

Seafaring Wisely
Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost,
and for the Baptism of Samuel Coleman Powell
The Rev. Bennett A. Brockman, Ph.D.

Proverbs 9:1-6
Psalm 34:9-14
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:53-59

We Episcopalians have been prominent in the news of late, and I have preached two sermons about the issues that put us there, issues surrounding the election of an openly gay bishop in the diocese of New Hampshire. I supported full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians in the life of the church and in its positions of leadership, on biological, psychological, and theological grounds. I spoke about the way we Episcopalians, as part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, read the Bible. We acknowledge its primary authority, but balance its authority with the teachings of the Church down through the ages on one side, and our human knowledge, logic, and reason on the other. We believe that the Holy Spirit, God's presence abiding in us, guides us as we interpret Scripture. We believe that we understand divine Truth in an unfolding process, one in which scientific understanding is vitally important.

Current news reports have played up the fear that parishes or dioceses would separate themselves from the Episcopal Church, and that the worldwide Anglican Communion would be fractured, because of the actions of our General Convention. So today I want to talk about how we Anglican / Episcopalians handle disputes—at our best and otherwise.

Each of the Christian paths most familiar to us, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, has its characterizing genius—and each has its corresponding limitations. The limitations remind us that the Church is definitely a human institution, and that God alone is worthy of worship.

The genius of the Roman Catholic Church is its uniformity. Doctrine is declared by the hierarchy, and Roman Catholics are bound by it. End of discussion. The corresponding limitation of the Roman Catholic Church is its rigidity, its aversion to change. It silences or excommunicates dissonant thinkers. It ties itself in moral and intellectual knots trying to justify doctrines--such as those regarding divorce and birth control or priestly celibacy--that seem to beg for revision in the light of modern experience and knowledge.

In contrast, the genius of the Protestant denominations is their ability to accommodate the individual religious conscience. As I Peter 2:9 proclaims—words we echoed in our opening hymn, every believer is a priest and therefore does not require the Church either to interpret the Bible or to mediate God via the Sacraments. The corresponding limitation of the Protestant way is its fissiparousness, its tendency to split into smaller and smaller denominational entities. Historically, when Protestants have fundamentally disagreed

with one another, the aggrieved group have "left the church", founding a new one. Look sometime at the Yellow Pages listings for "churches" and you'll see what I mean.

In our own American Episcopal Church we have experienced both ways of dealing with monumental disagreement. [I am relying on Robert W. Pritchard's History of the Episcopal Church for the information that follows.] Amazingly enough, we did not split up over the nation-dividing issues of the Civil War. I would call that a Catholic outcome. Yet around the year 1900 some parishes did walk away over what would today seem a trivial issue regarding the word "regeneration" in part of the baptismal liturgy. A very Protestant outcome.

In living memory, in 1976, the General Convention determined that women could be ordained as priests. This was truly a radical change, and a dozen or two very Anglo-Catholic parishes thereupon left to form an independent branch of the Anglican Communion. Almost thirty years later, women priests are almost universally accepted within the Anglican Communion worldwide, and within mainstream Protestant churches as well. But the parishes that split off from the Episcopal Church continue in what I would term a very Protestant state, despite their Anglo-Catholic roots. For they have split into ever-smaller subgroups, out of communion with each other and with the Episcopal Church. One of their bishops was reported recently as saying in effect, "I don't recommend what we did," and they are trying to find ways of reuniting with the Episcopal Church.

So we find ourselves as a church right now seeking and hoping and praying for a Catholic solution--staying together no matter what--within a Protestant context--with individuals and parishes distressed about an action the church has taken, and wanting "to do something about it".

I trust and believe we can find a truly Anglican way through all of this.

Let me explain by telling you a fable, a fable that is based on the true story of the voyage of a British warship, the frigate Pandora. I will concede in advance that my fable may not be absolutely objective. In 1791 the British Admiralty sent a naval vessel, the 24-gun frigate Pandora, under the command of Captain Edward Edwards, to pursue and bring to justice the mutineers who commandeered the Bounty, set Captain Bligh adrift, and fled to Tahiti. You remember that story. The waters of the South Pacific were largely uncharted then, and the passageways through the Great Barrier Reef surrounding the northeastern approaches to Australia were more guessed at than known.

One evening as the Pandora made its way cautiously through these perilous waters, Captain Edwards noticed breakers ahead and on both sides of the ship--signs of the Great Barrier Reef. The wind was blowing Pandora toward one of the breaker lines. They were heading into a trap. There was not enough clear sea to tack and reverse course. Shipwreck seemed imminent.

Now Captain Edwards came up with what I will call a very Anglican response to the crisis. He directed sailors to take soundings along the ship's path to measure the water's depth and the direction of its currents. He directed other sailors to furl sails to reduce speed to a minimum to steer by. He directed another party to lower one of the ship's boats and deploy a sea anchor from the stern to take advantage of the current, which was flowing away from the Reef. This slowed the ship more and began turning its stern. He directed another party to take two other of the ship's boats and ferry the main anchor to a point well off its starboard bow and drop it. That quickly turned the ship's prow.

And so they were able to come about and tack safely out of harm, at least for that moment.

Now I call this an Anglican solution, and here's why. A very Protestant solution would have been for the Captain to have cried, "Abandon ship! Every man for himself!" And everyone would have scrambled into the ship's boats; frantically taking whatever provisions they could with them, giving up on the ship. And they would have found themselves adrift in the vast South Pacific. A very Roman Catholic solution would have the Captain pondering the navigation manuals and charts, inadequate to the occasion though they were, and consulting with his officers about them--even as they sailed right onto the reef.

Instead, the ship's assets--every member of its crew, its anchors, its sails, its boats, its seafaring intelligence--were deployed willingly, resourcefully, and courageously. All hands stuck together and played their part. Good Anglican common sense and order were maintained, and the ship was saved.

I believe we Episcopalians truly have something wonderful to offer our long-suffering world. Our reasoned and informed approach to Scripture and tradition is part of it. Our taking seriously what human knowledge and experience have discovered is part of it. Our taking seriously the deep message of Scripture, that God loves every person in our world so totally that he gave up his own son to cancel out our sinfulness and show us the way to eternal life is part of it. Our insistence on reading every passage of Scripture as subordinate to this overarching message of God's faithfulness and love towards us, and God's call to us to imitate that relentless loving faithfulness, is part of it. Our reverence for God's presence in the sacraments, and the beauty of our worship, is part of it.

I venture to call this Anglican way a path of wisdom and to hold that living in this way is, to quote our first reading, to inhabit the house of Wisdom. Paul in our Ephesians reading describes this as holy living, making the most of the time. Shakespeare and the King James Version were more emphatic, calling it "redeeming the time" granted us.

And critically right now, part of our Anglican wisdom is our ability to maintain what the ordinary world calls civility, even when we disagree most passionately. The conservative Dallas Morning News noted in an editorial "the calm and deliberative" debate at our General Convention, debate marked "not by cheap name-calling but by honest soul-searching" in which "the common bond of faith took precedence". And the editorial went

on to hope that our “thoughtfulness and mutual respect for one another on this issue will have a positive impact on . . . our larger [American] . . . debate”. [Quoted from the closing remarks of the Rev. George Werner, President of the House of Deputies, as quoted in an Episcopal News Service release dated Aug. 8, 2003.] Talk-show hosts take note!

And a critical part of this wise civility is humility, a profound humility that Bishop Gray of Alabama, for one, exemplified. He was quoted as saying in effect, "My forebears were wrong about slavery, even though they passionately thought they were right, and we may be wrong now in opposing this election". That is a humility that the majority needs to exhibit no less. [It's worth remembering that the Pandora, having escaped the Great Barrier Reef once, fell victim to it later, requiring the survivors to retrace Captain Bligh's 1500 mile, 16-day open-boat journey to eventual landfall and rescue. Only the Church Invisible, the saints gathered into the glory of eternal life, is forever.] There is a still more fundamental word for this attitude of humble civility. Our Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev. Frank Griswold, named it in his concluding sermon to the Convention:

" It is not [merely] civility that has been at work among us, but love. . . Love is not just a feeling: it is a matter of the will. And the willingness of many . . . who are deeply distressed by certain actions of the convention to stay, quite literally, at the table, is a profound act of love for which the community can be grateful Our differences . . . have stripped us of our facile civility and plunged us into the vast sea of the divine agape' [self-sacrificing love], . . . into the divine compassion where all things are reconciled in ways that we can only dimly comprehend." [ENS, Aug. 8, 2003]

Samuel, the table to which we welcome you today in baptism represents that "vast sea of the divine self-sacrificing love". It is a table at which you will hear the love of God proclaimed as living and life-giving—an unchanging love, even though our understanding of it changes. It is a table where you will find blessing and encouragement for your growth into wise adulthood. It is a table that I pray will always hold everyone around it in love. In love that allows passionate disagreement that often is messier than Anglicans would prefer, but in love that always mirrors God's relentless faithfulness, in love that redeems the time. Welcome aboard! Amen.

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