



All the Sacraments for All the Baptized The Episcopal Church: True to Itself

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
The Feast of William White ~ July 19, 2009*

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'
Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me,
'Do not say, "I am only a boy";
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the Lord.'
Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,
'Now I have put my words in your mouth.
See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.'

John 21:15-17

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'

I have just returned from Anaheim California where for more than a week I joined the bishops, lay persons, deacons, and priests, elected to serve as deputies at the triennial General Convention of the Episcopal Church. This Convention is our governing body; it determines the constitution and canons, the shape of our worship, the mission priorities, strategic goals, and the budget for the church. A bicameral legislative body, with some 200 members of the House of Bishops, and approximately 800 members of the House of Deputies, the General Convention is a major undertaking. A time of reunion, of innovative worship, and of gathering the church from extraordinarily diverse backgrounds and perspectives, it is a powerfully inspiring event.

We took some extraordinary and very exciting steps: we opened the way for diocese in the church to lift up and ordain as bishops any person duly qualified, including those of us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered. Further, we opened the way to develop liturgical rites for the blessing of same-gendered persons and we charged a commission to articulate a theologically evolving understanding of marriage. Because I believe that the love of Christ and the sacraments of the church are intended by God for the reconciliation and full inclusion

of *all* persons, I was excited and am proud that my own affirmative vote counted in these matters. As our former presiding bishop Edmund Browning said a couple of decades ago, “there will be no outcasts in this church.”

These are dramatic decisions with far-reaching implications. I believe they are prophetic actions. We hear from the prophet Jeremiah this morning. Prophets are called to speak of that which is not yet. Prophets are called to challenge the existing order of life and to invite their audience to imagine an altogether different order of life. The heart of Jeremiah’s call and ministry is summed up in God’s commission of him: “I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” To pluck up and to pull down, to build and to plant; in the Episcopal Church we are breaking down walls of fear and prejudice that divide and we are building a new thing: the full inclusion of all persons.

But we do so at what cost? Are we ready to take this step? Will this not cause division and rancor between the progressive and traditional branches of our church? Will the Episcopal Church be set apart and cast out from the worldwide Anglican Communion of which we are a part?

In a moment, I will say more about our place within the Anglican Communion, but there was a clear sense in Anaheim, that the unity of the Episcopal Church in this country is abiding, strong, and filled with grace. How can this be? Aren’t some people radically opposed? Yes, they are. But through great care, deep attentiveness, and what I can only call holy listening, even the most conservative of delegates indicated that they remain committed to the unity of the church. It was clear that the bishops, in particular, have invested a great deal in nurturing respectful relationships.

When the House of Bishops overwhelmingly approved gathering material for liturgical rites for same-sex unions, twenty-six bishops drafted and signed a dissenting view. But within their statement, they make clear that it is intended not to divide or obstruct, not to say they quit, but to offer and share their alternative perspective – and to affirm that they were heard by the majority.

Followers of Christ have been gathering in councils since the beginning; the disciples gathered to choose Matthias to replace Judas, to elect the first deacons, to debate whether or not to preach to the gentiles; later disciples gathered to clarify doctrines about Jesus and the Trinity. Today we observe the special feast day of William White – a saint in the church and for many years the rector of Christ and St. Peter’s. Bishop White is the chief architect of the structures that govern the Episcopal Church – from our first convention in 1785, up to this present 76th Convention. White’s driving conviction was that the presence and will of God may be apprehended and carried out by all members of the church: lay persons, priests, and deacons, as well as bishops – a conviction that is not shared by all branches of the Anglican Communion.

If holy listening was the means by which we gathered, the defining belief for many was best articulated by Integrity – which is the fellowship and voice of the LGBT community in the church – has affirmed time and time again: “all the sacraments for all the baptized”! If baptism means full initiation into the body of Christ, then once baptized, there are no partial members of that body; all are full members.

Returning to the question of how our action will be received by the rest of the Anglican Communion, the will of the Convention was first and foremost to be true to ourselves. We heard from many guests who helped us gain perspective, to catch a glimpse of how at least some others see us. One was Jenny Te Paa, Dean of the Theological College in Auckland, New Zealand. Dr. Te Paa is an indigenous member of the Maori people and a brilliant Anglican theologian. She spoke of a time not long ago when the Church of New Zealand took a decisive – and divisive – step toward full inclusion, knowing that it might jeopardize their relationship with others in the communion. She challenged us to consider carefully what our relationship with the wider communion would be built upon if we are not being true to ourselves. If you are not revealing and expressing your self clearly in your relationship with another, do not be surprised if the other misunderstands you and the relationship is diminished.

Said Jenny Te Paa, “We were at the time thankful for the opinions of others, we were appalled and saddened by others but at the end of the day we sought to proceed to do what we truly believed God was calling, urging, pleading with us to do, which was in our case to do with redeeming our Church’s historic legacy of grave injustice toward minority indigenous peoples including indigenous or Maori Anglicans.” “I see clear parallels here,” said she. “Episcopal Church sisters and brothers, you too must follow your contextual spiritual conscience because in the first instance you have to live justly with yourselves in order that you can in turn and in time, live justly and in good faith with others in the Communion.”

If you hear nothing else today, hear the charge “in the first instance” “to live justly with yourselves.” In the end, each of the approved resolutions was our best statement of who we are as a church today; what we believe, and what we’re going to do about it; honest and true. Articulated in the context of holy and respectful councils, and firm in our conviction that all the sacraments are for all the baptized. Thus, we are not afraid. We rejoice. The

truth is setting us free.

“Do you love me?” Jesus asked Peter – three times. “Yes, Lord, I love you; you know I love you.” Peter replied – three times. “Feed my sheep.” Jesus commanded. Feed those who are in your care. Feed those whom you know, your partner, your spouse, your parents, children, friends, neighbors, and strangers. Feed those in your care. To feed all, you may need to pluck up and pull down before you can plant and build. But in love, and for love, and with love, the love of God that passes all understanding shall be upon you and within you and among you.

I end with a prayer for the church: “O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” *The Book of Common Prayer, p.515*