

Speaking of “Manner of life ...”

July 9, 2006 ~ All Saints Church, Pasadena ~ Susan Russell
(Proper 9B) 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-6

On June 1st I celebrated the 10th anniversary of my ordained ministry and, as anniversaries will do, that benchmark prompted me to reflect on “days gone by.” And I found myself remembering those earliest days of my ordained ministry, when I was serving up the hill at St. Mark’s, Altadena – and recalling that one of the things I asked for as a fledging preacher was sermon feedback from the congregation. So we created a “feedback form” that folks were encouraged to fill out and I’m remembering one particular week when there was a nice stack of them waiting for me on my desk on Monday morning.

I don’t actually remember what the sermon was about but since I’ve been told that every preacher only HAS “one sermon” I expect it was a variation on mine: God loves you beyond measure ... now go out and love others as God has loved you. Anyway, what I DO remember is that somewhere I had used a rainbow as an illustration to make some point or the other. Sifting through the comment forms on my desk one practically leapt up from the pile: *“When you talked about the rainbow I suddenly understood myself to loved – to be included – to be part of the Body of Christ in a way I never thought applied to me. And for the first time I took communion believing that “take, eat, this is my body which was given for you” really meant ME! Your sermon changed my life. Thank you.”*

Wow. If I had never preached another word that would have made all the student loans from seminary worth it! And then I turned to the very next feedback form in the pile. *“Nice sermon. Good delivery. But the rainbow illustration seemed out of place; for me, the sermon would have been stronger if you’d left it out.”* And I thought, “Well, there it is.” And I was tempted to take those two feedback forms and go to Aaron Brothers and buy one of those dual-mat frames and hang them up – side by side – over my desk as a reminder that you can never please all of the people all of the time and that one person’s life changing image is another person’s “didn’t work for me” illustration. That realization – coming as it did in my first days as a deacon -- came with a certain sense of freedom: the freedom that comes with knowing that since you’re never going to manage to make everybody happy anyway you might as well focus on being faithful to the word you’ve been given to preach.

Nothing I have done, learned, experienced or absorbed in these now 10+ years of parish ministry has done anything other than confirm that fundamental life-lesson I learned from those sermon feed-back forms piled on my desk as a still-wet-behind-the-ears deacon from Altadena.

And that includes the 75th General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Perhaps you heard about it? For while it was not the all-church-all-the-time media event we experienced three years ago with the election of our friend Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire the Episcopal Church did manage to make some news: both good and bad. The good news was the election of Katharine Jefferts Schori as the first-ever woman Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and the first-ever woman Primate in the Anglican Communion – a brave, courageous choice of faith over fear, of looking ahead rather than looking back, of pinch-me-I-must-be-dreaming-who-ever-thought-we’d-live-long-enough-to-see-a-woman-presiding-bishop. It was a very proud moment for this church.

And then there was “the other news” – after nine days of legislative wrangling, we ended up passing what was presented as a compromise “Response to the Windsor Report” resolution designed to keep the American Episcopal Church on the global Anglican Island by agreeing not to consent “*to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion.*”

It was a very **not**-proud moment for the church as it caved to threats that unless we gave “something” our bishops would not be invited to the once-a-decade gathering of Anglican bishops called the Lambeth Conference scheduled for 2008. And the “something” we gave was a compromise that in the end compromised nothing but the integrity of those who voted against their consciences and achieved nothing but writing sacramental apartheid into the annals of our church’s historic record.

Clearly anyone reading “*whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion*” who doesn’t read “gay and lesbian folk need not apply” has missed a few critical episodes of “As The Anglican World Turns.” And just as clearly, anyone reading “*whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion*” who DOESN’T think a woman Presiding Bishop [a] presents a challenge and [b] will lead to further strains on communion isn’t reading their email.

And they’re welcome to read mine – frankly somebody should because I can’t keep up with it. Is it the end of the world as we know it or another one step back before two steps forward on that arc of history that bends toward justice? Depends who you ask. Was it a reasonable “calling their bluff” offer to the wider communion or a bloody, sacrificial offering of gay and lesbian vocations on the altar of global Anglican politics? Depends who’s writing the email. Just like my decade old sermon feedback forms there are very different “take aways” from the recent events in the national Episcopal Church.

I'm hearing from folks who think the leadership of our justice lobby failed by not pushing hard enough and from those who think we failed by pushing too hard. I'm hearing from people who just can't DO this anymore and need to step away out in exhaustion, anger and just plain sadness -- and I'm hearing from those who have been complacently on the sidelines and are newly invigorated by what happened in Columbus -- ready to step up and engage in the struggle for justice.

My own opinion? I think the General Convention of the Episcopal Church showed a stunning lack of moral leadership when it caved to the internal and external pressure to sacrifice the core value of gospel justice for the institutional value of corporate unity.

I think when history looks back on these events we will rightly be judged for placing the unity of the institution over the call of the Gospel – AND in the long run, I think it is be one of those two steps forward-one step back moments that grieves the hearts of those watching the church step back from being all it could be but in the end is part of the movement forward toward the church I believe we are both called and destined to be.

And I think we need to be asking ourselves why a people who threw a tea party in the Boston Harbor to achieve liberty and justice for all in 1776 allowed themselves to be blackmailed into bigotry to secure an invitation to a tea party at Lambeth Palace in 2006.

But most importantly, what I think we need to be asking ourselves is “where do we go from here” – and for that I want to turn not to the question that was all the rage a short while ago ... “What Would Jesus Do?” ... but to the question “What DID Jesus Do?” And for the answer we turn to today's Gospel according to Mark.

What did Jesus do when faced with the competing values of speaking the truth about God's inclusive love as he received and understood it and keeping the Anglican Communion – ooops ... I mean the hometown synagogue – happy? Did he consider finding a way to compromise justice for the sake of unity? I mean really – wouldn't the Gospel have been just as well served if he'd given them a little more time to get used to the idea ... if he didn't push them so hard ... if he, well, maybe if he'd gotten a Special Commission together to craft some complex resolutions that would have used really a lot of words so say not so very much and offered them as a compromise to those who just couldn't quite “go there” yet.

What DID Jesus do? He spoke the truth as he received it. And he let the chips fall where they might. In our gospel reading today we're told “they found these things to be stumbling blocks.” Another translation says, “And they took offense at him.” In other

words, he strained the bonds of affection. He challenged the wider community – he more than challenged them, he enraged them!

In Luke’s account of this same story we hear what it was that Jesus preached that got their knickers in a knot: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

And he ended his “sermon” by saying, *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”* And the story ends “They got up, drove him out of the town and led him to the brow of a hill on which their town was built so that they might hurl him off the cliff.”

No “cake on the lawn” for this hometown boy back for a preaching gig – no invitation to the first-century Palestinian version of tea-at-Lambeth. He was a prophet without honor in his hometown – and yet he kept on preaching.

Proclaiming good news to the poor – release to the captive – freedom to the oppressed.

The Good News he had to offer was too good to be extinguished – by hometown hooligans or Temple authorities or even death on a cross. The Good News that he was born to teach us and died rather than compromise is the same Gospel we proclaim today as we gather today to celebrate in word and sacrament the God who loved us enough to become one of us in order to show us how to love one another – each and every one another of us – as the oft quoted Archbishop Tutu named it ... male and female, black and white, gay and so-called-straight, clever and not-so-clever.

My brothers and sisters, what the American Episcopal Church dared to proclaim in 2003 with the election and consecration of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire was “today is that scripture fulfilled in your hearing.”

Today. Not when Anglicans who do not yet accept the ordination of women come to consensus on the full inclusion of the gay and lesbian baptized into the Body of Christ. But today.

Now.

Here.

Some find in these actions a liberating word of hope ... seeing themselves fully included in the Body of Christ for the first time ever -- and others are fixin’ to throw us off the cliff. They find these things to be stumbling blocks. They have taken offense at us. Our manner of life is a challenge to them.

And I say, good for us.

In spite of the one-step-back taken in Columbus the steps forward continue ... and WILL continue ... for we will settle for nothing less than the “manner of life” Jesus modeled for us and then died to free us to live – a life committed to loving God with our whole heart and loving our neighbors as ourselves: even when we challenge the wider church.

Even when we strain the communion.

And when we do – and we will – the question we need to remember is WDJJ ... and to remember that the answer is not “created compromise resolutions that solve nothing and perpetuate discrimination.”

The answer is not “sacrifice gospel justice for institutional unity.”

Instead the answer is preach good news to the poor, liberation to the captive, freedom to the oppressed – and let the chips fall where they may and shake the dust off your feet when you have to.

The answer is to embrace the manner of life we inherited from our Lord and savior and to celebrate the freedom that comes with knowing that since you’re never going to manage to make everybody happy all the time anyway you might as well focus on being faithful to the word you’ve been given to preach.

That’s what Jesus did.

May we be given the grace to go and do likewise.