

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

Pentecost 2
June 13, 2004
Fr. Bill McGinty

“That We All May Be One”

This week in one of the New Jersey newspapers, there was a feature article about a group of Christians who have formed their own church. Disillusioned with their own particular church, or sometimes with the pastor, they have begun to meet together independently to read the Bible and to pray. The article poses the question – what is a church and is it okay to form your own?

This month’s Episcopal Life also has a full-page article by our Diocesan Communications Officer, Bill Lewellis. His piece is something of an open letter to a parish, St. Stephen’s in Whitehall, and its church leadership. It appears that St. Stephen’s refuses to pay its diocesan assessment because of the Diocese’s stand on moral issues and the National Convention’s vote to confirm the appointment of the Bishop of New Hampshire last summer. Bill Lewellis questions whether a local congregation has any standing once it disaffiliates itself from its Bishop and the Diocesan community.

Both articles point at the heart of what is meant by the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion! There is nothing stopping good Christian men and women from coming together to pray – it is to be encouraged! So many of our parishes have such groups that supplement, strengthen, and add to our church experience and the parish’s ministries, yet, that is not what is going on here. Here are parishes or groups who cease all dialogue or conversation with the Diocese or the parish and strive for an identity that can only be described as “divorce!”

For Episcopalians this presents us with paradoxical dilemma. You see, our church is not merely a group of people who worship God and believe the same thing. Our church is an activity! When Jesus told us “love one another, preach the Gospel, do this in memory of me, and teach all nations” we took Him at His word.

The church that the apostles created, with the help of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, is a church modeled on the life and ministry of Jesus. We, each year, live out Jesus’ birth, baptism, calling of the apostles, His healing ministry, and His teaching ministry, collectively as a Christian body of disciples. Just as Jesus did, we call apostles to minister to God’s people. We relive Pentecost when we “lay hands” on one man or woman and call down the Holy Spirit upon him or her. We are saying “you are an apostle, a leader for our bishop and you are a focal point for this community. You take the visible place of Jesus in our midst, and through you we all share in the one Priesthood of Christ. The church is then, of its very nature, “one.”

We are in the words of the great Creed of Nicaea: “one holy catholic and apostolic church.” To break from that apostolic tradition, to enact a civil disobedience is to journey into contradiction. Simply put, you cannot be a part of the “Body of Christ” who refuses to belong or refuses to communicate. Excommunication in this case is not just ipso facto, but

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a self-inflicted wound that militates against church as an activity of living the Gospel command.

As sad as these conflicts are, they remind us of who we are, and what we are about at the core of our being. We are the daily living breathing Gospel witnessing to Christ in the world by our interaction with one another. Let me say that again: “we are the daily living breathing Gospel witnessing to Christ in the world by our interaction with one another.” This is the relationship between the parishes and our relationship with each other within the parish. When we describe the church in such a way as living with Christ in our midst, then how can any of us ever be separated from one another by our petty differences? What Christ has shared with each one of us must always be more than anything that could possibly separate us.

Separation is always painful; we who have experienced it in family life, know the pain, the brokenness, and the bleeding woundedness and hurt of that sad state. It is not what we want for our fellow Episcopalians in other parishes. We need dialogue and we need to keep the channels of communication open to allow the Holy Spirit to do His work.

“Come Holy Spirit and fill the hearts of your faithful, enkindle in us the fire of your love...”

The words of the old hymn take on a new significance when we pray and direct them towards healing the wounds of the church that exist in our diocesan community today.

“Send them the gifts of your Spirit” – we pray because we know that it is the Holy Spirit who brings wisdom, it is the Spirit who brings counsel and it is the Spirit who brings truth! And trust, St. Paul tells us is a straight road that leads to God and righteousness.

Righteousness – now there is a word! Paul tells us that in God’s court we all stand guilty because we all dwell in sin. But, it is Jesus who steps forwards and takes our sin upon himself. He died so that our sin will be wiped out and that we may be declared righteous. We are not righteous because of our own efforts; we are righteous because of Christ’s efforts! And this is what makes us as a church, as a diocese, and as a parish, ONE!

Christ had leveled the playing field; He has made us all equal. He has united us in His sacrifice, such that each of us must call Him Lord, Savior, Messiah, Friend. And if we are indeed now His friends, then we are friends to one another.

Here is the wonder and image of the Gospel – though we are many, we are one. With this knowledge, with this in mind, we can truly celebrate that unity in the Eucharist – as one Body in Christ.

Let us pray.

Jesus Lord, we pray that we may be one as you, the Father, and the Spirit are one! Unite us in your love, baptize us in your Gospel word, send us out to be that living breathing witness to your life and work! May your kingdom come. May your will be done! May we forgive our

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brothers and welcome them back in the communion of your Eucharist! May we see in each other the friend you see in us!

Amen +

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