

*The Last Sunday after the Epiphany (The Sunday of the Transfiguration)  
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

*February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2007*

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour  
Mill Valley, California*

*Archbishops and Transfiguration  
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector*

If you were following the news this week, you may have noticed that the head bishops of the Communion have been meeting in Tanzania, wrestling with the tensions of a markedly changed world and Church. There were all kinds of dire predictions made before the meeting began about schism, but much to everyone's surprise, even hotheaded archbishops can be civil to one another, at least in principle, and just about everyone made it to the meeting. . .and stayed. Not least of whom, of course, was our new Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori.

Aside from formal press briefings each day, the Primates have been asked not to speak with the media until the conclusion of the meeting tomorrow. But seven of them did so anyway, issuing a statement that made international news on Friday -- news that they would not receive communion with Katharine Jefferts Schori, because the Episcopal Church had not "repented" of our actions in 2003 in consecrating an openly gay bishop in a committed relationship. Okay, so that's the old news.

Now, normally if you asked me whether or not we should look to our bishops and archbishops to see what the life of the church is like, I would say. . .well, no! The real life of the church is not found in private meetings and archbishops behaving well or otherwise, of course, but in the tangible relationships of real folk like you and me struggling, praying, and working with our sisters and brothers at building faithful lives in a complicated world. It's found in the real witness of bringing healing to a broken planet.

But the actions of seven leaders of the Anglican Communion in boycotting Eucharist with their sister Primate did make international news, and it said something, rightly or wrongly, to the world about our global community as Christians, and about what it means to gather around the Table of God together.

Now, being Christian and a number of them avowed evangelicals, the seven archbishops naturally quoted Scripture to justify their boycott. I want to share with you the passages they cited:

The first was quoting Jesus from the the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 5 (verses 23-26):

*So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*

The second was a somewhat more hard-hitting passage by Paul in his First Letter to the Church in Corinth, Chapter 11 (verses 27-29):

*Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only*

*then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.*

And just for good measure, they threw in a familiar quote from the beloved *Book of Common Prayer*:

*Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways; Draw near with faith.*

The strange thing is, all three of these passages, it seems, say nothing about determining whether my sister or brother is suited to receive communion with me. They all call, instead, for me to examine no one other than *myself* before I approach God's Table and take in bread and wine we call Christ for renewal and transformation.

Moreover, this boycott said something strange about reconciliation, which is part of the bedrock of our Christian faith and tradition. The refusal of the seven archbishops articulated in action that I should not be seeking reconciliation with my sisters and brothers until they have repented, and I might add, to my satisfaction. That's a very strange teaching if you think about it for very long, and if I were to follow it – I don't know about you – but I would *never* be able to approach God's Table. In all honesty, there are people in my life who have caused wounds in me and in those I love who have not repented to *my* satisfaction. If I wait to work at reconciling with them until they have fully repented in my view, well, I will probably wait for a very long time.

And if God followed this rule – waiting for us to repent to God's satisfaction before offering reconciliation – well I suppose Peter, James, and John would have stayed on the lake fishing, there would have been no transfiguration for the bewildered disciples, and it would all be on our own heads to attain perfection before God even really bothered with us.

No pressure, right?

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Bruce Bawer, in his book *Stealing Jesus*, highlights the current tension within broader Christianity in the American context as a conflict between a church of legalism and a church of love. While Bawer looks most closely at the context in this country, I think his essential insight easily extends to Christianity around the world. I might frame it slightly differently (albeit probably a little bit less intelligibly) as a church of biblical rules, personal salvation, and uniformity on one hand versus a church of sacramental faith, diversity, and prophetic action.

One is what we saw in action this past Friday as seven Primates declined communion with their brothers and sisters and quoted Scripture and the *Book of Common Prayer* to make a statement against their sister bishop and the province she represents. Their understanding of Christian rules was not being followed by ++Katharine Jefferts Schori and the governing bodies of the Episcopal Church in the United States. We had broken their understood mold, rooted as they believe it is in Scripture and tradition, and they were and remain offended.

The other is about a spiritual/faith community that is anchored centrally not in legalities and uniformity of belief, but in relationship – a bringing together of people into dynamic life with an unpredictable but infinitely compassionate and nurturing, transformational God – one who indeed sees our sins and

weaknesses, but gracefully turns them into strengths and blessings as we are reborn through Christ in our baptism from the inside out. This is the understanding of Church the other Archbishops pursue as they join with each other, despite disagreement, despite worlds of difference in culture, norms, and biblical interpretation, around the altar of God's grace.

Most of us, of course, living in a messy journey of salvation, reside somewhere between the two. We spend a lot of our lives wrestling with whether to judge our neighbor, coping with our grudges both personal and communal, and trying not to nurse them as we come forward for the broken bread and shared cup. At our best, we witness simply by humble word and example, examine ourselves, and then put ourselves at some risk by loving our neighbors in community, even if we cannot understand them, or continue to strongly disagree with them.

We gather around the Table of Christ's reconciliation, putting ourselves with others into the loving hands of God's grace and trying to do better next time, banking on God's power to transform – to transfigure our lives. . .anyway.

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Today is the Sunday of the Transfiguration, the final Sunday before Lent begins and we begin a period, at least we hope, of not so much examining our neighbors, but ourselves, and our life together in community.

Jesus has taken Peter, James, and John up on the mountain to pray and he is suddenly transfigured – the Greek word is *metamorphothe* – he undergoes a metamorphosis before his first disciples.

Appearing with him is Moses – the bringer of the Law to ancient Israel – in many respects, the embodiment of the legal side of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Also appearing is Elijah – embodying, in a very traditional understanding of this gospel text, the prophetic witness of our shared faith. Jesus transfigured, revealed as Christ, the Messiah, brings both law and prophecy together into fulfillment – a manifestation of God in frail humanity.

And no sooner has this revelation been given, Jesus and his disciples are back down the mountain and in the midst of the crowds with Jesus healing. For the author of Luke's Gospel, and for us as the Christian community, this is a deep reminder that law is only valuable when it is life-giving and prophecy is only truly prophetic when it ushers in healing, compassion, and justice for those who desperately need it. Both are embodied in Jesus' actions and teachings, and God's great hope for us as a Christian community is that we come away from the altar released from our grudges and unfettered from holding disagreement against each other. . . and instead transfigured by the Word and sacrament into Christ-like beings who can bring hope and healing together to the world around us.

In us, God wants love to knit together Law and Prophecy: love that yearns to live into the covenants we hold with each other and our Creator; and a love that thirsts for true justice for all God's children embodied by the savior of our hearts. We are a community founded first and foremost on love of God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. . . on which, as Jesus teaches, hangs all the law and the prophets.

But most of the time, Archbishops and ordinary parishioners in the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion alike, we will struggle with putting this love first. Some of the time, we'll even struggle with understanding that this is what Jesus was about, even when we witness the transfiguration in our own lives and relationships. Peter, if you'll remember, leaves the mountain wondering how he might build three dwelling places for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus – totally clueless *again!*

Be assured, we are in good company, even in the best and brightest in our Church, even in the head bishops of the Anglican Communion as they struggle as we do how to live with disagreement, share at God's holy table, and wrestle with a heritage of law and prophecy that can only be reconciled in divine Love, a love in which we constantly fall short. . .a love that calls us, saves us, and will never leave us or our neighbors alone. I invite you to join me in living more into that as we look ahead to Lent, and ask that God may guide each of us into deeper understanding and compassion, that we may live more fully into that "love which is immortal. . .manifested to us in Jesus Christ."

*Amen.*