

**3 Easter
May 5, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Many of you know this, but for those who don't, and those who need a reminder ... The Episcopal Church in the United States is part of the Anglican Communion. The Anglican Communion is made up of all those Churches that are descended from the Church of England. When England was a colonial power the Church of England spread around the world. The figurehead of the Anglican Communion is the Archbishop of Canterbury ... presently that is Justin Welby.

Every ten years or so all the bishops of the Anglican Communion are invited by the Archbishop of Canterbury to gather for what is known as the Lambeth Conference. In 2020 bishops from over 165 countries worldwide will gather in Canterbury, England. While the bulk of the Conference will take place on the campus of the University of Kent, some events will take place at Canterbury Cathedral ... the mother church of the Anglican Communion; and at Lambeth Palace ... the official London residence and offices of the Archbishop of Canterbury. According to the Lambeth Conference web site, "The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, is sending personal invitations to every eligible bishop and spouse and is looking forward immensely to hosting them." However, there is a caveat ... the spouses of gay or lesbian bishops in the Episcopal Church in the United States are specifically not included in that invitation. Some bishops from the conservative branch of the Anglican Communion have threatened a boycott if all spouses are invited. They base their authority on the premise that marriage is between "one man, and one woman."

The topmost leadership of the Anglican Communion ... a branch of worldwide Christianity ... gathering in the name of Jesus Christ who is the ultimate expression of unconditional love ... that topmost leadership of the Anglican Communion has decided to exclude certain persons who have been historically marginalized ... all for the sake of "unity" and "peace" in the Church.

[Later on Sunday, May 5 The Episcopal Café made this post:

<https://www.episcopalcafe.com/welby-apologizes-over-mistakes-he-made-in-lambeth-spouse-decision/>]

Today we heard the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Paul ... known before his conversion as Saul ... was a Pharisaic Jew who persecuted the followers of the new Jesus movement. Then his dramatic conversion. Afterwards, Paul was, and would become, the greatest evangelist for Jesus.

Yet, even then, Paul told slaves to be obedient to their masters. Paul preached and wrote that women were to be subservient to men, and had no role in church leadership. Moreover, some of Paul's words are still used today to condemn loving relationships between two people of the same sex.

Slavery is gone ... at least as a legal norm in civilized societies. In some expressions of the greater Christian Church women are still working for gender equality. But there is progress. As we are well aware, with Pastor Deena Galantowicz sharing leadership with me in this congregation, the Episcopal Church has been ordaining women as deacons, priests, and bishops for some time ... including Katherine Jefferts Schori who served as our Presiding Bishop before our present Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry. Yet, the Church is still lagging on the issue of the inclusion of people who happen to love others of their same gender ... and they use Paul's words as their justification, at least in part.

There has been progress on the role of gays and lesbians in the life and leadership of the Episcopal Church. And there has been headway as well, for gays and lesbians in gaining access to all the sacraments of the Church ... at least from my viewpoint I consider it movement in a positive direction. However, I find it painful when that progress is obstructed by those in a position to make a meaningful statement, and take significant action but do nothing ... all for the sake of "unity" and "peace" in the Church. Ironically, the Church is the institution that came into being through Jesus who spoke truth to the power of both the Roman government and the Temple authorities ... and he was willing to die speaking that truth to power. Jesus came to bring peace to this world ... but peace through justice, not peace through evasion of conflict.

Episcopalians are taught that the Authority of the Church ... that is the way the Church decides major issues ... is based upon three things in equal proportion. The image of a three legged stool is often invoked. If the legs aren't the same length the stool does not function very well. Anyhow, the three legs of the stool for the Episcopal Church are Holy Scripture, Tradition, and Human Reasoning. And what is meant by Tradition is the way the Church has acted over its two-thousand-year history.

One problem with this three legged stool approach is that the Bible often contradicts itself, so people can be rather selective in choosing parts of the Bible to defend a particular position. Another problem is that throughout the Church's history there have been times when the Church has been flat-out wrong ... the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Doctrine of Discovery which allowed the killing of native people while conquering the New World. And finally, I think we all know that Human Reasoning is not infallible. We have only to look at the missteps we ... our own selves ... have made in our personal lives to know that Human Reasoning can be flawed.

The late Howard Thurman was the dean of the chapel at Howard University in Washington, D.C, and later at Boston University. He was a mystic, philosopher, theologian, educator, civil rights leader, and author. In his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, he told the story about his

grandmother, a former slave who, because she could not read, made him read the Bible to her in the evenings. He was free to choose any portion of the Bible, except for Paul's epistles.

One day he timidly asked his grandmother why she disapproved of Paul's writings. She told him that for years the overseer on her slave master's plantation would read to the slaves how Paul enjoined slaves to be obedient to their master, and she decided that if she lived to be freed from slavery she would never again read or have read in her hearing anything from Paul. For her, the overwhelming evidence from the Gospels, the first five books of the Bible known in Judaism as the Torah, and the Psalms was that it was God's compassionate desire that all people be free. God was a God of love, Thurman's grandmother insisted, and love does not enslave the beloved ... rather, love frees the enslaved to be loved and to love.

So what might the conversion of Paul on the Damascus Road tell us about all this ... it is, after all, included in our Holy Scriptures and therefore is part of the Church's Authority. Simply put, Paul had an encounter with Jesus.

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. (Acts 9:3-7)

Saul had been a devout Jew. He thought that what he was doing was the "right" thing to do. His persecution of the followers of Jesus ... including watching the stoning of Stephen and doing nothing to stop it ... might be considered horrible. We may think of the pre-conversion Paul ... Saul ... as being evil. However, he was only following his Holy Scriptures and his Tradition in protection of the way he ... with Human Reasoning ... understood his faith.

Yet, there was another Jew who understood that same Jewish faith in a different way. His name was Jesus. Saul's encounter with Jesus changed him. I believe that the same can and will happen to the Church ... including the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion ... in due time.

Paul, while he was Saul and a Pharisee, was very concerned with who was **IN**, and who was **OUT** ... who was ritually clean and acceptable or, on the other hand, who was ritually unclean and therefore unacceptable. But he had an encounter with Jesus and the fact is that the life of Jesus revealed the heart of God. Saul was a Pharisee, and it was the Pharisees who criticized Jesus saying, "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them." And yet Saul ... on the road to Damascus ... was the recipient of radical hospitality in this divine welcome ... this encounter with Jesus ... this unconditional love shown to one who was persecuting those who were taking seriously what Jesus took seriously.

Remember, the "sinners" that Jesus welcomed in radical hospitality were those who were ritually unclean in his world. The tax collector who handled money with the Emperor's image

on it ... an idol. The prostitute who was ritually unclean because of the laws dealing with feminine hygiene. The persons with skin sores because of the prohibition against open wounds. The blind, or deaf, or lame because they must be sinners otherwise God would not have let this happen to them. Jesus ate with them. He accepted them in radical hospitality.

People felt safe with Jesus. He exuded compassion. Jesus welcomed all the people we ignore and despise. The sexually suspicious. The religiously impure. Ethnic outsiders. Rich tax collectors. The chronically sick and the mentally deranged. Women, widows and children. They all felt safe with Jesus ... they knew his compassion.

The only people who didn't feel safe with Jesus were the religious experts and Temple authorities who appointed themselves as gatekeepers of God's love. And they had good reasons to feel unsafe. When Jesus welcomed the unwelcome, when he accepted the unacceptable without any preconditions, he angered those in power. Whether then or now, there's a bitter irony in how the simple act of offering a welcome and accepting a person can anger some people.

How is it that some churches today ... Episcopal churches, Catholic churches, Methodist churches, Presbyterian churches, Baptist churches, and many more ... how is it that some churches today, in the name of this same Jesus, refuse to share all the sacraments of the Church with those deemed by them to be unacceptable? If Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners ... those who were "unclean" by the standards of the religious purity system of the day ... then surely those gathered in his name ... who claim to take seriously what Jesus took seriously ... can and should share the meal prepared in his name with all who come to the table, as well as provide all the sacraments the Church offers.

Throughout his writings Paul uses himself as an example of God's "unlimited patience." Throughout the New Testament, Paul describes himself as a former religious zealot who tried to exterminate the early Christian movement. In the epistle to Timothy, as an old man, Paul was still haunted by his past. He describes himself as "formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor."

But God welcomed Paul. And his conversion moved him from violent, hostile aggression to indiscriminate love and hospitality. You don't need to do anything to receive God's welcome, because there's nothing to do. God welcomes us just like we are and right where we are.

At times the Church today still uses Paul's words to justify marginalizing those they consider "sinners." Perhaps instead of arguing with them we need to demonstrate the same radical hospitality ... the same unconditional love ... that was shown to Paul. Maybe ... just maybe ... that kind of encounter with Jesus and taking seriously what Jesus took seriously might make a difference.

The only thing to do is to accept that we are accepted. In the words of Paul Tillich, "You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you don't know... simply accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens, we experience grace."

I can sympathize with Howard Thurman's grandmother. She lived a life of slavery justified by the same Holy Scripture she adored. Paul's writings, as inspirational as they are, can be used in ways that limit people's lives. That was the case with slavery. That still is the case with regard to the role of women in many expressions of the Christian Church. And it is still the case in how we include ... or don't include ... people who love others of their same gender ... our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

Saul encountered Jesus and it transformed his life ... and it transformed his faith. He did not see Jesus. But he heard his voice. Saul received an unconditional welcome ... radical hospitality. If it can happen for him, then it can happen for us, and it can happen for the Church as well.

Remember that you are a blessed child of God. You were born into blessing. The only thing to do is to accept that we are accepted. Remember the words of Paul Tillich, "You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you don't know ... simply accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens, you will experience grace."

Amen.

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