. He decided to get rid of him. David ordered his chief general – Joab – to arrange for Uriah’s death, for him to be slaughtered by the enemy. Joab was a clever commander, and he figured out a way for the enemy to kill Uriah along with some other soldiers. As so often, the coverup was even worse than the original crime.

David is God’s chosen. God blessed him with defeating Goliath, with protection from Saul, with the throne of Israel, with wives and children, with wealth and comfort. But in today’s lesson, David’s

broke half of the Ten Commandments: he murdered Uriah, he coveted Bathsheba, he committed adultery, he lied and dissembled, he stole, taking what wasn't his.

In next week's lesson, we hear God's response. God doesn't act with dramatic power, but rather has his prophet Nathan tell David a story. A rich man and a poor man lived in a city. The rich man had numerous flocks and herds, but the poor man has nothing other than one little lamb. He raised it almost as if it were his child, sharing food from his table, allowing the lamb to drink from his cup and to lie in his bosom. Nathan says that the lamb was like a daughter to him. One day a traveler came to the rich man's house, and the rich man was not willing to share of his own flocks or herds to feed his guest. So the rich man extended hospitality by taking the poor man's lamb and serving it to his visitor.

Of course, this is a parable interpreting David's treatment of Uriah and Bathsheba. But that wasn't immediately apparent to David. When Nathan finished his story, David exploded, full of fury: "The man who did this ought to be lynched! He must repay for the lamb four times over for his crime, his lack of compassion!" (2 Sam 12:6) Nathan replied, "You are that man!"

David is quick to judge and slow to see himself as bearing any responsibility. Might not every one of us see at least a bit of David in ourselves? In crisis, when things seem troubling, we so often want bold, decisive action, the comfort of certain judgment. We want to blame others. The more appropriate response is restraint, humility, charity. We can focus on the faults and problems of others, the things "out there" we judge to be messing everything up, or we can recognize that our own behavior and faith is our chief responsibility.

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