

August 3, 2003

St. James, Glastonbury

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Ephesians 4:17-25; John 6:24-35

As Episcopalians our eyes are directed this week to Minneapolis where the delegates and bishops of the Episcopal Church began their every 3rd year General Convention. As you all know, this year's convention is already stirring up a lot of controversy, most of it directed to the issues of approving the election of an openly gay Bishop and of blessing same-sex relationships.

In light of this important and contentious moment in the life of our Church, how significant are the words of Paul in this morning's epistle to the Ephesians? In addition to reminding the members of that church that they have been renewed in the spirit of their minds and clothed in a new self, he tells them that they must speak the truth to each other, for, as he says explicitly, "we are members of one another."

In last Sunday's epistle, Paul also reminded them that they are knit together by every ligament with which the community is equipped so as to promote the body's growth in building itself up in love.

But speaking the truth to one another and promoting the love that will hold the community together are not always compatible. We all know that sometimes speaking the what we believe to be the truth to someone will threaten to harm the relationship. Even in the closest of relationships too much truth spoken too baldly and at the wrong time can do as much damage as it does good. "Does this suit or dress make me look too fat?" "What do you think of my driving, dear?" Who wants to answer those questions truthfully?

Nevertheless, a belief that some kind of truth is at stake underlies the contentiousness of the issues before the Church. We cannot avoid speaking about these things because they are at the heart of the church's discussions nationally and internationally. The problem is that different people have different versions of what they take to be the truth and often cannot recognize any truth in what the other side has to say. And some have said that each side should avoid speaking its truth because to do so would result in the fracture the unity of the Church.

The problem is that if you believe that a fundamental moral issue is at stake, it is hard to place the unity of the Church ahead of the practices and teachings you feel are endangering the moral soul of the Church. In retrospect, it is easy to say now that by refusing to condemn slavery in the 1850s, the Episcopal Church preserved its organizational unity but at the cost of its moral credibility. Was the unity of the Church a higher value than the horrendous treatment of Africans under the brutal regime of slavery, some of it by Episcopalian slave-owners? Failure to challenge slavery was too high a price to pay to preserve the unity of the Church. The unity of the Church is not always the trump card that ought to settle internal debates, especially when moral issues are at stake.

The second dimension of the debates in Minneapolis has to do with disagreements regarding the authority by which Christians should determine what they are supposed to do as disciples of Christ. Unlike those Churches which believe in a single authority, for example the literal words of Scripture, Episcopalians have traditionally relied upon 4 different authorities: Scripture, reason, tradition, and human experience. Ideally, these authorities will agree but in practice they occasionally don't. And sometimes they agree on moral issues that conflicts with our contemporary moral sensibilities. Slavery is a perfect example of a practice that was supported by at least three of these authorities. Only the human experience of being enslaved trumped the slave owners' justification for slavery. Tradition defended slavery for centuries and yet today we would not appeal to tradition in order to support slavery. Reason

tells us that slavery is immoral but obviously moral people condoned slavery in the past. Even Scripture failed to condemn slavery. It was a practice among the ancient Israelites and even in the New Testament Jesus does not explicitly condemn it. Slave owners in America relied upon the Bible as their sanction for slavery. And of course there are things in Scripture that today we would not accept, such as regarding women as property or as unfit to speak in Church.

There are many Christians today who argue that on the issue of gay bishops and same-sex unions, Scripture is not entirely clear. Homosexual acts were condemned in the Old Testament because men played the part of women and being a woman was clearly inferior to being a man. In the New Testament, Paul's condemnation of homosexual relations was based on his belief that it was unnatural and therefore immoral. But today scientific evidence suggests that some portion of the population is genetically programmed toward homosexuality and for them it is a natural expression of who God created them to be.

If it is true that homosexuality is 'natural' for a portion of the human race (that is, it is not a chosen but a given part of their nature), then couldn't the conversation be about something even more important than what is natural or biological: couldn't we focus the discussion instead on the quality of human relationships and what moral standards ought to guide them? I think both sides of the current debate would agree that love, fidelity, compassion, and commitment are central to the kinds of relationships God intends for us to have, no matter who we are in relationship with, whether it's parent or child, spouses, friends, or partners. Some would argue that the Bible is less interested in the biology of sex than it is in the quality of love between persons of which sex is only a part. If two people genuinely love each other, and are committed to each other for a lifetime should it matter whether they share a common gender? The experience (one of the authorities for belief) of many committed faithful life-time gay partners must at least be listened to. If love and fidelity are the hallmarks of a Christian relationship, can these not be found in gay relationships as well as in heterosexual ones?

At the same time those who have spoken out most strongly against the immorality of much in our society today are absolutely right to insist that morality must be at the heart of any relationships. Those who argue that Christian morality is being undermined by contemporary practices are absolutely right to insist on maintaining the highest standards of ethical behavior in the deepest of all human relationships. Casual sex, licentious sex, infidelity, tenuous and fleeting commitments to others – all must be condemned as inconsistent with Christian morality, whether they occur in homosexual or heterosexual relations. Those who argue most passionately for a more liberal view of homosexuality must take the moral dimension of all relationships with utmost seriousness. And as for blessing same sex relationships [which is not the same as marriage, an entirely different issue], then if we can bless animals, books, motorcycles, fishing boats, and houses, can't we bless the relationships between human beings that adhere to the highest standards of love and faithfulness?

If we are, as Paul says, truly members of one another, we should be able to talk about these issues as a community, as we are doing in Minneapolis and churches around the world, willing to share our version of the truth with others and willing to hear their version, without rancor and vituperation. The one thing we all share is a belief in the fundamental value of love and the flourishing of all human beings who belong equally to the family of God. Instead of focusing on the divisive aspects of the issues before the Church, let us focus on those things which we all hold in common: the quality and enhancement of genuine, lasting, faithful love, wherever it may be found. For love, and that abundantly, is what God wishes for all of us. We can do no less than try to find ways to nurture and support love, for love is the heart of God and love is what God has given to us through the sacrifice of His son. Let us not sacrifice the

deepest treasure of the Church to issues that, at least so far, have obscured the reality and centrality of that love in all that we do as Christians.

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