

7/26-27/2008

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

For three glorious weeks, I was on vacation. Oklahoma, Colorado, Santa Fe. These are some of the most beautiful areas of the country, at least to me, and I was glad to be there. Many of you have asked me about my trip: what I did, what I saw, did I relax? Has he calmed down... you seem to suggest. But one of the most oft asked questions of priests post-vacay is "Did you go to church?"

And for me, that's a loaded question. I'm not quite certain if people are gauging my loyalty to church structures, are wondering if they should feel guilty if they don't quite make it to services on their own vacations, or if they're simply interested. Either way, I will say that frankly, "no," I do not attend services. For one, I generally think of church as a community, and without my community, I miss church period. And sadly and secondly, there is no faith community within a hundred mile radius of where I was in Oklahoma and Colorado that would welcome me into their own community. My childhood Episcopal Church has fallen to the dark side and rallies troops against gays and lesbians. And at the church closest to my farm, the Methodist church where as a child I went to vacation Bible School and played Red Rover on the front lawn, the minister recently told my Grandmother that the Episcopal Church was in salvific jeopardy because of our acceptance of gays and lesbians. Unfortunately, it seems that the battle lines of the modern church have been drawn right across my land, not to mention my soul. Luckily for me and my family's dignity, my Grandmother showed that offending minister the door! But I cannot help feeling like a diaspora gay, expelled from my homeland. By the waters of Babylon...

I am sorry to belabor my own personal grumblings here and in the pulpit. That is not my intention. I'm usually a little more Obama-esque in my minority status anger. But I do want to set the stage for how we react to and address the global Lambeth Conference, the gathering of most of the Anglican and Episcopalian Bishops that happens only every ten years and happens this summer. Luckily, what Lambeth Conference says or decides is not binding for the Episcopal Church. We have no need to feel ultimately threatened, but parts of our very important relationships with other people around the globe, many of whom desperately need our help, is being called into question, primarily because of our views about sexuality and all the underpinning issues surrounding our interpretation of scripture. It is a sad state of affairs, and all of us might soon feel like we are in diaspora whenever we venture into other Anglican churches.

I would like to read from Bishop Roskam's blog from Lambeth. Bishop Roskam does believe that, thus far, everyone is mostly working well and playing well with others. But then, she wrote early this week, "I was feeling pretty positive about our work so far, when I learned this evening that the Province of the Sudan has called for Gene Robinson's resignation and has made various other demands. We New York bishops were particularly surprised by this, as the Archbishop of the Sudan, Daniel Den Bul, was at our Priests' Conference in May, and as recently as that gave Bishop Sisk full assurances that he wished to remain in relationship with the Episcopal Church... It seems that parts of the Anglican Communion still have in mind to destroy the Episcopal Church. I am greatly saddened that this latest salvo comes from an area of the Communion where there is such great suffering. Surely the bishops of the Sudan have better things to do with their time and energy than to feed the division."

Clearly, if someone who has genocide going on in his own country is scandalized with our ordaining a gay bishop, we have missed just how important this issue is for some. Perhaps, we need to be thinking about and articulating why we feel so strongly about our church's position, which, with the help of our readings, I would like to do today. In today's Gospel Reading, we hear Jesus attempt to define heaven, the place where divisions between us and God cease. And if we're thinking of who we should be, perhaps we should be working toward a place where the divisions between humanity and God are lessened as much as possible. After all, that does seem to be the point of the incarnation of Jesus, God being with and among us. In the reading from Matthew, Jesus offers five metaphors to describe such a meeting ground. He says that the Kingdom of heaven is like yeast, treasure, a great pearl, a mustard seed, and a net. In the end, this place of connection is a place that is so precious that we should be willing to sacrifice everything else. To not do so might mean missing the connection.

And I guess that what strikes me as relevant to Lambeth is that these parables of heaven require us to see the world through a different lens. While most of the world is concerned about winning and big seeds, and power, we are more concerned with the smallest of seeds, the one pearl of love, and making sure that ALL are protected.. Which brings me to my point. For one, I am weary of discussing whether or not I personally should or should not be allowed within the community of God. I am a child of God, so is everyone here, so is everyone in the world, so are the people who demand that I repent. And part of seeing the world through a different lense, part of being willing to find for that great pearl and to be leavened, is the ability to not violently react against bishops, or others, when they attack us with hostility. The great pearl is to love them.

That does not mean that we should ask Gene Robinson or me or anyone else to resign. That does not mean that we should not move forward with same sex blessings and marriages. Stopping heaven from reigning on earth usually produces weeping and gnashing of teeth, because we refuse love. But we should be careful as we proceed. We should remember that as Christians, if we want to really follow Christ, we are searching for heaven, for a place where we can stand firm in the radical love of God, even in the midst of people who dislike and disfavor us. And we cannot do that, if we are holding onto malice and contempt, even malice and contempt for people who have shown us malice and contempt. .

The writer and Sunday School teacher Anne Lammott writes about teaching a similar lesson. "What does letting go mean?" I asked [the Sunday school class]" she says. " The boys looked around at one another, worried as cats. 'Let me show you,' I said, and gripped two colored markers, one in each hand. 'What if, when we go in for our snacks, someone offers me a juice box, and I won't let go of these pens, even though I'm thirsty.' I told them to watch, and you'd have thought I was doing a magic trick as I slowly unfurled my fingers and let the marker drop.

We all thought hard about this. 'So why would you want to let go?' I asked. One of the six year olds answered, 'Because you're thirsty?' "Bingo!" I cried. Thank you, Jesus! This was suddenly the most successful class I'd ever taught. 'See sometimes, if you're lucky, you get to a point where you're sick of a problem, or worn down by tinkering with it, or clutching it. And letting it go... buys you some time and space, so maybe freedom and humor sneak in – which is probably what you were praying for all along."

Luckily, Bishop Roskam has found some hope. Yesterday, she wrote. "We in the Episcopal Church have always said that we do not demand agreement with our positions in order to be in relationship. Now is the time to live into that commitment." she says. "The Archbishop of the Sudan [is now] signalling to the rest of Africa, ...[that] They do not agree with our actions, just as our other partners in Africa do not necessarily agree with us. And still they are choosing to be in relationship with us." which seems to be good news.

She continues, "Hold in mind the words of Bishop Mdimi Mhogolo to me when we first entered into a partnership for Carpenter's Kids. "We do not agree with your decision [concerning Gene Robinson] but we think the division is the devil's work to keep the church from ministering to a suffering world." ... As long as the bishops choose to be in relationship with us, we can move ahead to minister together to this suffering world."

To accept heaven on earth, we have to let go of the colorful marker of feeling righteous and on feeling the wrong-eous-ness of others. And we need to trust in God and trust that our unity with others, even Bishops in Africa comes, from a different place than simple agreement. We have to trust that it comes from a relationship with a forgiving, loving God that is still working itself out. And It comes from a acknowledgment that we are all universally in diaspora from our true home, the place where God and humanity meet. I trust that the Episcopal Church has come a little closer to our true home, we have seen heaven in our gay and lesbian members, but we are all fallen and attempting to find the one true way of the love of God. And we pray for them and for us.