

Together in Love

a sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary Track 2

7 July 2024

Ezekiel 2:1-5; Psalm 123; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

for the Cathedral Church of St. Luke, Portland, Maine

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Jesus is teaching. Do we have ears to hear?

Hello, friends. It's good to be back in the house with you.

Late last month, I was in Louisville, Kentucky, along with several others to represent Maine's Episcopalians in the 81st General Convention of the Episcopal Church. The General Convention is the triennial gathering of our governing bodies, the House of Deputies, composed of lay and clergy members from each diocese in the Episcopal Church; and the House of Bishops, including all living bishops—though some may not *appear* to be living (‐; The first General Convention was held in 1785. Today, the General Convention is the largest democratically-elected legislative body in the world, with approximately one thousand voting members in the two houses. Still, we believe that our work is guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit, who can even effect holy change through majority votes. (‐:

To attend the General Convention is to experience both euphoria and tedium. It's an honor to participate in discerning the future for our Church. Worship inspires with a banquet of music, proclamation and preaching in many voices and languages. It's uplifting to witness and support an ever-fuller inclusion of the variety of God's peoples in our Church. And it is a grind to endure hours of discussion and voting about the Rules of Order! Finally, it's generally HOT! Miss Holy Spirit has a way of leading General Convention to cities one would be wise to avoid in summer: Austin, Baltimore, Louisville; and I can only imagine what it will be like in Phoenix in July 2027.

We also recently observed the birthday of our little nation, now 248 years young! 250 is the new 150, I hear. You look great!

We've been through the real-life meat-grinder in recent weeks, haven't we? I think we're reviving and modernizing Edgar Allan Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*, careening among many perils:

- some of the most extreme heat ever recorded even before the beginning of summer
- the earliest-ever hurricane of this intensity ever recorded
- The Supreme Court of the United States drove a stake into the heart of one of the most essential tenets of American democracy and rule of law, that no one is above the law... and that the very persons sworn not to create but to execute those laws—the Presidents of the United States—are now free to break those laws... and that the selfsame Supreme Court has empowered itself to determine which of those unlawful presidential acts are prosecutable, and which are permissible.
- We're bearing down on a nail-biter of a presidential campaign season.
- European governments are lurching to the right at the same time that the UK government is swerving to the left.
- Tyrants are building alliances.
- The Holy Land is in tatters, and everything anyone says about it inflames someone.
- Tick-borne diseases make us afraid to go outdoors, and a new bird flu may be hopping from cattle to humans.

It seems that Bill Murray's deadpan apocalyptic prophecy in *Ghostbusters* is imminent: "Human sacrifice! Dogs and cats living together! Mass hysteria!"

A friend once preached that "Lift every voice and sing", which we'll sing later in this liturgy, would make a superior national anthem to *The Star-Spangled Banner*, and on this Sunday closest to Independence Day, in light of all our current trials, doesn't this ring true to you?

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by thy might,
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.

Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee;
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee,
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land.

I'm not sure it's appropriate as the national anthem for this secular yet also multi-religious nation, but it would be a *fine* national hymn, aptly naming our collective national trials, and helping us all to own the sins of the American people and our government, past and present.

Jesus is teaching; do we have ears to hear? Jesus gets up his neighbors' dander in the synagogue. To them, he's just a carpenter, and he's pushing beyond his station. The text doesn't reveal what he said, but they cared more about his class than his message, and they can't hear his word. We know from the gospels that Jesus critiqued the contemporary, slavish adherence to Jewish laws that entrapped people who needed food or healing; and throughout the gospels, when he teaches or heals or performs miracles that test the laws, the Jewish authorities who enforced them confront him. Though textual originalists might disagree with me, I believe that, if Jesus had witnessed American chattel slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries, he would have challenged the *status quo*, angering and inciting those in power.

The General Convention frequently considers resolutions that address social, political, and societal concerns. I've attended three consecutive General Conventions, and, for example, gun violence and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been hot-button issues. This time, during a long debate over the wording of such a resolution, a Deputy admonished us that, "The world is watching!" I scoffed, because, really, no, the world doesn't much care about the Episcopal Church nowadays. We've been on the skids for decades. In years past, the Episcopal Church was the Church of the rich and the powerful (11 out 46 American presidents have been Episcopalians, George H. W. Bush being the last.); significant moments in the life of the Episcopal Church got national news coverage. But as the Religious Right rose in the latter 20th century, and with the current secularizing trend in the United States, our Church lost many members, but even more influence.

Why do I tell you this? Because the Episcopal Church both cultivated and benefited from a privileged membership that was long at the center of power in the USA. But the same Church that compromised on slavery to hold itself together and maintain its influence in the 19th century has drifted to the margins of power, yet has also marched toward the forefront of social justice. In the last half-century, though our power, wealth and population have declined, our witness has increased. We still have a long way to go [LOOK AROUND], but we have, I believe, grown more faithful to the gospel of Jesus.

Here are some signs of that growth:

- Fifty years ago, the first ordination of women, "The Philadelphia Eleven", happened because women believed that priestly ministry was as much theirs as men's and agitated to be ordained, and because a few brave male bishops stepped out ahead of General Convention and witnessed to the equality of the sexes in calling and ministry.
- Since then, the Episcopal Church has moved to recognize that gays and lesbians, and more recently people of all genders and sexual orientations, are equal in God's eyes, and worthy of full participation in the life of the Church.
- Two of the pillars of our ministry now are anti-racism and care for all of creation.
- Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, who were forcibly evangelized and culturally assimilated, is ongoing, and bearing fruitful relationships.

One of the most uplifting actions of the 81st General Convention was the transformation of the Navajoland Area Mission into a missionary diocese. For over a century, the Episcopal Church has been strong among the Diné, better known outside Indigenous circles as the Navajo. In recent decades, the Episcopal Church in the Navajoland has been a custodial ministry, but Diné Episcopalians longed for self-determination, and we voted to make the Church there a missionary diocese. Now, they can finally raise up leaders, and call their own Bishops, from among their own people. It was deeply moving to hear testimonials of longing and hope from Navajoland Deputies—a people so long oppressed were given back their voice.

Jesus is teaching; do we have ears to hear? His gospel message is countercultural and anti-political, and therefore is a threat to the *status quo* (plural), maybe better understood as the "*statuses quo*". The Jesus Movement challenges almost everyone. I'm not sure how Jesus would respond to all the questions and challenges we confront today, but I imagine many of his answers would test our faith; each and every one of us would struggle. The General Convention did not adopt the resolution calling for the abolition of police forces and prisons; what would Jesus do? The General Convention did not tackle the global refugee crisis, nor the travesty at our southern border; what would Jesus do? We are trying to understand, absorb, adopt, and embody his

word in a world that is often hostile to it.

Our current Presiding Bishop Michael Curry preached twice during General Convention; those of us who have heard him before expect an uplifting distillation of Jesus' ministry and teaching. Our brother Michael has been a prophet during his nine-year term that will end this autumn: a prophet who calls us into love—love for God, love for neighbor, love for self, love for all creation and all created beings. He has labeled us “the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement”, a movement that, following Jesus, is loving, liberating, and life-giving.

Loving. Liberating. Life-giving.

Michael Curry has preached often enough that, when his sermon reaches its heart, the congregation joins him in proclaiming that “if it’s not about love, it’s not about God.” He does repeat himself... BUT his message cannot be reiterated too many times. It rephrases and further distills Jesus’ summation of the law: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

The 81st General Convention elected and confirmed the next Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Sean Rowe, currently the Bishop of both the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania and the neighboring Diocese of Western New York. Sean Rowe is a *very* different person from Michael Curry, and though his strategic, structural-reformist ethos is probably needed, I believe that we will miss Michael Curry’s warmth, charisma, and message.

As the Episcopal Church wrestles with an uncertain future, our hope as a faithful people lies in the message and example of Jesus. We are all called to follow in his counter-cultural, anti-establishment, God-centered, borderless, limitless love and care for all God’s people, indeed all of God’s creatures and creation. It is easy for individuals, and even congregations, engaged in our own ministries, to remain disconnected from the work of our larger Church, but when it is at its best, it guides and inspires us. Once you bushwhack through the institutional tedium, the heart of the Church beats strongly in the work of General Convention, and particularly in its worship. We may not have been caught up to the third heaven, as Paul writes, but that gathering is made up of Jesus-followers from diverse cultures on five continents—a truly global Church. When we engage with our siblings across the Church, we glimpse the fullness of God through the mosaic of God’s gathered people.

I hope that we who have been to the General Convention mountaintop—or valley, or desert, or swamp—can lift the whole Church upward to see and hear Jesus more clearly, and follow him more nearly, day by day.

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