

St. Paul's Fairfield, CT
2 Pentecost
June 20, 2003
Proper 7-B
The Rev. Bennett A. Brockman, Ph.D.

Job 38:1-11, 16-18
Ps. 107:1-3, 23-32
2 Cor. 5:14-21
Mk 4:35-41, [5:1-20]

Stormy Rites of Passage

Have you ever been frightened? Like on a really—I mean really—bumpy airplane or boat ride? I remember crossing English Channel one time in a storm on a Hovercraft that did a lot of hovering—and a lot of plummeting! Or more commonly, do you know what it's like being in the passenger seat when someone else is driving? What do you do with your right foot, the one that puts on the brakes—when you think the driver should be slowing down?

It's easier being the driver or the pilot, isn't it? You have some measure of control. But there are times when we feel like the disciples traveling across the Sea of Galilee with Jesus in the great storm the Gospel story describes. And you wonder if anyone is in control. The disciples are terrified. No wonder! The wind is howling; the waves threaten to swamp their open vessel. But Jesus goes to sleep—and keeps on sleeping. That's really curious; we're most vulnerable when we sleep, and anxiety is the great opponent of sleep. No way could the disciples sleep! But Jesus sleeps.

So they wake Jesus up, insisting that he at least share their terror: “Jesus, wake up! How can you sleep when we're all about to die!”

So Jesus wakes up. But instead of sympathizing, he rebukes them: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And then he amazes them further by quieting the storm. “There was a dead calm.” (I wonder if they were then becalmed, stranded in mid-sea, and left wishing he hadn't been quite so effective!)

“Why were you afraid?” he asks them. Why were you afraid indeed.

If you read through the entire Gospel passage that you have on your printed insert—we opted for the shorter reading—you'll find that just as Jesus quieted the raging external weather on the sea, he proceeded immediately to calm the inner storm of madness in the man named Legion, who was a terror to himself and to all who encountered him.

The point of both stories is that Jesus, like his Heavenly Father who instructs Job from the whirlwind in the first reading we heard, has power to “shut in the sea with doors” and “stop its proud waves.” He also has power to heal the raging anxiety of the storm-tossed disciples, and the raging madness of the man named Legion.

Important truths to remember as we sit in the part of the church known as the nave and recall that "nave" like "navy" are words rooted in the Latin word for "ship." The Church has down through the ages pictured herself as a ship passing through stormy waters, her cargo being the souls of the faithful bound for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Tuesday at the Vestry meeting someone asked me to share my thoughts about the news from New Hampshire, that the Rev. Canon Gene Robinson has been elected bishop of that diocese of the Episcopal Church. This wouldn't be news, except that Canon Robinson is gay. He has been living in a committed relationship with another man for some 14 years. Earlier in his life Bishop-elect Robinson was married and divorced, and he is the father of two grown children.

Yesterday in Hartford, our own Bishop Smith ordained a gay man and a lesbian as deacons, on their way to becoming priests. Both are in committed, same-sex relationships.

There is, of course, controversy about these developments. And there will be more. In July the General Convention of our national Episcopal Church will have its triennial meeting. It is the legislative body of our national church, composed of all the bishops and the elected lay and clergy delegates representing each of the 109 dioceses that constitute the Episcopal Church in the United States. General Convention will have to vote to affirm or reject Canon Robinson's election. General Convention will also consider another controversial matter, whether to give the clergy of the church permission in the name of the Church to bless unions of people of the same gender. There will be more front-page news coverage.

So the question raised at the Vestry meeting is relevant indeed, and I want to share with you, as I did with the Vestry, my stance on the questions these events raise. Some of you will remember that I spoke about these issues in 1998, after the Lambeth Conference of the bishops of the Anglican Communion worldwide. A majority of the bishops then said that homosexual practices were always wrong because they are contrary to the teachings of Holy Scripture. I declared then, and I still believe, that the majority was mistaken in their reading of Scripture, relying on interpretations that will not sustain scholarly scrutiny. And I believe their misreading of Scripture prevented them from even considering the relevant theology of human nature, of the character of covenant relationships, and of the divine call to ministry.

As I did then, so I will now try to respect that the majority did speak. I also will try to respect the fact that I have the privilege of the pulpit and that reasonable and faithful people can disagree with me—and still have my blessing and good will. And I will try to speak with humility, honoring the reality that I don't know all there is to know and that I have much to learn from every one of you whom I am presuming to preach to and to teach.

Today's Scriptures are really apt, aren't they, for considering such controversial matters. For many of us, even to contemplate these questions—a gay bishop, non-celibate gay or

lesbian clergy, blessing of same-sex unions—creates feelings of being in a storm, of seasickness. In the immortal words of a song by the rock group REM a few years ago, it's like "It's the end of the world as we know it"-- but unlike those lyrics we don't feel fine. Many of us may feel confused or frightened or angry. This becomes another of the many realities in our national and global pictures these days that frighten and confuse us, part of what seems sometimes to be a deliberately cultivated climate of fear. No wonder we long for Jesus to appear and say "Peace! Be still!" and make everything fine again. Or we long for there to simply be no change, just please leave everything as it was and we'll all be o.k.

But of course only God is unchanging. In the great German poet Goethe's *Faust* the last temptation that Faust faces—and overcomes—is the appeal of preserving one perfect moment unchanged. But change is the reality we cannot change. What is in our control is to try to make good changes, and to make the best of change we cannot control.

So let me clearly state that I believe the Episcopalians of New Hampshire acted rightly when they elected as bishop a priest they had come to know well during a long ministry among them. And I believe our own Bishop Smith acted rightly when he ordained two people whose gifts for, and calling to, and preparation for ordained ministry had been duly attested by individuals and groups qualified to make those determinations.

These actions are out in front of most of the rest of the Church worldwide. Our diocese and New Hampshire and some others around the world are in the uncomfortable position of being agents of change. But I believe we are right, in the same way the great Reformer Martin Luther was right when he staked his life on his convictions and said to his ecclesiastical judges, "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise."

For we simply know too much now to let things go on unchanged. Among the things we know now are people whom we know and love and respect, people who are gay and lesbian. Can you think of friends, co-workers, family members—people who are gay or lesbian and are also people of fine character? I remember my father's cousin Alan. He was a role model for me when he was a dean and an English professor at the Univ. of Pennsylvania. And he was gay. In my later professional life, both as an academic and as a parish priest, I worked with a man and a woman, gay and lesbian and both in committed relationships, who proved to be two of the most wonderfully Christian people I have ever known.

We also now know that sexual orientation--straight, gay, lesbian—has a preponderantly genetic origin, much like the other attributes that make us uniquely—and wonderfully—who we are. My high school friend Steve, for example, was the starting forward on our basketball team, and the #1 on the tennis team. He also was gay.

I don't believe those colleagues or Alan or Steve and the countless people like them chose their sexual orientation any more than I chose my own, or you chose yours. I believe there is ample biological and psychological research bearing out this conclusion. I cannot conceive that being what God made you can ever be a defect in your character.

But I do believe, and this is a crucial point, that there is abundant choice in how any adult, straight or gay, lives out the sexual component of our human identity. Some of us, most obviously religious who take vows of celibacy, can be fully human—and fully male and female—by finding fulfillment in loving relationships that do not include physical sexual expression. The rest of us typically include the physical expression of our sexuality in the relationships of our adulthood. And if we are Christians, those relationships are rightly to be life-long, committed, faithful relationships.

I believe it is appropriate to expect the same faithfulness and commitment in gay Christian relationships as in straight ones; and where such commitment is present, to bless such gay unions just as heterosexual couples who intend such commitment are blessed. And, where there is the talent, preparation, and call to ordained ministry, to ordain such qualified individuals as respond to God's call.

This is where the theology comes in, because relationships of such commitment reflect in our human world the very essence of God's defining faithfulness and self-giving, and God's creative calling of other beings into fuller being.

Commitment is the key, along with unswerving respect for the integrity of the person with whom we are in relationship. Commitment of one's whole person to another opens up and generates depth and wholeness of being, mirroring the creative activity of God the supreme Being delights in our being fully who we were created to be. St. Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." Anyone who has ever had the experience of being deeply in love and of being loved in return knows the experience of the expansion of the self, of feeling alive and complete and exalted; of one's potential for creative accomplishment being opened up. My cousin Alan is dead now. His obituary listed a "long-time companion" among his survivors--a companion I never met or even knew he had. I cannot but believe that Alan's life and mine would have been better and fuller had I been able to know and to honor him more completely as the person God created him to be.

So it is that I expect accepting and honoring gay and lesbian clergy to open up great blessings for the church, just as ordaining women has done these past twenty-five years; and that blessing gay and lesbian unions will unfold blessings for our nation.

For what is blessed, and what becomes a blessing, is at heart commitment. In the Old Testament commitment is called in Hebrew *hesed*, which describes God's faithfulness and loving-kindness to the ancient Jews, the people of the Covenant. In the New Testament this faithful loving-kindness is expressed in the Greek word *agapé*, meaning self-giving love. Jesus uses this word for love when he says, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). We perhaps know God most accurately and enduringly in the human relationships where our commitment is deepest.

Commitment requires respect for the integrity of the other in intimate relationships that by their nature are at the core of our identity as persons and render us so vulnerable. Such respect also requires that relationships be truly consensual. This rules out any kind of coercion in sexual relationships; promiscuity; and any sexual contact between adults and minors, who cannot give ethically valid consent.

The eighteenth-century German dramatist and philosopher and critic Gotthold Lessing once imagined himself standing before God. In his right hand God was holding absolute truth. In his left hand God held the unceasing search for truth but with the condition of being doomed to stray from it for ever and ever. And Lessing said, “If thus standing before me God asked me to choose, I would humbly say, ‘Father the absolute truth is for you alone, give me what your left hand holds.’” [Quoted from Hermann Weigand, “Goethe’s *Faust*: An Introduction,” rpt. in *Faust*, ed. Cyrus Hamlin (NY: Norton, 1976), p.447f]

What a wonderful affirmation of our humanity! The truth obviously is that we cannot have the choice Lessing imagines. God alone holds absolute truth. Our human finitude restricts us to be always searching for it, and always risking going astray. There will always be risk, and fear. But as Lessing’s parable proclaims, that isn’t a sentence but an invitation. If with humility we keep on seeking the truth and living into it with all the boldness and faithfulness we can muster, gloriously full life emerges.

That is testimony to the amazing generativity of the Holy Spirit working among us, shaping us as individuals and as people of God more and more into the fullness of our Creator's image. Like childbirth, this process is accompanied by travail and fear. Faith and hope are required, and love, to negotiate any difficult passage.

And it is finally love that, as St. John said, casts out fear (I John 4:18). So never fear. As one of the great Archbishops of Canterbury said, whether the Church gets it right or gets it wrong, the God of unfailing loving-kindness is in control. This passage may be stormy, and our stomachs may churn. But God’s loving-kindness is constant. Our challenge is to keep on living out that faithful loving-kindness: in our most intimate relationships; and in our institutional ones, as members of a parish, St. Paul's and as members of a communion, the Episcopal Church, and as member of the Church universal.

We can do this because as St. Paul in today’s reading from 2 Corinthians proclaims, we already are in Christ “a new creation,” and that gives us confidence to embrace these good and courageous changes with gladness, to welcome their potential, and opportunities. The passage may be stormy, but in our hearts there is the loving voice of our Savior saying down through the centuries, “Peace! Be still!” And there was perfect calm.

Amen.

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