

Sermon for Pentecost 2010

This Pentecost we face new challenges as Christians, as a congregation and as Episcopalians. Several years ago Bishop Steven Charleston, Dean and President of the Episcopal Divinity School proclaimed that the most important question before all of us is not about schism or sexuality. It is about witness! If you attended the consecration of our new bishops last week you would have been reminded of our ethnic and cultural diversity and the clear message that in the Episcopal Church and this diocese there are no outcasts. What a witness we can claim for ourselves this Pentecost!

Christian witness is the public affirmation of faith. It is what we do after the baptisms this morning of Audrey and Isaiah and our reaffirmation of Baptismal vows with their parents and godparents. It is how we let the world see that we practice what we preach. On this Day of Pentecost we are called to make our witness. We have the opportunity to be what we say we are in our baptismal covenant. The question for us today is: What will we do now to grow the body of Christ here in this changing city and the world?

The answer, as always, is a matter of faith. We witness to what we believe. In the Episcopal Church, we believe in Jesus Christ. We believe in the witness of Hebrew Scripture as the root of our faith. We believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ. In fact, we believe so strongly in the essential parts of our shared faith that we are not afraid to disagree with one another about what they mean to us individually and as a community of faith. This is the message we are commanded to share beyond these walls.

As Steven Charleston reminds us today, “we welcome difference as the active presence of God’s Holy Spirit moving amongst us. Our witness is not to conformity but to community. As the Episcopal Church we are not concerned that everyone in the pews believes exactly the same thing, in the same way, at the same time. Instead, we are concerned that no one is left out of those pews because of what they believe, who they are, or where they come from.

“Our witness is to the unconditional love of God through the grace of Christ Jesus. Therefore, we accept the risk of grace by not setting limits to love with our own judgment of others. There are no border guards at the doors of the Episcopal Church. We respect the dignity of every human being and are never ashamed of who sits next to us in worship. We are all the children of God just as we are all sinners in need of mercy.

“There are no walls around the Episcopal Church. We believe that God is at work in the world. We are not concerned that this world sees us as perfect, pure, or powerful. Instead, we are concerned that people see us practicing justice, doing mercy, and walking humbly with the God we believe loves us all equally.

“Our witness is to hope, not fear. We believe that men and women, no matter how separated they may think they are by religious conviction, cultural value, or social location are never truly apart unless they choose to be. We have nothing to fear from one another unless we allow fear to be our witness. While the distance between us may seem great and the path to reconciliation impossibly long, we have the guidance and comfort of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we never despair of one another or deny one another for to do so would be to despair and deny the power of that Spirit.

“Our witness is to mission. While the Spirit leads us to truth, we carry on with the task God has given us. We do not place pride before discipleship. While we may have many disagreements between us, we have only one mission before us. We never question the faith of the person who seeks to do the work of God. We believe that it is not important to know if that person is "right" or politically correct. It is only important to know if she or he feels welcomed into the servant ministry of Christ. There are no loyalty oaths in the Episcopal Church, but there are many jobs for those who want to help heal a broken world.

“Our witness is to the reconciliation of God in a time of fear. In the Episcopal Church, we stand together not even if we disagree, but precisely because we disagree. We practice the radical hope of God. We embody a faith that says there are many rooms in the house of God, but one home for us all if we choose to live together.

“It is time to make our witness. In a century already marked by the terror of war, with zealots of all traditions inciting us into the patriotism of fear, what witness will we make? What alternative will we offer? What fresh vision will we share? Will we retreat into yet smaller factions of "true believers," whether from the Right or the Left, smug in our self righteous assurance that we have the truth?

“It is time to make our witness. It is time to take off our halos, our mitres, and our martyr's crown to stand up and be counted. What witness will each of us choose to make?”

Bishop Charleston reminds us that we can not answer for anyone in this Church but ourselves. He says: *“I do not ask that you agree with my theology. I do not demand that you read your Bible exactly as I read mine. I know that you and I may disagree on many subjects and find it hard to live together. But I also know that you are as much in need of God's forgiveness as I am.*

“You and I need one another now more than ever because there are so many others who need us both in this hurting world. That world, the poor and the hungry, the captives and the prisoners, are depending on us to do more than argue with one another. For them, our witness is not a matter of church politics. It is a matter of life and death.

“.... This is the time for us to do something totally unexpected and wonderful, to confound those who say we have lost our vision. This is our moment to show the world that we can practice what we preach and be who we say we are. Our finest hour will not be when we think we have won something from one another, but when we know we have nothing to lose by loving one another.”

As we go forth from this church today, let us be filled with the Holy Spirit descending upon us this Pentecost and proclaim with Bishop Charleston:

“ I am a witness. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in God's gospel of justice, compassion, and reconciliation. I believe in the community of God and I will work faithfully with every person to bring peace and healing to the world. I open my hands. I open my heart. I want the world to see that I am not afraid. I step gratefully into the unconditional love of God. I stand up to be counted not for what I think is right, but for what I believe to be possible. How about you? Will you stand with me?

“Are you a witness?”