

Second Sunday in Lent – March 4, 2007
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV
The Year C Collect and BCP Lectionary Readings,
As They Relate to the Current Unpleasantness

The Rev. Kent Higgins

Some of you are perhaps students of the American Civil War, which is referred to in some circles as “the recent unpleasantness.” It occurs to me that we would not be far off the mark to refer to the current situation of The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion as “the current unpleasantness.”

The issues, charges, and counter-charges are reverberating around the globe, using up time and energy that might be spent on the mission of the church.

I am sensitive to the impact these debates have had on this particular congregation.¹ I do not intend that this sermon open old wounds, and would be distressed if it did so. My focus is on the larger church and my prayer is that these few words may speak to healing.

In the last few days, the primates (that’s primates, not primates) of the Anglican Communion have issued a communiqué from their meeting at Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. The document calls on The Episcopal Church to do a number of things, and imposes a deadline for response of September thirtieth of this year.

On Wednesday, the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church – who is our primate and chief pastor – commented on the communiqué via an Internet broadcast which I watched in the company of a number of other clergy gathered

¹ Following the approval by General Convention 2003 of the consecration of V. Gene Robinson, the locally-ordained priest serving Ascension resigned his orders and left the church.

for a meeting on, of all things, the concept of family systems and how we interact with one another, sometimes for good, sometimes not.

As I heard it, Bishop Katharine's message was that we should take a Lenten break from making loud noises toward one another, and instead reflect on where we are, and where we need to go in order to be about the mission that God has given to his church.

As I read, and then re-read, the collect and lessons for this Second Sunday in Lent, I heard them speaking to this point. And I will return to them shortly, but first I want to say a bit about "family systems" and ask you to consider if the elements I am describing are visible in the larger church today.

The principles of family systems owe much to the work of Rabbi Edwin Friedman, who (among much other work) described "Five Characteristics of an Anxious System". In the descriptions which follow, be aware that where Friedman used the word "system." I have deliberately substituted the word "church."²

Characteristic One. Reactivity – automatic nervous response to change which is not moderated by the "higher" brain cortex. It is recognized by a loss of playfulness and adventure. Any change becomes problematic, and importantly, the church is less able to accurately assess its own functioning.

Characteristic Two. Herding. The degree of anxiety upsets the balance of the church so that the forces of conformity are in charge. And these "togetherness" forces can tend to smother the forces of individuality. There is only room for the "We" and none for the "I". The result is polarization within the church which leads to:

² My notes regarding Friedman owe much to the comments and notes of The Rev. Scott Allen of the Diocese of Bethlehem.

Characteristic Three. Blame or Rejection. The church (Friedman's "system") polarizes into bad/good; black/white; left/right, et cetera. And everything in between is unseen and becomes invisible. There tends to be a focus on victimization, on external events rather than taking responsibility for one's own anxiety.

Characteristic Four. A quick fix mentality. A church that has a low threshold for pain is attracted to premature closure to stop the pain. The focus becomes symptom relief rather than addressing the real issues and possibly making fundamental change. The cry is, "Stop the world, I want to get off!"

And finally, Characteristic Five. Church leaders, themselves incredibly stressed by the tensions within the church to which they are supposed to minister, succumb to the "quick-fix" mentality and seek symptom relief rather than maturity or resolution of the issues.

The result, to use the phrase popularized in the Windsor Report, is that people choose to "walk apart." Please do not hear me criticizing those who make this choice. I am trying to cast some light on the process that is occurring, and then to look at today's lessons and the collect for some additional light.

You need to understand that I strongly believe that the Bible speaks to us with respect to our needs and actions. I believe that it is a legitimate, but difficult-to-answer question, to ask "What would Jesus do?"

You may wish to refer to your bulletin insert if your memory is somewhat unclear on what was in the collect and the lectionary selections. I'm going to go through these points rather quickly.

The collect for the Second Sunday in Lent would have us understand that our God is a merciful God, and that God understands we will walk off the path he

wishes for us to be on. At the same time, it is part of the makeup of God that he will forgive those transgressions by bringing us back into right relationship with himself.

Now if any of us read this prayer as a statement that God is going to welcome others back to where we already are, let me suggest that we re-read it. We all stray from God's ways, and God, in his mercy calls us back to him. The Hebrew word translated "mercy" is often also translated as "love." It is not just "the other guy" who has strayed – we all have and will continue to do so.

So we can say these things about those times when we ask God to show "mercy" to us:

- When we ask for mercy, we are already in relationship with God, a relationship which he initiated and which he wishes to continue.
- "Mercy" is something which is entirely within God's power to grant or refuse, but we believe that it is God's wish to be loving, that is to say, to continue the relationship, or to put it into Friedman's terms, it is not God's wish that we live within an anxious system.

In the Genesis passage, we see God demonstrating to the original patriarch (who will later be re-named "Abraham") that he – that is God – can indeed be trusted to keep his word. We can, therefore, rely on God's words as children of Abraham.

Psalm twenty-seven asks us, especially in verse seventeen, what are the alternatives to having faith in God and his goodness? And then, in verse eighteen, exhorts us to "...await the Lord's pleasure; be strong, and he shall comfort your heart; wait patiently for the Lord."

In Philippians, Saint Paul makes a clear distinction between those who are God's enemies and those who love and serve him, and describes what happens to each group. Death awaits God's enemies, but eternal life in heaven will come to those who love and serve the Lord.

And in Luke's Gospel, we are told that merely hearing the word of Jesus is not enough to open the door to salvation. Indeed, we must have done something with that knowledge. Those who fail to do so will be left outside the barred door, which is horrible enough, but even worse is the fact that those they had judged to be evil will have been found by God to be righteous, to be united in paradise with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

One of my friends is an Episcopal priest who at one time was very active in what I would call the politics of the church – the very sorts of things that are going on now – the righteous judgments of one person on another. One day years ago – and remember this sound and fury has been going on for decades – one day a parishioner asked if he had heard about the most recent outrage The Episcopal Church had perpetrated against God. Brien stopped her and said, “There was a time when I put a lot of energy into such matters. I have come to realize that was futile, and I am resolved to be the best priest God will help me be, and to ignore the politics of the church.”

That is what I hear Bishop Katharine asking us to do. It is what I hear the scripture saying to us today. Let God be God, and leave the judging to him. Try to be the best people we can be, relying on God and his love at all times. Love one another, no matter what we may have done in the past or will do in the future.

If we rely on ourselves and the rightness of our positions, we have put our trust in idols. God calls us to trust in him and his righteousness, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.