

Lost Sheep Disguised As Shepherds

Jeremiah 23:1-6

July 19, 2009

I.

Two days ago, after meeting for ten days, the 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church adjourned. As you know, the General Convention is an assembly of Episcopalians from all over the country that meets every three years to do the church's business (a small part of the meetings) and to consider resolutions mostly on controversial issues (a large part of the meetings).

And as usual, the bishops and delegates said and did things this year that were widely reported in the media, and that can define the Episcopal Church in ways many Episcopalians find unfortunate.

Will Rogers once said that no one's life, liberty, or property were safe as long as the legislature was in session. In the same way, some people might say that nothing remains sacred as long as the General Convention is in session.

Today I would like to talk about how conflicts affect the church. And I would like to do it with two points in mind. First, I'm not going to jump the gun and discuss details of specific resolutions at General Convention. I will wait until Bishop Gray, who was there, speaks about them.

Even so, I can say that the bishops and delegates heard some unconventional things about Jesus Christ, salvation, evangelism, and human sexuality, and there is much with which to disagree. Perhaps we can go into it later during Christian Education time, or at a special forum.

My second point is that you know I usually don't talk about church politics from the pulpit, but rather stand in the sanctuary gate to do so. The pulpit should be used for the Word of God.

But today, we have the Word of God that speaks across the centuries to the church today, and it proclaims a profound message of warning to the leaders of God's people. In our reading from Jeremiah, the Lord said, "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord."

Similar words were given to the prophet Ezekiel, whose ministry overlapped Jeremiah's. The Lord said, "[B]ecause my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore I am against the shepherds. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths" (34:8-10).

II.

But before we get into the reading I would like to emphasize that controversy has existed in the church for a long time. Jeremiah and Ezekiel dealt with it six hundred years before the birth of Christ. And it hasn't stopped since that time. The Anglican Church itself was born of conflict between King Henry VIII and the Roman pope.

And listen to the words of another giant in the church. "How dreadful and how innumerable are the contests which have arisen about religion! And not only among those who knew not what true religion was, but even among the children of God. How many of these, in all ages, instead of joining together against the common enemy, have turned their weapons against each other, and so hindered the great work of their common Master!"

That was John Wesley, preaching in a parish of the Church of England on November 24, 1765. And, of course, Wesley was known as the founder of the Methodist church, which split off from

the English church after the Revolutionary War. And even though Wesley remained a member of the Church of England, he knew something about conflict.

Religious disputes occur most everywhere today. Lutherans and Presbyterians argue about many of the same issues as do Episcopalians. The Roman Catholic church is no stranger to controversy. And, of course, our friends the Baptists have their own battles.

This reminds me of a story about a fellow who was walking across a bridge and saw another man about to throw himself from the bridge into the river. He ran over to save him and said. "Why do you want to kill yourself?" The man said. "I've nothing to live for."

And then the following dialogue took place: "Do you believe in God?" "Yes I do." "Well, so do I. Are you a Jew or a Christian?" "A Christian." "Well, so am I. Protestant or Catholic?" "Protestant." "Well, so am I. Anglican or Baptist?" "Baptist." "Well, so am I. Southern Baptist or Independent Baptist?" "Independent Baptist" "Well, so am I. Premillennial or amillennial?" "Premillennial." "Well, so am I. Pre-tribulation rapture or mid-tribulation rapture?" "Mid-tribulation rapture." There was a silence, and the first fellow said, "You heretic, go ahead and jump!"

The point here is that the church is contentions about many things of dubious importance. We don't have religious wars like we did a few centuries ago, but it still seems that God ends up as a punching bag. And while well-motivated discussion and debate can be healthy, it seems that too often the motives are driven by agendas rather than attempts to do or teach God's will.

III.

So, let's look at this reading from Jeremiah. And as background, after the times of King David and King Solomon, beginning about 922 B.C., Israel fell into a civil war that divided the once great nation into two second-rate countries. The northern kingdom still called itself Israel, while the southern kingdom took back its ancient name of Judah. The Bible says that all of the kings in the north did evil in the sight of the Lord, and all but two kings in the south did the same.

And when the kings did evil, the priests usually followed suit. And the priests frequently were served by self-proclaimed prophets or other court retainers whose oracles supported what the kings and priests wanted to be done. As a result of this spiritually corrupt leadership, the people also did evil, usually by idolatry, pagan practices, and failure to care for their poor and needy.

These are the people in today's reading. The shepherds were the evil kings, priests and false prophets of the southern kingdom of Judah who led the people astray. And of course the people were the sheep.

But there also were biblical prophets sent by God to call the people back into obedience. Jeremiah was one of those prophets. And when Jeremiah's words to the king and priests fell on deaf ears the Lord said to him, "Woe to the shepherds, who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!"

And we know from history that because these shepherds failed in their godly leadership, the nation was conquered by the Babylonians and the people were sent into exile. Because the kings, priests and false prophets did not maintain their own relationships with God, they were unable to keep their people in the faith and disaster ensued.

IV.

How does this reading speak to the church today? The words still have the same force and effect for all denominations. Woe to the shepherds. Woe to those who are responsible for providing spiritual care for the people, but instead serve their own interests under the pretext of serving God. Woe to those who themselves have become lost sheep, disguised as shepherds.

Today's reading can be a frightful preview for clergy in America who forget their calling. I'm not naming names, but we can recall the media stories about those who have fallen because of their greed, or vanity, or lust, or other sins against God and their neighbors.

And what of those who are well-intentioned but ill-informed? What of those who in the name of God end up drawing the church down to the level of society instead of holding the church up so that society can be uplifted. The church is not called to find out where the sheep want to go, and then lead them there. Instead we are called to proclaim God's Word and guide society away from disobedient ways. The shepherds are supposed to lead the sheep, not follow the sheep.

I'm reminded of a story about young Abraham Lincoln dealing with an evasive witness in a rural Illinois courtroom. With some frustration Lincoln finally asked the witness, "How many legs does a cow have?" The other fellow said, "Four, of course." Then Lincoln said, "Now suppose you call the cow's tail a leg. Then how many legs would the cow have?" The witness smugly smiled and said, "Why, five, of course." Lincoln replied, "Now, sir, that's where you are wrong. Calling a cow's tail a leg does not make it a leg."

That is happening within the church. Some people are calling things what they are not. They rely on God's Word or the Holy Spirit to justify agendas that seem to be driven by transforming the church to reflect society rather than transforming people to reflect our Lord.

And nowhere is this more important than for the religious education and spiritual training of our young people. Certainly, we as adults, want to know and live God's truth. Certainly, we want the church's doctrine to be based on Scripture rather than the ever-changing morality of society. And we probably believe we have maturity and experience that can help us discern what comes from God and what does not.

But our young people are more vulnerable. For the great majority of kids who do not attend private religious schools, the church might be the only place where they can receive instruction about the Bible and Christ's teachings. And I do not intend to diminish the work of loving and conscientious parents who try to raise their children with an understanding of godly values. But that job becomes much harder if the church itself embraces secular values that parents reject.

And when it comes to our young people, we all are shepherds. Even though many of our children are grown, we still are called to do all we can to teach and train and prepare those who come after us. And I pray that we at St. Thomas, and in the Episcopal Church throughout America, will be committed to helping our young people grow up and go into the world with an understanding of Christian values that reflect the teachings of Holy Scripture.

V.

So, where are we? I'm sure you all have heard of Murphy's law, a series of humorous axioms that show how anything that can go wrong will go wrong. There also is a series of related postulates that condense various aspects of life into pithy precepts. One is Harrison's Postulate, which says that "for every action there is an opposite and equal criticism."

This certainly has been true in the church. It seems that no thought is left unspoken, and nothing spoken is left unchallenged. And those two verbs define our jobs in the church and here at St. Thomas.

We are called to speak the truth, and we are called to challenge those who continue in false and faithless ways condemned by Jeremiah in today's reading. It is important to us and crucial for our kids. "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, says the Lord." *Amen.*