

## **Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**August 9, 2009**

**Proper 14B 2009**

In the Name of one Living, ever healing God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's readings are about health. They are about what inside of us makes us healthy or unhealthy. They are about power – the power that can be within us, if we only let it, to transform us and bring us into healthier relations with God, with ourselves and within our community.

We start with a negative example. The unhealthy and destructive consequences of David's unbridled ambition and appetites are now apparent. His eldest son Annon, the heir apparent, has watched David closely and is a chip off the old block. Annon has developed a lustful obsession about his half-sister Tamar and has devised a scheme to get her alone in his chambers by feigning grave illness. Annon's deceit, sense of entitlement and total disregard for others results in his rape of Tamar. David's failure to address the issue drives his other son, Absalom, Tamar's full-brother who has taken her in, into violence. The result of all this is yet another civil war that foreshadows the future of his kingdom and people for the next millennium.

David's story and much of the stories in the Old Testament reveal much about human nature and our need for healing. Jesus' ministry was one of teaching, touching and healing, right relationships and peace. We don't talk much about conversion. It is a bit too personal; but that is what Jesus was all about. He demonstrated that power we need isn't found in kings, weapons, political intrigue or wealth, but has to be found within. It is the power to live into the Spirit, to move beyond ourselves and be changed.

The author of the letter to the Church at Ephesus is dealing with the same situation – the situation where individual passions and prejudices are disruptive to the building up of a community. This letter was probably written after Jerusalem had been almost totally destroyed by the Romans and most Jews driven out of Palestine into neighboring Syria and what is now Turkey. The Jewish followers of Jesus were now living in a new culture with people who had different ideas and ways of living.

The author acknowledges that this situation that is causing much anger and dissension in the community and calls them into accepting the gift of the spirit and to live into Christ. The Letter to the Ephesians calls us to and imitation of God in terms that inspire us not to “power over” but to “power within” – the power of love and truth and gentleness, the power of kindness and humility. This is the conversion that Jesus taught about. This is the healing that allows for growth into the Spirit. Have you ever met a person that had these qualities? If you have, I am sure you remember, because such people are unforgettable.

Our readings are, I think, applicable to what is going on in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion today and in our larger society. They relate to our lack of civil discourse today. We, too, are living in a world with conflicting cultures and values. At our General Convention, the Episcopal Church passed two resolutions dealing with the place of gay and lesbian members in the church. At the 2006 General Convention an last minute resolution saying that Bishops and Standing Committees are to exercise restraint in approving the election of bishops “whose manner of life” is a challenge to others in the Church. This followed the election of the Bishop of New Hampshire and the anger from some with the church and from other provinces of the Anglican Communion. At this year’s Convention, we did not rescind that resolution but stated instead where we are now. By a large – almost 75% majority, we passed a resolution that all orders – deacon, priest and bishop – are open to all the baptized who are so called and duly elected and confirmed under our Constitution and Canons. We also passed a resolution calling for study

of the blessing of same gender unions and giving bishops pastoral discretion to currently deal with the pastoral needs of their members.

We don't know where this will lead. However, the General Convention has made clear that we cannot trade our sense of justice and what the Spirit is calling us to for security. That would be untrue to everyone.

The current situation has resulted in the same type of anger the early Church at Ephesus was dealing with. This anger is found on both sides of this controversy. Anger must be dealt with – it is human and real and we all have it. But we know that if we don't deal with it, it can turn to bitterness – that disposition that cherishes resentment, that clings to former grievances real or imagined. It can become fury – violent outbursts of temper. It can turn into reviling – untrue and slanderous words spoken about another. Left totally unchecked, it can turn into malice – less a vice than a corrosive force of evil.

I believe there is a bit of all of that going on right now. How do we speak with love, truth and kindness in this environment? First, we should deal with the reality that this is not the first time the church has been racked with controversy that has ignited anger and passions. We have argued over slavery, racism, the place of women, women as priests and then women as bishops, divorce and remarriage and now the place of our gay and lesbian people. There have been others: the authority of kings and the legitimacy of democracy, the translation of the Bible, the place of the pope, for example. There are some that seem to simmer forever – the age of the earth and the evolution of the species, for example. So the first kind truth is “do not be afraid” – the words Jesus uttered during the storm at sea. We will survive this.

While the current presenting issue is the role of gay and lesbian Christians in the Church – and, indeed in society – another loving truth is, I believe, that we often get angry about one thing rather than deal with another thing. I have been ordained now for five years and I have married about fifty or more couples. I think I have seen one – maybe two – of those marriage licenses

that listed different places of current residence for the bride and the groom! In America, Europe and other places, we no longer live in a world where teenage virgin girls are given by their fathers to men as chattel brides. But that isn't true everywhere. We no longer live in a culture where gay people have to pretend to be straight and straight people have to pretend to believe them. Many gay and lesbian couples have lived in committed loving relationships for decades. The NY Times wedding section a while ago had a couple who got married to celebrate their 50 years together. Again this openness is true in our culture but is not yet recognized or accepted in other cultures and it is resented.

Another truth spoken in kindness is that we often wish to deny reality and avoid dealing with disagreement and controversy rather than doing the work we have to do to be a community. We have refused to do the hard work to move our Christian moral theology and ethics of marriage and the blessing of committed relationships beyond sexual acts and concepts of gender and social roles that are no longer accepted by society and, arguably, are no longer scientifically valid. We still base our ethics on acts and social institutions and not on the quality of relationships and their effect on the couple involved.

Another truth that needs to be spoken is that when anger turns to reviling and malice, one of the first victims is language. Lately, a lot of people are talking about the "Anglican Church". Some people – many of them bishops – are calling for a central church government with authority over the local national churches. The truth is that there is no such thing as the "Anglican Church" – it does not exist! There is an Anglican Communion that is based on bonds of affection, a common heritage and four core commonalities called the Chicago Quadrilateral (It's in the historical documents section of the BCP). Another truth is that the Anglican Communion did not exist until the end of the 19th Century. For over 100 years, the Episcopal Church functioned well without the Anglican Communion. I am not saying I don't like the Anglican Communion; quite the opposite. But I am saying it is a relatively new institution and it's good works could con-

tinue without it.

Some bishops in the Episcopal Church have taken to calling the Archbishop of Canterbury as “our Archbishop” or have replaced our Presiding Bishop in the Prayers of the People with the Archbishop of Canterbury. That is another violation of language. The truth is that the Archbishop of Canterbury is the head of the Church of England only and has no authority over the American or any other church – not even over the Churches of Wales, Scotland or Ireland. The Episcopal Church in the United States quite intentionally has no archbishop. The breakaway entity called the Anglican Church of North America composed of conservative breakaway parishes in parts of the US and Canada and various other splinter groups has an archbishop – the deposed former Bishop of Pittsburgh. They have formed a new organization and they have very different ideas about authority and governance. Our Constitution and Canons place authority not in an individual but in the General Convention consisting of the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies – lay and clergy delegates elected by the various dioceses of the Episcopal Church. Our Gospel lessons for the past several weeks have been about Jesus being on one side of the Sea of Galilee where a crowd sought teaching and then going to the other side where a great crowd sought healing. In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus says that He is the Bread of Life come down from Heaven. He is offering us his healing and the power of the Spirit. Many in today’s Gospel lesson could only see him as the son of Joseph. They took offence because he did not measure up to their expectations and they wanted something grander. What could be greater than the Love of God?

We are always in need of teaching and healing and we find it when we come together as a community to give thanks for the inner power of the Living Christ, which we together celebrate as the Eucharist. That is why we do it every Sunday.

The great biblical scholar and author of one of the finest studies of the prophets, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, said shortly before he died: “When I was young, I admired clever people. Now

that I am old, I admire kind people.” I pray that we will all be kind enough to one another that whatever our differences, we can overcome our fears and emotions and gather together at the table to give thanks and share in the Bread of Life.

Amen.