

Sermon August 23, 2009 – Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev'd Canon Robert G. Riegel

John 6:56-69

Can we learn to say with St. Peter, “Lord, to whom else can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

The Holy One of God. I am increasingly inspired and awed by the life, the way, the attitude of Jesus. How could he be so steadily gentle and loving surrounded by so many fearful and angry people? Crowds who had eagerly followed him for his miracles and followed him to get more bread to eat were now offended and leaving him. Some were offended by the company he kept and the outcasts he welcomed. He told the disciples he would be taken and put to death. He told them that he would be betrayed, and denied, and deserted by his closest friends. Things were happening over which he took no control. Things were happening that would certainly have caused me anguish and fear. Yet, Jesus kept speaking only words of love and salvation. He was the Word made flesh. He was the true bread of heaven, the living bread, the only bread that could bring eternal life. And in constant love he kept offering his body, his life, his salvation to each and to everyone. He brought us the perfect love from God that casts out all fear. He gave us the example not to have to be in control, not to have to lord it over others, not to have to live in fear: in a fear that pushes others away and destroys community and life. He clearly intended for his followers to be loving and not controlling, to be peaceful and not fearful. He promised that his love could cast out fear and anger and bring peace.

Some of you may remember the fascinating TV series called THE TWILIGHT ZONE. In one drama Rod Serling projected us into a future age; into what might be called an obsolescence trial. A man is brought before a bar of justice, not on any charge of criminal activity, but because he has been declared obsolete by his fellow humanity. It has been charged that the man no longer does anything of worth to justify the space he takes up and the food he eats. In the trial he is given one more opportunity to disprove the allegation and avoid the sentence of extinction. That drama caught the full attention of many viewers, because it was an enlargement upon a basic fear with which we all struggle. A fear that some day we will become an irrelevant member of the human herd - useless - rejected - if not to a merciful death, then to an unmerciful alienation from any sense of self worth and from all important forms of acceptance.

Many people, or at least some very vocal people seem sure that our President and a national health plan will include such trials of worth and death. The amount of fear and anger and untruth has been amazing to me. Comparing the president to Adolph Hitler or Stalin or in an editorial today to the communist Brezhnev in to increases the fear and confusion. That has appeared on many signs, many Emails and said by broadcasters who have to be aware of its untruth. It is not acceptable. It invites violence and anarchy. I am not clear what a health plan would look like and what it would mean to our people and to the economy. But I want to be able to talk about it. I want both parties to work together and produce something of worth. I do know people who say they are totally against any National Health Plan who are themselves enrolled in one and regularly receive Medicare. Perhaps, what fuels this anger in people is a fear they will not be in control. We seem

almost addicted to the need to control. Perhaps there is another reason. We know at least at some level that there are millions in our country who are daily considered worthless, and not of enough value to deserve reasonable health care. These are the less educated, unemployed, the poor and underpaid. Perhaps there is fear that by including these people we will be the losers of medical care. I guess, with or without a bill there will be changes in medical care and we will pay more.

Many of these angry people attend church, affirm their faith in Jesus, and I saw that some were wearing the bracelet asking “What would Jesus do?” We are said to be a God-fearing nation, a God-fearing people but we are a long long way from acting with the love of God and adopting into our lives the way and the love of the attitude of Jesus. I am concerned about our nation. But I am even more concerned about the Church and how we speak to each other and about each other. We need to address the control issues, and the fear and the underlying anger that too often make us anything but the body of Jesus, the bread for the world. We often focus on one thing, homosexuality, which a loving church should address, and forget to address a multitude of issues. There is some really bad heterosexual behavior going on. There are crucial issues of justice, and the poor, and the condition of the environment, and the many services of feeding, and visiting, and embracing and instructing children, and clearly being the loving Body of Christ in and to the world. I hope, I really hope, we will not let fear and anger elect our bishop, but instead pray for and seek someone who can be an apostle to help us to be more the living body of Christ in the world.

Let me tell you about some people who I think are getting it right. It is no surprise that there are people who disagree with my approach to the Bible, as well with some of the things I teach and preach. Perhaps a few have drifted off. But there are a number who have done more than just stay. To my knowledge they have never said bad things about me. They are very regular in worship; worship is so important because it is the foundation, the basis for our community. They have provided leadership in a number of quite different Bible studies and book studies. They have served faithfully on the vestry and this summer several of them have promoted after worship luncheons where hundreds of people enjoyed fellowship and good food. They have taken part in a number of outreach ministries and formed a wonderful healing ministry. The cathedral is stronger because people of differing opinions stay together, worship together, remain in fellowship and respect. And, God knows, I am one that needs to grow in these qualities of Jesus.

The reading from the Epistle to the Ephesians calls us to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes to proclaim the good news of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

In the Gospel Jesus asks us if we want to go away. And Peter says, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Let us say that with Peter. Jesus offers his Body to us and calls us to be his Body in the world today. Our collect is also a call to us.

“Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your name.”

I love our Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion which has maintained a special form of Christian life through many centuries. I rejoice that we embrace a so-called three legged stool of Bible and Tradition and Spirit guided Reason. These are well expressed in our Church’s commitment to four things. The Bible, the Creeds, the two sacraments of baptism and eucharist and the historic episcopate or bishop. I do not want to lose our unity or diversity, nor our worship, nor our love for God, nor our love for one another nor our welcome of those now often rejected. Some years ago The Rev. Dennis Maynard, Rector of Christ Church Greenville, a man with whom I did not always agree, wrote his description of the Anglican Communion with which I basically do agree. Listen to what he wrote.

If you’re looking for a church that has
 Morality but not moralism
 The Bible but not bibliolatry (bib li ol a tree)
 Law but not legalism,
 Emotion but not emotionalism
 Piety but not pietism
 Tradition but not sentimentality,
 Then you’re probably in the right place

If you are looking for a church where
 diversity is celebrated and not condemned
 where thinking is stimulated and not discouraged
 where righteous living is
 of greater value than right talking
 where being loving is more important than being right.
 Then you’re in the right place.

If you are looking for a church where Jesus is central,
 a church not afraid to ask difficult questions
 of Him and of itself.
 Then you are in the right place.

But one word of caution.
 in such a church
 open to the ongoing revelations of God
 people will constantly be required
 to look at old things in new ways.

By the power of the Holy Spirit let us be the Church gathered in unity and showing forth the power and love of God among all peoples. Let the amazing lack of fear and the fullness of love by Christ, become our way and our life. Let us eat the Holy Bread and be the Holy People, forgiven by Christ and forgiving, fed by Christ and feeding, loved by Christ and loving; loving God, loving self and loving neighbor.