

June 2nd, 2006

A Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Pentecost

The Very Reverend G. Thomas Luck, Dean and Rector

St. Paul's Cathedral, Syracuse, New York

Lessons: Proper 8, Revised Common Lectionary

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

Psalm 130

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Mark 5:21-43

Throughout human history communities of people have struggled to define who they are, “what makes us, ‘us’?” Very often, the way people have tried to define who they are is by defining who they are not; by deciding who is out of the community we know who is in the community. I’m told that of all the names that people native to North America have for their various tribes, all of them translated into their language means “the people”, which means that everyone else is “not the people.”

In the time of Jesus the Jews had very clear rules about who was out of the community and who was in. To be allowed to be a member of the worshiping community one had to be a circumcised male and have a mother who was Jewish, although there were men who had been proselytized into Judaism. Women were in the community but not members of the worshipping community. In the Temple in Jerusalem only the priests, who had that office by hereditary inheritance, were allowed into the most sacred space, the Holy of Holies.

The Gospel story for today is quite radical for that context, even though it may not appear radical to us at all. It just appears to be a story of Jesus healing some people, which is what we would expect. But notice that both of the people who are healed are females, the daughter of Jairus and a woman with an uncontrollable hemorrhage rather than the normal way of women. In healing these women Jesus crosses over the lines of his religion and brings women into his fellowship. In the time of Jesus Judaism observed various purity codes and Jesus violates two of them in this Gospel. In touching the daughter of Jairus after she has died he has touched a corpse, something

which would have made him unclean, and which would have required him to observe ritual washings. In healing the woman who is bleeding Jesus violates the rule that all women in that time are impure and not to be touched. In fact, the woman is not even supposed to be out in public. But in both stories, Jesus is responding to the faith Jairus and the woman show in coming to him. Notice, they too cross boundaries by coming to Jesus, and having faith that he will cross the boundary back in order to heal.

The Church throughout its history has continued to struggle with deciding who is “in” and who is “out.” The very first Council of the Church, according to the Acts of the Apostles, was held in Jerusalem for the purpose of deciding if one had to be circumcised, if one had to be a Jew, in order to be a Christian. By the way, the James presided over this Council, not Peter, even though Peter was there. At that Council it was decided that one did not have to be a Jew in order to be a member of the Church. That sounds strange to our ears, but that was the first debate, and some would say things have gone downhill ever since us Gentiles were allowed in. To grasp the contrast, remember that the Temple priests were the only ones allowed into the Holy of Holies. But by Baptism all of us are made members of the royal priesthood of Christ, and the Church, not the building but all of us, are now God’s Holy Temple, God’s dwelling place on earth. This is reflected in Jesus teaching us to call God Abba, which is more like Papa, rather than El Shaddai, the most powerful God on high.

But you may have noticed that the Church today continues to be full of debates about who should be fully allowed to participate at all levels of Church life. While Gentiles and eventually women were allowed to be members of the worshiping community, women were only allowed to be Deputies to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in 1970. It is not too surprising that only six years later the General Convention voted to allow women to have full access to all orders of ministry in The Episcopal Church. Twelve years later the first woman, Barbara Harris, was the first woman to become a bishop. And I must say, having just had a few conversations with her again at General Convention, when she was chosen we picked an amazing person in all of the history of humankind. Now retired, she is still a delight to be with and has a wonderful sense of humor, as she was facetiously complaining about being discriminated against as a smoker. Her main complaint was the number of

times people put her in charge of coming up with the rules for smokers, something she found quite galling!

As I trust you have heard, the Episcopal Church has now chosen a woman to be our Presiding Bishop, Chief Pastor and Primate, Katharine Jefferts Schori. All of this is still controversial. We know that Roman Catholics and the Orthodox do not ordain women. Even though the Anglican Communion officially supports the ordination of women, the fact is that most national churches do not yet ordain women to any order. And so, we are kind of ahead of everybody on this. But I don't believe the movement towards the full participation of women is something that was begun by the Episcopal Church. I believe it began when Jesus responded to the faith of Jairus and the woman with the hemorrhage and brought them into his communion and fellowship.

There is another "them" and "us" controversy that is swirling around. To be honest, I kind of hope it is the last, but it may not be. The final group that has yet to be allowed full participation in the life of the church is gay men and lesbian women. These people did not choose their orientation any more than of the rest of us. They are who they are by nature, as God has made them. The Presiding Bishop-elect, our Bishop and I are clear that we desire the full participation of gays and lesbians at all levels of the Church. Our Canons for some time have not allowed discrimination at any level of the Church based on sexual orientation. But this is very hard for many, especially around the Anglican Communion.

For this reason I voted for two different resolutions that, with different language, calls on the Episcopal Church to pause for a bit before ordaining any more gays or lesbians to be bishops. I know this is hard for many. It is hard for me. Presiding Bishop-elect Katharine Jefferts Schori told the bishops that she could only support the resolution "if we understand that it's not slamming the door. It has to leave the door open for further conversation and consideration in the very near future." And she told the House of Deputies in which I served, "I think if you do pass this resolution you have to be willing to keep working with all your might at finding a common mind in this church. I don't find this an easy thing to say to you, but I think that is the best we are going to manage at this point in our church's history." Because of my votes there are gays and

lesbians who are angry with me, who want nothing more to do with the Anglican Communion if we can't have more gay bishops right now. At the same time, there are people on the right who hoped General Convention would not pass any resolutions so that they could claim that we have broken with the Anglican Communion and thus they are in and we are out.

For my part, as I stand here this morning, I am clear that I am fully supportive of the full participation of gays and lesbians everywhere, including in the Anglican Communion, and that if we are not at the table it is far less likely that will happen. I was informed in my thinking by running into an old acquaintance of mine at General Convention. He is a retired priest and a gay man. I first knew him in 1970 when he as a seminarian accompanied some of us who were youth on a diocesan trip to help the mission in Bluff Utah that eventually became the Diocese of Navajoland. He said to me, "None of this really touches me. I really don't have a lot invested in it. When I was active, my goal was just to survive. But I will say this. I have done a lot of counseling with people who are trying to discern their sexual orientation. Once I had been working with a man who after many years of struggle determined that he was gay. Upon deciding this, he immediately wanted all of his family and friends to embrace him and love him as a gay man. I said to him, 'You've spent every waking minute for the better part of thirty years trying to figure this out and come to terms with it. You might give your family and friends equal time.'"

In a very real way the Episcopal Church only came out of the closet three years ago with the ordination of Bishop Gene Robinson. I think we need to give some of our family and friends in the Anglican Communion a bit of time before going further. I don't know how long it should last, and I don't know how it is all going to come out, but I think that taking a pause helps acceptance rather than further resentment.

In the meantime, your Bishop and I are fully supportive of the ministries of gay and lesbian people at every level in our diocese. For that reason, as I was listening to our Presiding Bishop-elect being interviewed on the Diane Rehm show this week I was especially delighted to hear that the first caller to speak was our own Dan McMaster of St. Paul's Cathedral, who is here today I'm glad to say. I hope that her conversation with him is at least enough for him to continue to be part of our life and fellowship.

In a way analogous to the woman with the hemorrhage reaching out to Jesus for healing, Dan had enough faith to reach out to Bishop Jefferts Schori on national radio. In the wonderful way that the Spirit works, we've gone from a woman reaching out to Jesus, to a gay man reaching out to his new Primate who is a woman. And even as some believe The Episcopal Church has already died and is as good as a corpse, or as others see The Episcopal Church hemorrhaging uncontrollably, I believe all of this shows us that like Jairus, like the woman with the hemorrhage, when any one of us, and when this Church, reaches out to Jesus in faith for healing and in so doing acknowledges Him to be Savior and Lord, Jesus' response is simply, "your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

Amen.