

Lost Shepherds

Jer. 23:1-4, 9-12, 2 Tim. 3:14-4:5, Mt. 7:12-27
July 15, 2012

I.

If you have heard many of my sermons, you know I don't usually talk about church politics or controversies from the pulpit. The pulpit is for God's Word and how it applies to our lives.

But today, the Word of God in our readings speaks across the centuries to what is happening in our church right now, and so I can discuss the church and still follow my own general rules about preaching. Even so, for those visiting for the first time, please know that today's sermon will be a little different from what you typically would hear.

Three days ago, after meeting in Indianapolis for eight days, the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church adjourned. As you probably know, the General Convention is an assembly of Episcopal bishops, priests, and lay leaders from all over the country who meet every three years for the ostensible purpose of conducting the church's business.

But recent conventions have been controversial, and this one was no different. It produced some unusual and unbiblical things that can make people wonder about the Episcopal Church. It seems that our church, at least from a national perspective, is an increasingly secular rather than sacred place. And that makes it more difficult for us at the local level to reach out in Christ's name.

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

Today I will talk about that ever-present reality. But I'm not going to jump the gun and go into detail about the meaning of everything that happened at General Convention. I will wait until Bishop Gray, who was there, speaks about them. The Bishop has scheduled a day for clergy to meet at the Gray Center next month to discuss what it all means for Mississippi and the church.

I can, however, say that many church leaders espoused some unconventional ideas. The most widely reported was approval of a liturgy to bless same-gender relationships. Bishop Gray already has said that he will not approve that liturgy for use in Mississippi. But it isn't only that. There also were novel theories about God, salvation, the resurrection, and the Sacraments.

But before going further, let us remember that we are not unique. Presbyterians and Lutherans argue about many of the same issues as we do. The Roman Catholic church is no stranger to controversy. Methodists and Baptists have their battles.

And strange ideas about our faith can span the theological spectrum. It isn't just those who might be called liberals. I recall a very conservative, but obviously uninformed, fellow who said that if Jesus knew what was happening in the church today, he would roll over in his grave.

So if it isn't one thing it's another, and has been that way for centuries. The Anglican Church itself can trace its origins to a dispute between King Henry VIII and the Roman pope. Even the prophets and apostles dealt with conflicts.

II.

Those conflicts are evident in today's Old Testament reading from Jeremiah, which proclaims a profound message of warning to those who lead and serve God's people. It was a time when Jewish kings also engaged in idol worship, and the temple priests went right along with them.

And Jeremiah told those corrupt priests that the Lord had 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. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord."

Episcopalians are leaving the church. Our membership has gone down for many years as the church has diminished the authority of Scripture and lost sight of its Biblical priorities. The problem no longer is idol worship, but the result is the same. The sheep are being scattered from the fold because the shepherds are serving their own agendas rather than God's purposes.

This same idea of unfaithful leadership is inherent in our New Testament reading from First Timothy. Paul, who was in prison after his many journeys to spread the Gospel and establish churches, wrote to his young assistant, Timothy, about what to expect after Paul was gone.

He said, "Proclaim the message whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths."

That also is happening in our church. Traditional ideas about marriage, communion, baptism, and the Bible are giving way to newly invented ideas that accommodate those who disregard the truth and seek spiritual justification for unspiritual lives.

And lastly, Jesus said in our Gospel, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

These readings contain portentous lessons for our national church. They remind me of a story about Abraham Lincoln who, as a young lawyer in Illinois, was dealing with an evasive witness.

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 story applies to the church. Some people are calling things what they are not. They reinterpret Scripture to suit their own desires, and promote agendas that seem to be driven by transforming the church to reflect society rather than transforming people to reflect our Lord.

And that is at the heart of the issue. Certainly the church should strive to be relevant to society. But the church's job is not to find out where the sheep want to go, and then lead them there. Instead we are to proclaim God's Word and guide society into God's truth. The shepherds are supposed to lead the sheep up to God, not follow the sheep down into the world.

III.

And now, I want to go back to our recently adjourned General Convention and mention two other good and positive things that happened, but which also carry some dangers.

First, the General Convention reaffirmed the Episcopal Church's historic commitment to mission and helping the needy. That is a good thing. Jesus told us to do it. We live in a world full of food and a world full of hungry people. There is a distribution problem.

But Jesus did not call us to mission at the expense of our identity as a church. We also live in a world full of God and a world full of people who do not know him. Again, there is a distribution problem. And here rests the church's principal duty.

To illustrate the issue, many secular organizations do wonderful work to help other people. They operate good and useful programs, but they are not our models. They do not work in Christ's name. Well-meaning atheists could feel comfortable serving in many of those organizations.

We as the church, however, are called to spread the Gospel as we also spread the wealth. We bring food and assistance to people, but it also is our purpose to bring Christ as well. That part of our commitment to mission has seemed to be less and less apparent, and the danger is that the work of mission can overcome and displace the work of bringing people to Christ.

My second point is that the General Convention spent much time considering ways to reorganize and restructure the church. That also is a good thing. We need to operate more efficiently.

But I pray we do not deceive ourselves by believing that restructuring is the final objective. We all probably have heard about business managers who focused too much on organizational charts, lines of authority, and where all the little boxes should go, and forgot about the product they were manufacturing or selling.

What is our product as a church? What are we offering? If it isn't Jesus Christ, then it is nothing. While the church should emphasize good organizational structures, it also must emphasize the Good News. But focusing on the former should not distract us from the latter.

And nowhere is all of 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. But our young people are more vulnerable. For many kids who do not attend private religious schools, the church might be the only place where they can know the Bible and Christ's teachings.

And I know there are 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. How can parents teach what the church brushes aside?

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 prepare those who come after us. I pray that our national church will rediscover its commitment to helping young people grow up and go into the world with an understanding of Christian values and 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 are several related postulates that condense various aspects of life into similar pithy precepts. One is Harrison's Postulate, which says, "For every action there is an opposite and equal criticism."

This certainly has been true in the church. 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 to challenge those who continue in false and faithless ways condemned in today's readings. It is important to us and crucial for our kids.

And we are blessed that Bishop Gray and other diocesan leaders, by being faithful to Scripture and reaching out to those with whom they disagree, have forestalled many of the difficulties that have occurred in other states.

But even so, as our readings say, be wary of those with itching ears who seek teachers to suit their own desires, and turn away from the truth and wander into to myths. They will be known by their fruits. Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, says the Lord. *Amen.*