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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
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Pentecost IX, Proper 13B
John 6:24-35

"Let your continual mercy, O Lord, cleanse and defend your Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without your help, protect and govern it always by your goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen." (*The Collect for Proper 13, Book of Common Prayer p. 232*)

"Cry havoc and let loose the dogs of war!" (*William Shakespeare: Julius Caesar, Act 3 Scene 1*)

The General Convention of the Episcopal Church has met.

For those of you not quite familiar with the workings of the Episcopal Church, or, as we say in our own jargon, our *ecclesiology*, General Convention meets every three years. It is a huge gathering of bishops, priests, deacons, and laypeople, and is divided in a parliamentary style into the House of Bishops, including, well, *bishops*, and the House of Deputies, including, well, everybody else. Every diocese is represented by its bishops, both active and retired, and by clergy and laypeople elected at its own convention.

As you know, the Episcopal Church does not have a pope, nor does our own presiding bishop have the authority of a pontiff. No, the authority of the Episcopal Church to establish rules of order (called *canons*) and to give voice to the mind of the church, rests with this huge bicameral legislature, General Convention. It is General Convention which tells us what we may and may not do – who is eligible to become a priest, for example, what the budget of the national church will be for the following three years, who owns what property, what prayer book is authorized, all of that sort of thing which helps guide the rest of us in our daily and weekly matters of worship, mission, and business.

It is my own opinion that General Convention of the Episcopal Church tends toward lukewarm positions on most social issues which might cause controversy or even schism within our portion of the Body of Christ. This can be understood in light of our own preference for what is called "local option" – for example, the schedule of readings that we use, the *lectionary*, was authorized for trial use by GC 2000. GC 2006 authorized it replacing the Book of Common Prayer lectionary beginning in 2007, with the provision for continued use of the previous Lectionary for purposes of orderly transition, with the permission of the ecclesiastical authority, until the First Sunday of Advent 2010 (A077).

The wheels of Mother Church grind slowly. Ever. So. Slowly.

A more difficult-to-swallow example of our lukewarmish position-taking is that of slavery. The issue of slavery simply wasn't dealt with in the American Episcopal Church because it was too controversial – it might promote schism, or the breakup of the church. We had

abolitionists in the church, to be sure, and some very effective ones – but on the whole, the church was silent on the issue of slavery: it was held as a secular or political issue, not a moral issue. The church split into two churches because of the secession of the south, not because of a moral imperative from General Convention. After the Civil War, guess what? People of color fairly abandoned the Episcopal Church, believing that creating their own churches would further the cause of freedom more effectively.

And General Convention let it pass.

And General Convention allowed black bishops for black churches, refused to take a stand on segregation, and allowed “local option” – leaving the issue of discrimination to individual dioceses.

And so, you see that we have a rather dubious history when it comes to taking a definitive moral stand in the area of racism. Yes, we are doing better: In 2006 we acknowledged, quote, “Resolved, That The Episcopal Church acknowledge its history of participation in this sin and the deep and lasting injury which the institution of slavery and its aftermath have inflicted on society and on the Church; and be it further

Resolved, That we express our most profound regret that (a) The Episcopal Church lent the institution of slavery its support and justification based on Scripture, and (b) after slavery was formally abolished, The Episcopal Church continued for at least a century to support de jure and de facto segregation and discrimination; and be it further

Resolved, That The Episcopal Church apologize for its complicity in and the injury done by the institution of slavery and its aftermath; we repent of this sin and ask God’s grace and forgiveness.” (Resolution 2006-A123)

Our unwillingness as a national church to take positions which might upset the status quo (that is, which might upset a conservative minority of parishes and dioceses) can be truly painful to review – the example of the sin of slavery and racism are probably the most extreme example of our fear of driving people away because we have taken the high moral road.

Our unwillingness to open all levels of leadership to women is a story of classic presumption on the part of white men that they alone possess the true knowledge of the truth of God – that their interpretation of Holy Scripture is the only possible interpretation, that the tradition of the subjugation of women is too important to cast aside, and that they – men – can decide when, where, how, and to whom the Holy Spirit might speak and invite.

Women – with, I must add, the support of some men – began to actively seek admission to the process toward priesthood way back in the 1850s – and this was even before they could vote in a parish election or belong to Vestry! In 1974 four bishops, daring to believe the integrity of eleven women and their sense that they were truly called to holy orders, four bishops (brave men, actually) irregularly ordained eleven women priest in Philadelphia. To avoid the scandal

and rupture of church court proceedings, 1976 General Convention, after years of putting the subject on hold, passed a resolution opening all orders of ordained ministry to women.

Now on to the more stimulating resolutions of 2009.

For two millennia Holy Mother Church has employed and ordained people of homosexual persuasion. Granted, that has been limited pretty much to men: priests, bishops, perhaps a pope or two, organists, directors of music, Sunday School teachers, deacons, lay Eucharistic ministers, custodians, wedding consultants (yes, some Episcopal churches actually have those!) – we have filled every single office, lay and ordained, within the Church.

And we have been mostly silent.

For thirty-three years the Episcopal church has been on record that we will not discriminate in employment.

It took until 1994 to overturn a canonical resolution denying honest, unapologetic, and open people like us access to ordained ministry. That is, in fact, what happened at General Convention of 1994 – the church became honest.

And the Anglican Communion was rent asunder: “Cry havoc and let loose the dogs of war!”

It seems that within the worldwide Anglican Communion and within The Episcopal Church of the United States there are people who would much rather that gay men and women simply be quiet. Don’t scare the horses. Hush up – don’t talk about that nice florist/hairdresser/confirmed bachelor that way!

Along came Gene Robinson.

Gene was a parish priest, then canon to the ordinary (that means, general assistant, fallguy, and gofer for a bishop). He had divorced his wife many years prior, and had been in a committed relationship with his partner, Mark, for many years as well – and please note, he did not divorce his wife to live with Mark.

The good people of the Diocese of New Hampshire elected him their bishop.

And the bishops and standing committees of 2003 confirmed his election.

And the conservative side of the church went berserk.

It seems, of course, that they hold dear to their hearts the seven verses of Holy Scripture we call the “clobber verses” – portions of the Bible which say that I – and people like me – am an abomination. They neglect the fact that our Lord Jesus never said a word about the subject. And they neglect the notion which *I* hold dear: that the overarching message of the Bible is of God’s love. That Holy Scripture always points toward justice. That the world needs *more* love,

not less. And that faithful, committed, monogamous relationships can become icons of holy love.

In 2006 General Convention committed what I believe to be a sin: They passed a resolution which which instructed "Standing committees and bishops with jurisdiction to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on the communion." It was widely understood that "candidate... manner of life" was a coded euphemism for gay and lesbian persons, and this interpretation was later validated by the House of Bishops.

This was in clear violation of our church law, but it was passed in an attempt to quiet the waters.

It didn't.

And so at this year's General Convention, recently concluded in Anaheim, the Episcopal Church got honest and got integrity with two resolutions.

The first reaffirmed our canon law prohibiting discrimination. It stressed that we desire full partnership within the Anglican Communion, told the rest of the world that we'd continue to pay a whole lot of money to support the processes, offices, and mission of the Anglican Communion, but that we always had, currently do, and will continue to allow access to all levels of leadership to all of God's children.

The second resolution moved us toward developing an official rite for the blessing of same gender relationships, and for marriages in dioceses where that is a legal possibility.

Now whether or not you or I or anyone else agrees with the outcome of these two resolutions, my own reaction is this:

Finally we have chosen honesty over hypocrisy. We have said "This is what we do. This is where we believe the Holy Spirit has led us. We've done the hard work of prayer, study, and listening, and we feel called *as a church* to be honest about who we are."

Finally we have chosen honesty over fear. There are issues over which honesty will cause disruption. Even chaos. Havoc, as Shakespeare uses the word. But there are times when a moral imperative is so pressing that the fear of losing some members or parishes or even dioceses must be accepted, looked at, and then a decision must be made not to let fear rule our hearts.

Yes, there will be further disruptions within the Episcopal Church. Fewer disruptions, I suspect, than the more conservative media would have us believe – for after all, to many people in the pews and in the pulpits this is all simply an issue that doesn't make us sweat.

We'd much rather get on with the mission of the church – you know, the good ol' feeding the hungry sort of stuff that Jesus compels us to do.

This all may be more information than you wanted to hear. For patiently listening, thank you.

But since many in the news media have pretty much predicted the death of the Episcopal Church I wanted to give you a bit of perspective.

We're not dying.

We're becoming more faithful.

We're becoming more honest.

We are beginning to live a life with integrity.

And we are once more doing our best to live into the light.