

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
March 4, 2007

**“BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO:
REFLECTIONS ON THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH”**

~Luke 13: 31-35

Having heard these five verses from the gospel of Luke, and the further along we move into this holy season called Lent, the clearer it will become that things are not going so well for Jesus. He has stirred resistance. The Pharisees are uneasy. Herod is miffed.

Regardless, Jesus refuses to play it safe. When those around him appear to be saying ‘slow down’ he seems to be saying ‘move ahead.’ The evidence points to Jesus willingness to move ahead even though the witnesses are abundantly clear about the cross that waits. It has been said that every expression of faith is a fine line between steadfastness and fanaticism. While I would not call Jesus a fanatic, I would call him honest and courageous and daring, and yes, relevant. Described by one author: “He is like the prophet-preacher who preaches the truth even though it lands him in a Birmingham jail. To borrow the image in the gospel text, he is the ultimate mother hen. Jesus is the mother hen who will pursue her child through thick and thin, through good and bad, through stupid moves and violent outbursts; he’s the mother hen who folds the covers down on the bed and puffs up the pillow, at the same time saying, “Don’t ever let me catch you doing that again.” He will take on the authorities, whether represented by Herod or Jerusalem by moving toward the conflict rather than away from it.”

Just in case you haven’t particularly followed the latest news in the religious arena, things are not going so well at the moment for the Episcopal Church in the United States. We have stirred resistance. Our bishops are a little uneasy. The Primates of the Anglican Communion worldwide are miffed.

To be honest, I struggled this week about whether or not I should or could or would address this issue in my sermon this morning. I feared that your eyes might glaze over upon hearing words like primates, communiqué, and Anglican Communion. And though I am an Episcopal priest, this is not an Episcopal church or congregation.

So why even talk about it? Because this is a thoughtful, curious, intelligent, well-read community that pays attention. Because you are not afraid of dealing head on with complex and difficult issues about living in a complicated, messy world. Because you come here for not only spiritual nourishment but spiritual relevance. Because while you might come for comfort, you come for challenge – the two not being mutually exclusive. Because you are, we are, and intend to be, a community of faith, justice, hope and love.

And one more thing. This also gets personal. The Primates (otherwise bishops) of the Anglican Communion are talking about me. An openly gay Episcopal priest living in a same gender relationship for 15 years. I considered maybe you would wonder what I thought.

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As you can imagine, the last two weeks have brought a blur of blogs, e-mails, op-eds, and a live web cast with our US presiding bishop, Katherine Jefferts Schori. In between it all, my own emotions have vacillated between disbelief, anger, optimism, sadness and hope. I've thought of many of my gay brothers and sisters throughout the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion - and thought how incredibly tired I am of this issue – and for once again being made to feel that we are outcasts, living on the fringes, the scapegoat, despite our talents and contributions, singled out as the reason we are in such a mess.

In a nutshell, a communiqué was issued after a 5-day meeting of three-dozen Anglican bishops following a mid-February gathering in Tanzania in East Africa. It constituted a severe rebuke of the Episcopal branch in the United States by giving us less than eight months to ban blessings of same gender unions and to make clear that clergy in same gender relationships cannot be confirmed as bishops – or risk a “reduced role” – in other words – expulsion from the world’s 3rd largest Christian denomination. Nevertheless, the directive comes after years of debate within the Anglican Communion over whether and how to force the Episcopal Church in the USA to conform to the wider church’s view of homosexuality. The irony of this directive is that the morality it vows to impose comes largely from the developing world. A morality, which in the case of Nigeria for example, tolerates polygamy, child sacrifice and the stoning to death of adulterous women (but not their male partners) seemingly without objection but cannot contemplate how a loving relationship between couples of the same gender could be allowed.

Perhaps equally alarming and audacious is that the Anglican bishops established a separate council to help address the concerns of American Episcopalians, though clearly in the minority, who feel alienated by our support of gay clergy and same gender unions. Although our presiding US bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori has agreed to the arrangement, some describe it as an extraordinary check on her authority.

The parallel in today’s gospel reminds us that conflict involves characters, place and time. But even Jesus in the middle of the text remarks, “Yet today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way.” The issue of the text is the larger purpose of Jesus’ mission to announce and embody what he is called to do. This mission transcends time though the conversation, activity, takes place in real time within the constraints of daily life. As there is conflict between characters, there is conflict between time zones. In other words, there is tension between Jesus’ own desire to finish his work, with all its implications, and the immediacy of the conflict that is at hand. But he appears to have the last word in the debate: the time has come. We had better get this right. It is not a time for easy platitudes. This is a hard truth. “Jesus’ journey is not about political expediency,” explains one writer. “If it were, he’d react to Herod’s fear and Jerusalem’s cunning. He’s soften his message, join the crowd, become a tenured rabbi. But his journey is not about religious negotiation. If it were, he’d react to the Pharisees caution. Instead, he does not let others sway him from his mission. In the gospel of Luke today, Jesus describes “Jerusalem killing him like it does all its prophets.” An example no less of abusive power.

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Which brings me back to this gathering of Anglican bishops in Tanzania and a directive that many others – gay, straight, men, women – and I consider to be extraordinarily abusive. And I, along with others, believe it is about much more than the headline issue of homosexuality. It is about control and authority. At its heart are base issues of power and politics.

Jack Miles, a senior fellow for religious affairs with the Pacific Council on International Policy and scholar in residence at the Getty Research Institute, wrote in an editorial in the NY Times on March 1 titled: *A Divorce the Church Should Smile Upon* - that “as so often in religious history, the deeper issue is one of church governance.” (Translate: control, authority, and power) “In effect, the Episcopalians left the Church of England more than 2 centuries ago. It was no surprise that after the newborn United States broke with the British crown in the political realm, the Church of England did so in the religious realm as well establishing a democratic form of self-governance.” Miles helped me realize that the deepest rationale for the creation of the Church of England had been that church governance through separate national churches better reflected the practice of the early church than papal governance. “A generation from now, when we look back on the breakup of the Anglican Communion and on the status of homosexuals within the churches of the world, what may we expect to see?” “An old proverb,” quotes Miles “that ‘God writes straight with crooked lines,’ and at this juncture, the Author of Liberty, as a venerable hymn names God, seems to have taken pen in hand.”

The example of Jesus in today’s gospel is instructive. While others around him said slow down, he said move ahead. He did not play it safe. With all due respect for our presiding bishop who has asked us, the Episcopal Church, in deference to the Anglican bishops directives, to pause, not go backward, I would only do so long enough for us to be clear in our response to the directives about why we will not be complicit to injustice, abuse and oppression and – move on. To quote one preacher: “Justice has no season; justice is for every season.” Justice has a way of carrying us away from traditional forms of authority into a new place.

There is a story told by Jim Wallis, author and editor of Sojourner’s magazine, that I conclude with now: At the height of apartheid in South Africa, a political rally had been called and later canceled by the government. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, “Okay, we’re just going to have church then.” The protesters gathered together in the Cathedral in Cape Town and the police were massing by the hundreds on the outside, there to intimidate, to threaten, to try and frighten all the worshipers. Jim Wallis who was present that day said, “I will testify, being on the inside, that I was scared. You could feel the tension in that place. The police were so bold and arrogant they even came into that Cathedral and stood along the walls. They were writing down and tape recording every thing that Archbishop Tutu said. But he stood there to preach. And he stood up, a little man with long flowing robes, and he said, this system of apartheid cannot endure because it is evil.” Jim Wallis suggests that was a wonderful thing to say, but very few people on the planet believed it. Bishop Tutu pointed his finger at the police standing along the walls of the sanctuary and said: You are powerful. You have behind you the power of

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the state, you are very powerful but you are not gods and I serve a God who cannot be mocked. Then he flashed that wonderful Desmond Tutu smile and said, “So since you have already lost, since you’ve already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!” At that the congregation erupted and they began dancing in the church. They danced out into the streets and the police moved back because they didn’t expect dancing worshipers.

It is time for the Episcopal Church, the people of God, to dance.
Justice has no season. Justice is for every season.
Amen.

Notes:

New Proclamation: The essential pastoral companion for preaching; Year C, 2006-2007, Fortress Press: Minneapolis.

The New York Times, March 1, 2007: *A Divorce the Church Should Smile Upon*; Jack Miles.

The New York Times, February 20, 2007: *Anglicans Rebuke U.S. Branch on Blessing Same-Sex Unions*; Sharon LaFraniere and Laurie Goodstein.

A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality; Stephen Bates; I.B.Tauris and Co. Ltd: London, 2004.

The Rev. Dr. J. Rebecca Lyman

The Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.