

FIGHTING THE FEAR FACTOR

July 29, 2003 ~ St. Barnabas, Denver ~ The Reverend Susan Russell
Deuteronomy 15:7-11, Psalm 112, 2 Corinthians 8:1-9,13-15, Mark 5:22-24,35b-43

Grace to you and peace, and many thanks for your welcome this morning! I am the Reverend Susan Russell from the Diocese of Los Angeles and I am among you today as a result of my work as Executive Director of Claiming the Blessing: a national collaborative ministry committed to healing the rift between sexuality and spirituality in the Church. Our focus right now is on our General Convention which begins just a month from today. Hard to believe, perhaps, but here it comes again – already! I have compared the General Convention of the Episcopal Church to that wonderful Broadway musical – Brigadoon – where every so many years the village emerges from the mists – only to fade away again until the next time. Well, it’s time again: and this year General Convention will emerge from the mists not in the Mile High City – which offered us such fabulous hospitality three years ago – but in what they’re calling the “Little Apple” ... Minneapolis.

My work for the last year has been getting ready for the upcoming convention – traveling around the country sharing the hopes and dreams and goals the Claiming the Blessing collaborative has for this church we love. As a result, I’ve ended up spending a huge whack of my time in either parish halls or airports. From Houston to Portland, San Diego to Cambridge, Nashville to Boulder – the cities are as different as they can be, but certain things are oh-so-predictable. Round tables, folding chairs and marginal microphones parish halls are on one list. Metal detectors, wheeled-luggage-wending passengers and a long line at the Starbucks in airports are on the other.

Very different places – parish halls and airports. One is designed as a forum for hospitality and community – where parishioners are encouraged to linger over coffee and fellowship or to gather for speakers and forums. The other is by nature a place of transition and anonymity – with travelers either rush anxiously trying to catch their plane or wander aimlessly trying to kill some time. But the thing that struck me recently was not the differences but a striking similarity – and the similarity was the undercurrent of fear.

The fear factor in airports isn’t so remarkable given the current international political climate. One longs for the days when travel involved worrying about things like lost luggage and the questionable quality of airplane food – delayed flights and too-little-leg-room.

Now we deal with metal detectors and National Guard troops – security checks and ethnic profiling. Is it only a Yellow Alert or have we stepped up to Orange again? There is, it seems much to be afraid of.

The parish hall parallel is subtler, but having encountered it again and again I believe it is no less influential. When folks gather to hear me talk about Claiming the Blessing the fear factor is never far below the surface. As soon as we open it up to questions, I get ones like these: Is this the year the church will split apart? Is it true that schism is inevitable? What about the threats to “excommunicate us from the Anglican Communion?” How can we possibly survive these deeply held differences?

Well, I’ve got answers to those questions. Good answers. And I’ll get to some of them in minute. But first, what I believe we need more urgently are not just answers to the questions but an antidote to the fear that underlies them – and for that I turn to the lessons appointed for today. They all ask the same question -- and, through the ages, they come to the same conclusion.

Moses, writing in Deuteronomy declares: *Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."* The psalmist celebrates those who keep that commandment:

Happy are they who fear the Lord *
It is good for them to be generous in lending *
and to manage their affairs with justice.
They have given freely to the poor, *
and their righteousness stands fast for ever;
they will hold up their head with honor.

And Paul, writing centuries later to the Christians in Corinth says, *Now as you excel in everything-- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you-- so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. [For] it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."*

What we’re talking about here is a theology of abundance rather than of scarcity. Scarcity – the fear that there isn’t enough to go around – is the worldview which works against our living into God’s call to abundance. Abundance is the essential component of the ongoing message of hope rather than fear offered to us by the God who created us, redeemed us and sustains us.

There IS enough, God tells us – over and over and over again, through the prophets and apostles – and through our Lord Jesus Christ. Again and again he called us to embrace God’s abundance and live joyfully out of it: the feeding of the 5000, the lilies of the field, the miracle of the water turned to wine at the wedding in Cana: all demonstrations of God’s desire to give us more than we ask for and all that we need. Of course it has to do with material goods – with how we manage our affairs and organize our economies ... how we strive for economic justice and help to meet the needs of those around us – how we stay focused not only on our needs but, in the words of the familiar table blessing, pray that God will: “Keep us ever mindful of the needs of others.”

But it doesn’t stop there. God also offers abundance regarding those less tangible needs: needs for love, for blessing, for hope, for healing. “Do not fear, only believe,” Jesus said to Jairus – father of the little girl who lay either dying or dead: depending on who you listened to. “Do not fear, only believe” -- not in the scarcity preached by the doomsayers who surrounded him saying “it’s too late – give up” but believe instead in the abundance of God’s love and healing – believe that it’s NEVER too late – to love ... to hope ... to heal.

There’s another wonderful healing story we heard earlier in the lectionary cycle – the one about the paralyzed man on the mat brought by his friends to Jesus for healing. They had to dig through the roof and lower him down into the house where Jesus was teaching, but when they did, he said to the man “their faith has made you whole – get up and walk” – and he did. And that brings me back to the parish hall and the “fear factor” that threatens to paralyze this church of ours. Just like Jairus was, we are surrounded by those who say, “This is the final straw – the church will split if we take this step – there are not enough blessings to go around – we have to draw the line somewhere and this is it.” That’s a theology of scarcity.

I believe our call in these fearful times is to be the voice of Jesus speaking the words of hope and abundance, “Do not fear, only believe.” I believe it is our faith that can make the church whole – can get it up off its mat of paralysis and help it walk again. The fact is schism is NOT inevitable – everyone from the House of Bishops’ Theology Report to the Anglican Primates Pastoral Letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury himself have said that different positions on issues of human sexuality will not put us out of communion with one another in 2003 any more than our differences on women’s ordination did in 1976.

The truth is there are some with power in this church determined to do nearly anything to keep it – including exploiting the fears of those who love this church that their love for each other will split it by repeating over and over that rupture of the communion is inevitable.

Enough is enough. It's time for US to speak the truth as we know it.

We are stronger than that. We have weathered greater than that. There is indeed room in this historic Anglican faith of ours for differing opinions and perspectives – even theologies and practices. Our Primates – the heads of all the different national Anglican churches -- have said so, declaring that they “respect the integrity of each other's provinces and dioceses, [and acknowledge] the responsibility of Christian leaders to attend to the pastoral needs of minorities in their care.” Now that's a message of hope rather than fear. That's a position deeply grounded in classical Anglicanism. That's the blessing we claim far greater than any specific rites or any pending resolutions.

Verna Dozier, the prophetic biblical scholar and Anglican theologian wrote, “*Doubt is not the opposite of faith: fear is. Fear will not risk that even if I am wrong, I will trust that if I move today by the light that is given me, knowing it is only finite and partial, I will know more and different things tomorrow than I know today, and I can be open to the new possibility I cannot even imagine today.*” [Dozier, “The Dream of God”]

We do not have all the answers – but that does not mean we have to be immobilized by fear. Jesus didn't call us to be “right” – he called us to be faithful. He called us to walk in love – with him and with each other. He reassures us – like he did those gathered at the bedside of Jairus' daughter – with the same invitation and challenge: do not fear: only believe. Believe in the power of love to cast out fear. Believe in the historic Anglican tradition we inherit which can and will provide for us the “elbow room” we need to include all who seek to love and serve our Lord – all who desire to be fed by the holy food and drink of new and unending life we will soon share around this altar – all who seek to both be vehicles of God's blessing and abundant love.

We can choose to move forward in faith by the light we have in front of us – to claim the blessing of God's inclusive love and to offer the Good News of both the Gospel and Episcopal Church to a world desperately in need it. Or we can be immobilized by fear. We can offer faith rather than fear – we can speak of hope rather than despair. We have work to do and will to do it. What we need to do is stay the course and fight the fear – wherever we find it! And may the One who has given us the will to do these things give us as well the strength and courage to accomplish them. AMEN.