

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11)
St. Paul's Cathedral
July 19, 2009
The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

Ephesians 2: 11-22
Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. AMEN.

As I reflected on today's scriptures in light of the General Convention just completed, I was tempted to preach on the gospel. In particular, I was struck by how easily the text could be translated in light of recent events. The apostles, no make that "deputies and bishops," gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done...no, no that's not right...told them all the resolutions that they had passed. And he said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest for a while." I wish!

In all honesty, I cannot imagine a place that I could be today that would feed my soul more than being with you. Truth be told: the General Convention of the Episcopal Church is a grueling marathon of eleven days that being around seven a.m. with committee meetings and end with evening events that sometimes conclude after ten p.m. At times, it is a challenge to see the work of Jesus in the work of the convention. Yet it is there. Jesus was present in the breaking of bread at the Eucharist and the breaking of bread in the restaurants. Jesus was guiding us in the challenging mission priorities and budget development moving us to give more than anticipated and spending less on church structure. And Jesus was holding us as we grappled with questions of full inclusion and blessings of faithful couples regardless of gender.

It is a gift of the lectionary that as I worship with you and preach that we hear a remarkable passage from Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. Let me set the stage a bit. You may have noticed that Paul never seems to write, "Sounds like very thing is going great; keep it up!" No, he is usually writing to provide a bit of coaching and guidance. And the guidance and perspective he offers is to a community that is divided—seriously divided over a matter of fundamental faith and behavior. It is as simple as the question of whether one can be a follower of Jesus and be a Gentile -- particularly be uncircumcised. In the earliest minutes of the church, walls are being built. Yet they are not walls constructing a temple of worship and mission such as David's successor would build. Rather the wall being raised is a wall of division. Does this sound familiar?

Permit me to read again a portion of what Paul said once upon a time to the church in Ephesus: "He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the

Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

Those, who have had less than charitable words to say about the Episcopal Church in recent years, suggest that we try to write sin out of the Bible, the story of God and the story of God’s creation. The truth is that we have a very clear and Jesus-centered understanding of what is fundamentally sinful. Paul hits the proverbial nail on the head. It is not about commandments and ordinance. Sin is about division. The reconciling work of Jesus is to create “in himself one new humanity in the place of two.” It is costly; it is “one body through the cross.” It is about no longer sorting or sifting. It is about proclaiming peace to those who are far off and peace to those who are near.

Let the word go out from this place, this congregation, this church: we are about the work of Jesus. You are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God. This is not some sort of cheap familial bond. It is to be deep and deeply holy. It is so deep that it can only be described as the body of Christ, Jesus in the world today.

I know that our last General Convention disappointed many, if not most, in the gay and lesbian community and those who supported them. Some would suggest that it pleased no one. In all likelihood, this one has had and is having a different effect. To be sure, our gay and lesbian members were affirmed in all orders of ministry and generous pastoral latitude to address questions of blessing of unions.

What you may not have heard in the news was that the deputies and bishops were very concerned about keeping Gentile and Jew together, circumcised and uncircumcised. Our concern was about the one who differed with us. We were concerned that in respecting the full dignity of one person that we did not forget the dignity of another.

And so here is the hard part of being the body of Christ, a church that Edmund Browning said at the beginning of his term as Presiding Bishop would have “no outcasts.” We must continue the hard work of reconciliation which is always about self-giving and giving up and deep listening.

It is important that as we do this work we cling hard to Jesus and the cross, the one who shows us that through darkness comes life, through death comes life. And we should remember how Paul describes Jesus -- as a cornerstone. This makes all the difference. Because if we are different: Jew, Greek, circumcised, uncircumcised, gay, straight, liberal, conservative, and we cling to Jesus, then we cannot build walls that divide. Indeed, our walls meet at the proverbial corner and become that which becomes the foundation of the church. At that juncture, at that cornerstone is a table; It is there that we make Eucharist. And Eucharist is always about remembering Jesus, repairing the body, making it one.

Dear ones, I want to commend you for being an inclusive church. St. Paul's Cathedral has been a gift to many who felt that there was not a church to welcome them, include them, ordain them, and give them a place to minister. The struggle for full inclusion is far from over. Katharine Jefferts Schori did not end sexism in our church. Barak Obama did not end racism in our nation. And this General Convention did not settle issues of homophobia in our church and communion.

Nevertheless, we are invited to recognize that this is a chapter in the story of Jesus' transformational work through our church, not the whole book. There are other chapters that need to be written. Our church needs to speak and act differently as we live in a place where the developing world and the developed world meet. Dorcas House is a good toe hold from which to pivot in that direction. And as we grapple with a different economy and a strained ecology, we should be a church that leads as a sustainable human family on "this our fragile island home."

And so, let us draw towards our cornerstone, Jesus, at the table. Let us join walls to build up our church with all its wonderful and beautiful parts. And let us build the church for a purpose beyond ourselves. Let us be the living breathing church of Jesus in the world, for alien and stranger. For in receiving Jesus in sacrament, we become sacrament to those we meet. And that will make, well, all the difference.