
A House of Prayer for All People

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The Cathedral of St. Philip
Atlanta, Georgia

A Sermon Before the U.S. Anglican Congress
Meeting at the Cathedral of St. Philip

Isaiah 56: 1-8
Acts 8: 26-40
Matthew 28: 18-20

I am honored to speak today before this assembly, the U.S. Anglican Congress, and before various members and guests of the Cathedral of St. Philip. I am honored because it is a privilege to preach the gospel. I am ready in season and out (2 Timothy 4.2), to give an accounting of the hope that lies inside me (1 Peter 3.15).

However, I realize that I am preaching to people I do not know well. So, today I want to deliver a testimony, my personal witness of the gospel of God, and the witness of this Cathedral of St. Philip.

I testify today to salvation in Jesus Christ, and I testify to the orthodox Christian faith. By "orthodox," I mean that faith whose theological substance was carved and sharpened not just in the biblical accounts of Jesus and the Spirit, but also carved and sharpened in the eager and loyal thinkers of the first five centuries after Christ. Our ancestors in the faith struggled mightily with their experience of the salvation of Christ, and they struggled with how that experience might be translated into words.

Indeed, our Christian faith was translated not just into words but also into the practical structures of the time. Such translation is always necessary in the faith. The "pure" experience of salvation in Jesus Christ is, ultimately, beyond words. It is transcendent, just as our God is transcendent. But that experience of grace and love is so compelling that it urges us to express it. We are a people of the Word, and so we describe and create in words.

The orthodox framers of our witness experimented, and made mistakes, and they are my heroes. In these folks, the Church universal learned about forgiveness - by having to forgive one another time and time again. We learned about reconciliation. But we also learned something else - something critical to Christianity: our faith develops. Our theology develops.

The way we describe and give witness to the salvation of God in Jesus Christ develops. That is to say, it changes, by necessity, over time. And, over time, it tends to change because it stretches for the upward call of God in Jesus Christ (Philippians 3.14). We have not attained it, said St. Paul to the Philippians. Things are made new in Christ.

I believe in this development of doctrine. God's truth has come to me in wonderful ways and creative ways in the past, and I have no doubt that God will come to me in still more wonderful and creative ways in the future.

But I've started in the wrong place, haven't I? (Last night, I walked into a social gathering of some of this assembly, and the first thing one person wanted to rail against was my view on sexuality; that's the wrong place to start.)

No, the place where the description of my hope really begins is in Scripture, in the word of God written, and in the words delivered to our ancestors in the faith even before the great theological councils of the Church.

Listen again to the scripture we heard this morning. Isaiah 56 says "Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, "'The Lord will surely separate me from his people.' do not let the eunuch say "'I am just a dry tree. ...To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things who please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

I do not know exactly what a eunuch was in that time, or how a eunuch came to be a eunuch. But I do know Isaiah's vision. Isaiah's vision was that salvation comes to, and through, even this sexually different being. Isaiah sees a grand vision, as well, of how even the foreigner shall be joined to the Lord. "All flesh shall see the glory of God, together" (Isaiah 40.5). What a vision! Yes, even the stranger, the one who does not follow the traditions as we have followed the traditions, will be joined to the Lord. What a kingdom that will be!

If we are honest, that vision challenges each one of us. Because each of us has a personal sense of God that is so strong that we cannot help but think it must be exactly the same for everyone else. It must be universal. And God certainly is universal. This God is universal! But our particular experience of God is not universal. God will seek the stranger. The people we tend to cut off from our community are very often the people whom God chooses to seek after.

Even the people who choose to leave our community are very often the people whom God seeks after. This is the vision that Isaiah saw. "My house shall be a place of prayer for all people" (Isaiah 56.7). Not just those who agree with me, or who agree with you. Not just those who look and act like me and you. Not just those with whom we are most comfortable. I believe Isaiah meant "all people." Later, John the Baptist would repeat the prophecy as Jesus was coming into the world. "All flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Luke 3.4-6).

I believe, of course, that Jesus himself is the fulfillment of that vision. Jesus is God seeking the lost. Everything we do, then, should point, not to ourselves or to our structures, but to the magnificent grace of Jesus Christ. And so, I have come to read the word "orthodox" in another way. I believe it surely refers to the substance of faith. But "orthodox" literally does not mean "right theology." It literally means "right praise." "Doxos" means glory and praise. We get the word "doxology" from the same root. To be orthodox is to offer right praise.

If we seek to glorify Jesus, then the right substance will emerge.

Isaiah and John the Baptist's vision of the kingdom was fulfilled even further by a particular person, the person who has influenced me so greatly in the past four years - the person of Philip the Deacon. Yes, I am speaking of the patron saint of this Cathedral, where we and others gather today.

I believe that Philip understood. He understood that there were no barriers to the gospel. He knew that, according to the traditions, being a foreigner and a eunuch were reasons to be excluded from holiness. But he also knew the vision of Isaiah. Being sent out in uncertain and challenging times, he came across a person who was both a eunuch and a foreigner: the Ethiopian eunuch, the one who was studying Isaiah! Philip explained scripture, he taught, and he baptized.

Those are the marks of the Cathedral of St. Philip, in Atlanta, Georgia. First: to have the courage to go out, to leave familiar territory. To leave the familiar area of Jerusalem. To join with those who seem like outcasts. Second: to teach. Teach, teach, teach. Finally, third, to baptize. Baptize, baptize, baptize.

That is our witness. That Cathedral of St. Philip is a house of prayer for all people. It's difficult to be any type of institution these days. We try to be an institution that incorporates that witness of mission and expansive grace.

No, I do not most of you very well. But I have heard some of the complaints and discouragements and disappointments

that many have spoken. Some of you left the Episcopal Church for a season because you did not agree that structures and descriptions develop, or that the prayer book should be changed. Some of you did not like the ordination of women. Some folks have spoken loudly opposing the ordination of gays and lesbians.

Some folks, I understand from conversations last night, are not present this morning, at this Eucharist, because they did not like the fact that I was preaching. There have been some betrayals and broken agreements.

We have some betrayals and disagreements. We must admit, too, that disagreements about sexuality have especially divided the Episcopal Church in recent years. Sexuality identity is strong. We have discovered that in the past forty years. But it is not stronger than the gospel of God that holds us together.

The Episcopal Church is a comprehensive and incarnational church. The Anglican tradition is a great tradition of Christianity. We are not the only tradition that is great. But we have gathered a tradition that is wise and patient, which seeks to comprehend polarities and opposing opinions. This is what the Elizabethan Settlement was all about.

The word "comprehend" can mean several things, can't it? It might mean understand. We seek to understand. We can do that because we stand in the great tradition of the scholastics, "fides quarens intellectam," faith seeking understanding. It takes faith to seek understanding, to seek the truth wherever it might be found.

But "comprehend" also means something like taking the whole of an issue or substance, "apprehending the totality." Comprehensiveness means we seek to encompass the whole in the same way that God encompasses the whole. God comprehends our disagreements. God cares for the world and for each of the folks who might seem so different from us.

Reconciliation, I believe, is about comprehensiveness. God seeks to take in the lost and the scattered, no matter whose fault it is that we are scattered.

Again, because we are a house of prayer for all people, because I believe in reconciliation, is why I welcome this U.S. Anglican Congress to meet here. There are people here who truly believe in, and desire, Christian reconciliation. I salute that desire and I pray for it daily.

But I must say, too, that I am not one of those who is discouraged about the Episcopal, or the Christian, Church. I rejoice in, and I have benefitted from, the development of liturgy and theology. I rejoice in, and I have benefitted from, the ordination of women in the Church. I rejoice in, and I have benefitted from, the ordination of gays and lesbians in the Church.

I do not rejoice in these developments for their own sake. I am not one of those who "celebrates diversity" for its own sake. Rather, I rejoice in these developments because each of them shows me something more about the expansive grace of God. I rejoice in development because I believe the scriptures: all things are made new in Jesus Christ.

That's what I signed up for when I became a Christian: to know and enjoy God forever, just as the Calvinist and Reformed traditions say.

So, I urge us not to let the disagreements of our particular generation separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Paul claimed in Second Corinthians that "from now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view. ...If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away. See everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation... Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:16-20). Be reconciled to each other.

That is my vision for the Church. I believe God will reconcile us. I see a time when local churches, with folks who know and love one another, will be able to contain disagreements and differences of opinion on issues that once divided us. I see a coming kingdom. In this new kingdom of God, no party or faction or assembly or political action group will win. I see a kingdom of where God wins, not one particular person or group or opinion. This is the kingdom where things are made new in Jesus Christ!

In that future Christian Church, the differences will still be with us, but they will not be stronger than the reconciliation power of God.

The differences will still be with us, but they will not be stronger than the orthodox faith, forged in right praise, right glory to God.

The differences will still be with us, but they will not be stronger than the expansive grace of God that we know in Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

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