

ADVENT III

I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Luke 3:17

I rarely get to preach about the Baptizer two Sundays in a row. I usually have a helper, a seminarian or intern, who wants to preach about the eccentric prophet – I’m not the only one who appreciates his extraordinary character and role in salvation history. Alas, I’m solo this year, with only Chris Ashley to supplement, wonderfully, my preaching. But the silver lining is an extra week for me to take another pass at John .

I was at a diocesan luncheon with Bishop Barbara Harris 10 days ago, just after we’d gotten the statement from Bishop Shaw allowing us to solemnize marriages of same sex couples. Most of the clergy hadn’t known about the permission in time to write sermons about it for Advent I, and maybe some didn’t want to, anyway. But one priest said, “Next Sunday, the Baptizer and permission to marry. I wonder how those can be fit together?”

“Easily, I would think, “ I said. Seemed like a no-brainer to me.

And then last weekend the Diocese of Los Angeles elected Mary Glasspool, a lesbian, as Assistant Bishop. “Gee, “ said one of my friends, “so maybe for two weeks in a row the Episcopal Church looked good in the news.” But of course there’s an immediate and dark reaction. The Archbishop of Canterbury issued a statement warning that if Mary is confirmed as a bishop the Anglican Communion could be *pushed over the edge into full-blown schism*.

On Monday night after the statement came out, I went to hear Hendrick Herzberg speak. Rick is a political commentator for *The New Yorker* at this point, and I love to read his pieces, as they are generally both radical and profound. When he learned that I’m an Episcopal priest, he said, “If I belonged to any Church, it would be yours. “ “Even after today?” I asked – thinking of the Archbishop’s immediate backlash.

I don’t like sermons that get too technical, but since I think most of us here have some investment in the outcome of this conflict, I’m going to explain the process of electing and confirming a bishop as best I can.

First, dioceses elect their bishops. They go through a search process similar to a parish’s when calling a rector. The diocese will do a profile of itself, then form a search committee and invite the nomination of candidates. They read applications, interview

some applicants, and invite a few – usually 5 or so, to come for the “walkabouts” or “dog and pony shows” as they are fondly called, where people of the diocese can meet the final candidates. Then they hold a convention, where the clergy and lay delegates vote, ballot after ballot, until a bishop is elected.

But that’s not the end. Then the bishop elect needs to be approved, or consented to, by at least a majority of the diocesan bishops and standing committees all the dioceses of the Episcopal Church USA. Or, if the election falls shortly before our General Convention, held every 3 years, the Convention will vote to confirm the bishop elect. Or not, as the case may be.

When New Hampshire elected Gene Robinson, they timed their election so that the confirmation process would happen at General Convention. I suspect they felt that confirmation at General Convention would be easier to obtain – the public forum, the lobbying that goes on there– than diocese by diocese. And if they elected Gene, they wanted him to be confirmed, obviously.

When we elected Barbara Harris as the first woman bishop in the Anglican Communion, here in Massachusetts, we had to obtain consents diocese by diocese. And we almost didn’t – not because so many places voted *no*, but because they dragged their feet about voting. And I guess that bishops may feel more cautious at home than they do at General Convention, and that Standing Committees – the bishops’ committees of advice and counsel, may be generally more conservative than the deputies elected to General Convention. In any event, it may be more difficult to get a good outcome with Mary’s consents because it has to go diocese by diocese, and maybe- or maybe not, because of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s interference.

All that being said, I think it’s fairly rare for consents not to come in. Because of course this withholding or opposition tactic could be used against a very conservative bishop-elect as well as against a progressive or “alternative” one.

There’s some more to be considered, too. In England, bishops are not elected, they are appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury (with the consent, I believe, of the Queen!) And so our process is not perfectly understood or appreciated in other parts of the Anglican Communion. I believe one of the reasons that Gene Robinson was confirmed at the General Convention in 2003 was that our bishops felt that he had been elected “decently and in order” according to our polity. The results and implications of the election may have been anathema to some and troublesome to many; nonetheless, they respected the election and agreed to uphold it. Or, as one of my colleagues put it,

“they got tired of being pushed around by the rest of the Anglican Communion.”

I hope and pray that they are still tired, that we are still, and increasingly, tired of being told that we are out of line, as we progress in our journey as a Church toward true and full inclusivity.

When people come to St. John’s and find sanctuary and a spiritual home, I of course am delighted and gratified. And then all too often they start reading about the Anglican Communion online and wonder what they’ve gotten themselves into! I tell them to think locally, and as there is such a wide spectrum of belief and practice within our denomination, I think that’s sound advice generally. But there is also value as well as hazard to belonging to a national and international Church, and sometimes we have to come to grips with the bigger picture, I think, and now may be one of those times.

Because while I think we do have something special here at St. John’s, we are not unique in our progressive, even prophetic, stance. Small New Hampshire, and big Los Angeles, have shown us *a new thing springing forth*. As has Bishop Shaw, giving permission for us in Massachusetts to perform legal marriages of same-sex couples. I believe, and pray, that this signs point the way for the whole Church.

As John pointed the way for Jesus. *I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

I wonder what John thought he meant by this? I wonder what he foresaw, what he suspected? He was in prison, according to Gospel accounts, by the time Jesus’ active ministry was underway. John may have seen visions and dreamed dreams, but it seems almost inconceivable that he could have begun to imagine what has happened in the name of Jesus since these words of his. *In the name of Jesus*, for good or ill.

But whatever John may or may not have been able to foresee, he knew— his words tell us— he knew that he was part of something bigger than himself. He understood that he had Abraham for an ancestor, and he understood that Jesus would carry on the prophetic work of justice seeking that is the legacy of great prophets always and everywhere.

Last week after the lunch with Barbara Harris I was chatting with the receptionist at diocesan headquarters. He’s very appreciative of my leadership on LGBT justice issues, and he was saying how thrilled he was about Bishop Shaw’s statement on marriage and thanking me for being instrumental in bringing about the change. I said I was honored to be a part of the movement that has brought about marriage equality in the Commonwealth and in the Church. He said something like, “I’m so happy about this,

because the apostolic church is very important to me, “ and I must confess that I kind of tuned out at that point while he went on talking.

But I’ve thought about that remark since. I didn’t ask him what he meant. My guess is that he – a former Jesuit, and gay– wants to belong to a tradition that believes that our Episcopal ordinations descend directly from the first apostles – that’s called the Apostolic Succession. Bishops are believed to derive their authority from this lineage. Roman Catholics espouse this doctrine, as do we in the Anglican Communion (the Romans deny our claim)

Now, as a historical reality this seems tenuous to me. I suspect there have been some slips along the way in the last two millennia. But as a theological and sacramental concept, it’s powerful and profound. By far the most startling and chilling statement I’ve ever heard from Gene Robinson was this. He was talking about the security measures around his consecration in New Hampshire – he had of course received many death threats and the hateful Fred Phelps and company were going to show up. He had to wear a bulletproof vest at times. Gene said, “an arrangement was made for a secure location for me and three bishops to be taken to if the danger seemed great. So that the next day, *if I were alive*, I would be a bishop.”

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So this consecration business, the laying on of hands of the three bishops it would take to consecrate a new bishop, is a big deal. As the ordination of a priest is a big deal– though it only takes one bishop to do that. Those of you who have attended the ordination of a priest will remember that all the other priests at the service come up at the time of the laying on of hands, and place their hands either on the head of the ordinand or the shoulders of those touching the ordinand, so that there’s a great circle of priests joining in the sacramental moment.

And I can vividly remember, from my own ordination, the weight of all those hands. Because they were not just the hands of those present, but, symbolically, the hands of those through the ages who had touched the heads of priests and bishops back through the ages in a (semi-) unbroken line to the very beginnings of the Christian Church. That’s a lot of hands, a lot of weight, a lot of responsibility, a lot of honor.

(And of course, the extraordinary significance of ordination and consecration is what bothers those who oppose the ordination or consecration of women and gays. They believe such ordinations are not valid. That’s lousy theology, because we believe that the effectiveness of a sacrament does not depend on the worthiness of the one who celebrates

it. That is, priests can be notorious sinners – and we all surely are sinners, notorious or not– but the eucharists we offer or baptisms we perform are valid nonetheless. But those who take the concept of Apostolic Succession, the purity of the line of ordinations, very, very seriously often tend to be misogynist and homophobic. It seems to be a package, though not, certainly, for my friend at the diocesan switchboard)

And so as I reflected on the remarks of that receptionist about the Apostolic Church, my own comment about being *a part* of a movement took on new resonance for me. Because my deepest sense all along, in this movement for justice and inclusion, has been the sense of being *part of something*, part of yearnings and actions that extend through space and time farther than I can fathom. That awareness fills me with awe, gratitude, and profound humility. It allows me a glimpse of what the Baptizer may have known and felt: that his mission and ministry were one moment in the sweep of salvation history, and that his individual contributions to the coming of the realm of God joined a great rolling stream that had flowed through centuries and would continue though many more, into our present day and beyond.

The Baptizer strides through our salvation story, a towering figure of warning and of inspiration. But he knew, as all who are leaders in the great work of salvation must know, that in the end individual contributions become simply drops of water in that great stream. He knew, and he confessed,

I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Amen.

