

BREAKING NEWS

July 22, 2003 ~ Christopher Street West: L.A. Pride Sermon 2003 ~ Susan Russell
Job 38:1-11, 16-18; Psalm; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Mark 4:35-41

Here we are -- all dressed up with someplace to go! And don't we look fabulous? But not by accident: a lot of planning goes into staging an event of this magnitude: lots of lists, lots of schedules, lots of "orders." We got our "parking orders": come early ... hope for the best. We got our t-shirt orders -- and whether they were large, small or XXL they are outward and visible signs of the rainbow of people who make up the Body of Christ. And now it's time for "marching orders" -- and the most important one to remember is this one: we are marching in the light of God!

Yes, we are marching today -- in the light of God and down Santa Monica Boulevard -- proclaiming both the Good News of God in Christ Jesus AND the Episcopal Church: BEING the Body of Christ ... not just talking about it. As Verna Dozier, the African American Anglican theologian says: "Don't tell me what you believe: tell me what difference it makes that you believe." Today -- along this parade route -- it will make a difference that you believe. It will make a difference in the lives of those you may never see again or know that your witness has touched -- those who will hear for the very first time that there IS a community of faith that welcomes them -- that the inclusive love of God we proclaim extends to ALL people -- that the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Los Angeles MEANS what it says when it says, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes YOU!"

It's a witness we bring every year at this time to the GLBT community gathered along the parade route -- the Diocese of Los Angeles has a long and fabulous history of being an outward and visible sign of God's love and welcome at the L.A. Pride Parade. But this year we're not just bringing Good News -- we're part of Breaking News: and that breaking news is the election two weeks ago of the Reverend Canon Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire. Canon Robinson's election might be news simply due to the overwhelming margin by which he was elected on only the second ballot -- but that wouldn't be enough to land him on the Today Show! What is drawing all the attention is not his mandate for ministry but his sexual orientation. As an out, gay man living in a committed relationship Gene's election as Bishop of New Hampshire is indeed "breaking news" -- not only for the church but for the culture. From the Today Show to the O'Reilly Factor and everywhere in between the Episcopal Church has been front and center in the headlines -- resulting in what I believe is a unique and wonderful opportunity for evangelism.

“Evangelism??” Why yes, my dear, it’s all the rage – hadn’t you heard? Of course, it hasn’t always been so. I’m one of those cradle-type Episcopalians -- born at Good Samaritan Hospital, baptized at the Old Cathedral – and so I remember jokes like “Evangelize? Whatever do you mean? Everyone who *should* be an Episcopalian already *is* one.” I grew up in a church where I couldn’t imagine what on earth “evangelism” could have to do with us – with me. But that church has changed – and so have I – and I guess the response to that versicle is “thanks be to God.”

The awesome truth is that we have MUCH good news to tell ... and we live and move and have our being in a culture literally dying to hear it. To hear that they are loved. To hear that they are welcome. To hear that they are called to “go and do likewise.” That’s the Good News of God in Christ Jesus AND the Episcopal Church that we – each and every one of us – have been commissioned to proclaim. It’s Good News that can and will grow the church – maybe even double it by the year 2020 – if we’re willing to both claim it and proclaim it: to be the new thing we’ve been called to be.

Admittedly, not everyone is on board with that call. Jim Stanton – formerly of this diocese and now the Bishop of Dallas – has written this about that: *Some will say the direction taken by New Hampshire is the leading of the Holy Spirit in a new age. But ... nowhere is the Holy Spirit seen in the New Testament to contradict God’s revelation in prior ages.* With all due respect, it seems to me that Bishop Stanton has missed a very important distinction – and that’s the crucial difference between contradicting God’s revelation and expanding our *understanding* of God’s revelation. It’s not that I don’t sympathize with the temptation to say, “Enough with the revelations already! Surely God is finished with us *now!*” I really get that.

But so, I imagine, did the Israelites when they finally arrived in the Promised Land – only to have the prophets tell them (again and again!) that unless they cared as well for the stranger and alien – the widow and the orphan – they were falling short of God’s call to them. The first century religious authorities thought they finally had it wired – they were not exactly lining up for the new understandings of God’s revelation offered by the uppity rabbi from Nazareth – not at all interested in questions like, “Who is your neighbor?” and “Have you done it unto the least of these?” And then there was Peter – who in the earliest days of the church came face to face with what seemed to be a contradiction to God’s revelation when he came face to face with Cornelius – the Gentile centurion seeking to be baptized. Resistant at first, Peter was opened to the leading of the Holy Spirit in a new age – and after declaring “now I understand that nothing God has made is unclean” he baptized Cornelius and his household – the Gentiles were incorporated into the Body of Christ -- and another step forward on the journey was taken.

And here we are today – fabulously and wonderfully made – and part of that same journey: part of God’s relentless call to bring all creation into relationship with God and with each other. Listen again to these words from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Corinth: *So 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; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself ... entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ.*

More marching orders: ambassadors for Christ given a message of reconciliation. Reconciliation is not about having all the answers – it’s about trusting God and each other enough to live in the tension of the questions. It’s about a church where Jim Stanton and Susan Russell can hold deep and different opinions on nearly everything except the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus and the power of God’s love to transform our lives to be vehicles of that grace in the lives of others. It’s about reaching out to those along Santa Monica Blvd who don’t yet understand that there is a church that welcomes them. It’s also about reaching in to those within our congregations and dioceses threatened by new understandings of God’s revelation -- held hostage by fear that this church they love will split apart – convinced that we dare not move forward until we have reached what is being called “theological consensus.”

Well, the last time I checked our ability to come to theological consensus has never been a prerequisite for God’s willingness to act in our lives. As Ed Bacon put it earlier this week: *I am so grateful that God didn't wait for the world to come to theological consensus about incarnation prior to Mary's pregnancy.*

While we claim today the blessing of belonging to the God who is forever doing “a new thing” we claim as well the responsibility to be both ambassadors AND reconcilers. We claim our place in the tradition as old as the prophets and apostles, with Peter and Cornelius and countless other faithful through the ages as we offer the amazing gift of the Good News of God’s encompassing and inclusive love.

What we need is not theological consensus but a bigger microphone to offer that Gospel message to a world dying to hear it ... to a culture starving for spiritual sustenance and yet bypassing the banquet we share every time we gather at the table because they don’t even know what’s on the menu. We need to reach those who assume they know what “Christians” believe because we have for too long let the Jerry Falwells and the Pat Robertsons presume to speak for “Christian Values.”

Sometimes satire is the best window into the truths held by a culture, and to make that point I commend to you a website called bettybowers.com -- where Betty holds forth about all-things-Christian. Betty has raised the bar a little higher on the WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) questions with her own column: What Would Betty Do. Her signature includes the letters "ABC" after her name ... "America's Best Christian" ... and her final words are always, "Jesus and I are so close that we hate all the same people,"

That, my friends, is the picture of Christian Values held by a significant percentage of the unchurched and lapsed-churched folks who are lining up along Santa Monica Blvd at this very moment – some yearning for spiritual community and yet not considering Christianity (much less the Episcopal Church) as an option because they think they already know what we believe -- who we judge -- what our Christian values are.

The Good News is that the Episcopal Church HAS Christian values that look NOTHING like WWJD. We have something different to offer – and the Breaking News is that the election of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire has drawn national and international attention to it. And so we find ourselves at a kairos moment in the history of this great church of ours – one that provides us with the opportunity to witness to the work of the Spirit among us if we will seize the moment – if we will catch the wave.

"Catch the wave." It's the metaphor Bishop Paul Moore used in his remarks earlier this year to the Episcopal Urban Caucus when we gathered in Chicago. They were to be among his last words to this church he loved, as he died just a few weeks later. A lion of the church – in the forefront of the struggle for peace and justice, inclusion and liberation – Paul Moore spent his life and ministry answering God's call to do yet another new thing on behalf of the Gospel. In thanksgiving for his life and witness I leave you this morning with his words of hope and of challenge:

"I have a rather corny metaphor, which is a surfer. The surfer has to go out on his surfboard, get way the heck out there where the waves come, and then point toward the shore and just paddle. Then he sees a wave coming, and paddles faster and faster, and catches the wave and goes. But if he's not out there he doesn't see the wave. We have to keep looking for the wave, and try to catch it. That's how it happened in the civil rights movement -- we caught that wave. We caught the peace movement wave. If we want to be empowered during this moment in history, then we've got to grab this wave and use it! So go the heck back to your dioceses and your parish, Catch that wave and fill your heart with a longing for freedom and the courage to fight for it -- the courage to love when it's hard to love. Catch the wave, and have a ball!"