

Sermon for Proper 8

RCL Lectionary, Year C

[2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14](#) / [Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20](#) / [Galatians 5:1, 13-25](#) / [Luke 9:51-62](#)

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Hands to the Plow

Jesus, the Anglican Communion, and LGBT Pride Day

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Jesus, in good rabbinical fashion, offers us a series of shocking sayings today – sayings to shake us, his followers, out of our complacency. Sayings to awaken us to the bracing message of the Gospel. While he turns his face stubbornly towards Jerusalem (much to everyone’s consternation and distress) he holds up a mirror to us, a mirror that reflects back to us our reluctance, our second-guessing, our hesitancy to live into the fullness of his message, of his Way.

We wrestle, as followers of Christ, with the same things Jesus’ would-be followers wrestled with. We have obligations – obligations to family, to tradition, to institution, to the pressing needs and concerns of our worldly lives. We spook easily at change, we blanch at difference, we resist the challenge those outside our doors pose to us, we seek safety in what we know and fear what we don’t. Jesus deliberately shakes up his hearers and us, shocks us out of our comfort and into a vulnerable, itinerate place – the place of ongoing journey, the fragility of raw humanity on a dusty road, even staring into the face of darkness, death, and dissolution. Only in that way will we “get,” both literally and figuratively, the Gospel. Only in that way, he reminds us, will we fully find God.

Some of you might have heard about our most recent Anglican dust-up. After a series of dueling Pentecost Letters, The Archbishop of Canterbury recently dismissed representatives of The Episcopal Church from Anglican Communion ecumenical councils as a consequence of our consecrating an openly lesbian Bishop in Los Angeles. This led in turn to an uncomfortable conversation between our Church’s Executive Council and the Communion’s Secretary General. Just where are we and who are we now as The Episcopal Church in the Anglican Communion? No one’s quite sure just yet. We’re well into uncharted territory, and clear answers are hard to come by.

As if that weren't enough to mull over on its own, our Presiding Bishop was visiting the cathedral in Southwark in the Church of England in recent weeks, when she was instructed by the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury to not only provide evidence of her ordination status (despite her numerous previous visits), but was told to refrain from wearing her mitre, her pointed bishop’s hat, during the liturgy, because the Church of England is in a very fragile state at the moment as they consider yet again the consecration of women bishops.

Coming at such a raw time for everybody, you can well imagine the result was an ugly all-to-public episode in trans-Atlantic ecclesiastical diplomacy that has become known as "mitregate." It brought great embarrassment

for many in the Church of England, and provoked appeals to 1776 on this side of the Atlantic! Our Presiding Bishop, to her credit, was quite courteous about the whole affair while in England, though upon her return she publicly noted the silliness of the reactivity over the episode. Then she moved forward with her service to the life and mission of a Christian people. But such is life in the Anglican Communion these days. While reactive leadership worries over who's wearing a mitre and who isn't, about who's sitting on which council and who's being consecrated where and how, while officials attempt to mop up a rude public relations mess and pundits and bloggers like me wax eloquent. . . while the general public roll their eyes over those silly Christians at it again, there are millions across the Communion in dire straits financially, experiencing maddening hunger and debilitating disease, and Creation groans while oil gushes in the Gulf.

It would be too easy to start scoring points against the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, for indulging in irrelevancy – especially in these days of the World Cup. Maybe this is some great ecclesiastical showdown on the world stage. Perhaps we could say The Episcopal Church has scored one goal for being dignified in the face of such rudeness, the Church of England for being so unspeakably insensitive, *nil*. The crowds are screaming from the stands and the feelings are running high. We could leave it there and call it game over, but that would be too easy. Truth be told, Rowan Williams is in an untenable position, and we are, too, and it's only half-time.

The office of the Archbishop of Canterbury must oversee and we help fund a nineteenth- and twentieth-century institution, the Anglican Communion, that was built largely on the foundation of gentlemen's agreements between English and North American bishops – yes, all men, all white – beginning at the height of the British Empire. With the freedom of colonial states in Africa and the explosion of evangelical Anglicanism and rising leadership in those countries; with monumental social, philosophical, and theological change in the West and a shift to more democratic principles of church governance here, the old way of Communion just doesn't work anymore in a diverse Body.

Our Presiding Bishop puts it this way in a recent interview¹: we are like a great family in which the teenagers are at last growing up. We no longer, in old colonial fashion, turn to (papa?) Canterbury or gentlemen's agreements to make it right. The institution, with all of its inherent inertia, its enthrallment with regulations, traditions, and old scores, hasn't kept up with the times and now must leap somehow -- perhaps blindly or at least clumsily -- into the uncertainty of the twenty-first century. The Body of Christ is moving on to serve a rapidly changing world. How will we follow Jesus towards Jerusalem? Will we be like Elisha daring to follow Elijah to the boundary of the Jordan? Will we pick up Elijah's mantle when he departs? Will we dare ask for a double-share of the spirit of prophecy? These questions in the face of deeply conflicted times must keep Rowan Williams awake at night sometimes. I hope so. They would me. "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," after all.

But there is good news. For while bishops and officials quarrel over crumbling ecclesiastical edifices, the Gospel's mission continues. I think of the House of Bishops in the Church of Tanzania, who hold that their church's communion with The Episcopal Church hangs by the barest thread because of our inter-provincial disagreements over human sexuality. Yet here we are at Church of Our Saviour, in partnership with Ibihwa parish on the ground in the Diocese of Central Tanganyika, supporting primary education for fifty children – many of whom have lost their parents to AIDS. The politicking of bishops matters little in such circumstances.

¹ <http://caughtbythelight.blogspot.com/2010/06/leadership.html>

Abstract theological disagreements over human sexuality quickly become irrelevant, when education means a future for a vulnerable life amongst people struggling with unimaginable tragedy and abject poverty.

Closer to home, I think of our youth returning from a mission trip to help with the Appalachia Service Project. I think of our ongoing ministry with the hungry in cooperation with Our Lady Mount Carmel – all theological and ecclesiastical differences aside. I think of the work of the wider Episcopal Church just in Marin County, from a developing food pantry in Contempo Marin to our partnership with numerous churches and organizations in Marin City to start the Hannah Freedom School, a literacy program for at-risk students in Marin City.

Jesus said, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” The Church that focuses on institutional preservation for its own sake is about the spiritually dead burying their own dead. When doing it the old way is the only reason for being, we lose sight of who we are called to be and we engage in a half-life focused on death. But when we re-set our gaze forward as a people on mission for the sake of the Gospel – a people who are walking the way of the cross, who are putting our hand to the plow of the kingdom of God and not looking back, we regain our lives in Christ. The real Anglican Communion is not found in the formal structures of Lambeth Palace or in the tired strife between bishops and archbishops. The Anglican Communion where Jesus lives is where “The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” It’s in the places where sleeves are rolled up for mission and justice prayerfully meets compassion, where suffering is relieved and the hungry are fed, where sacramental, embodied partnerships are giving life rather than fighting over abstract ideas and the inconsequential nature of steeples and mitres.

Then there’s Bishop Christopher Senyonjo, a retired cleric from the Anglican Church of Uganda. Bishop Senyonjo inherited the faith of nineteenth-century English missionaries, along with all the Victorian values they brought with them to the British colonies of Africa. But then came to his door a hidden class of people in Uganda, gay and lesbian, fearful for their lives, living in shame for their sexual orientation and in some instances their clandestine loves. Bishop Senyonjo and the church he served had taught that such as these belonged somewhere in the list of vices we hear today from Paul’s writing: outcasts and sinners surely, condemned by the Christian Gospel. But Bishop Senyonjo listened with compassion to their stories in the light of a loving God “from whom no secrets are hid.” And over time, he began to hear in his gay and lesbian sisters and brothers and in their relationships the fruits of the Spirit that Paul also identifies in the same passage: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These fruits of the Spirit stood in stark contrast to the encultured suspicions and hatreds of homosexuality in the greater community, ranging all the way up to proposed laws in Uganda – supported by the Church, I might add – to make homosexuality a capital offense. Bishop Senyonjo was converted in a profound way, and, setting his face towards Jerusalem after his beloved Christ, came out as a straight advocate for these hidden and oppressed voices in his Church and homeland. As a result, he and his wife found themselves cut off from his pension, receiving death threats, and severed from a Church to which he had devoted his life and love. Yet he persists, taking his message all around the Anglican Communion. Why? Maybe he has heard today’s Gospel, too, the call of Christ to move forward in God’s love, even if it’s toward into a crucified place.

For Jesus, the “Son of Man who has nowhere to lay his head,” does not travel alone, but travels with the outcasts and those proclaimed sinners by the wider society. He dines with the unclean and the ritually impure. He talks with women publicly and touches the leper. He hangs out with those proclaimed righteous and

unrighteous alike. He faces down the pettiness of self-righteousness and the insularity of the powerful and the narrowness of the traditional. This is Jesus and his new family of the Kingdom on the move, walking towards a crucified place if need be. He is with our sisters and brothers walking this day in the fortieth annual Pride parade in San Francisco, a community of men and women recovering from society-inflicted shame, continuing to struggle for their rights to discern their unique path with God and to seek and celebrate the blessing of the Spirit in their most cherished relationships. Many in that parade have left the Church for obvious reasons. Some have remained by grace and bear with hope the institutionalized second-guessing much of Christianity continues to offer.

Theirs has inspired the struggle of a Church like The Episcopal Church that has recently opened our ears and hearts to their lives and stories. . . and made them our own. This is no longer about our ministry to LGBT people, but about our ministry with them. Like a family coming together out of the closet, this is no longer about "them," but about "us." We journey together towards Jerusalem and through a crucified place, thrown off ecumenical councils, punished by The Archbishop of Canterbury and our sister churches in many places and ways, on the receiving end of cries of heresy and bearing the umbrage of many at home and abroad. In two generations we have taken bold steps that leave us a minority – albeit a growing minority – in the greater Christian world, and we have yet further to go. For instance, it was only last summer that for the first time transgendered members of our Church were able to speak publicly about who they were and what they have experienced in the Church on the floor of our governing bodies. We have yet to settle the controversial questions of marriage and blessings in the context of our traditional liturgies. We are tangled in lawsuits as a few of our sisters and brothers attempt to depart the Body and try to take the property with them. An expensive courtroom battle becomes a painful, woeful recourse when the Family of God cannot live with difference. We quarrel just as the apostles did on the road to Jerusalem. But Jesus walks on – his face is set – leading us on just the same.

Jesus' call to us today is one of mission above institution. In God's kingdom our goodness of our institution is measured only as far as it serves the Gospel, only as far as it brings healing in grace, only as far as it is willing to set aside complacency for the rigors of relationship, only as much as it is willing to make tradition live for a new generation, to reinvent the old way of doing things for the needs of those who are with us in the holy present, and those who come after us in the hopeful tomorrow.

Are you challenged by this Gospel? I am. We all are together. But we are reminded in our hymn this day, that old hymn, with an ancient idea that stems from Jesus teaching now nearly twenty centuries old: the Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. It is not a foundation made of cement or stone. Nor is it a foundation of portfolios, stocks, and savings accounts. Nor is it a foundation of old traditions bound up in pretty places or enshrined in canon law. It is a foundation of humanity and divinity made one in Christ – crucified by the world and raised again by God, and breathing ever new life among us in the Spirit.