

“The Spirit of Anglicanism”

- I. Introduction: The question of the morning is this: “In the Anglican and Episcopalian tradition, what are our sources of spiritual authority and using these sources, how do we discern the decisions we need to make?” Having posed this somewhat weighty question, it is important to note that what I will share with you this morning cannot have the depth that the answer to this question truly deserves. I will only hit upon the high points and identify principles for our ongoing conversations. As I mentioned last Sunday morning, we Episcopalians have been in the news and it seems timely to focus upon questions such as these. But first, I want strongly reiterate the primary theological value that I focused on in last Sunday’s sermon: the Incarnation of Jesus Christ frames everything else we will consider this or any other Sunday morning. In today’s Gospel Jesus tells those who desire to follow him, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

In other words, we are first and foremost followers of the Incarnate Jesus Christ. Our identity as his disciples defines who we are. Inherent in that identity is the imperative to be one with another in the Body of Christ. Ephesians gives us compelling guidelines about how this unity is to work. We are organically related to one another, just as the parts of the human body are so related. Our unity is to include peacefulness, humility, submission to one another, and deep prayer for one another’s well-being. Ah, you might say – great concepts in principle, but ever so challenging to put into action. I would agree.

- II. I believe that we Christians over the ages have done a fairly abysmal job of remaining one as the Body of Christ. We have repeatedly split and fragmented. I cannot help but think how contrary this is to the words of Jesus in the High Priestly Prayer in John – remain one with one another as the Father and I are one. At the same time, I also believe that our history as Anglicans and Episcopalians reflects the desire to build bridges between differing theological points of view and to create space for people with differing spiritual journeys to come together. This desire continues to be present today.

I'd like to share a story. Last week I described my first encounter with the Episcopalian church as a high school freshman. Please fast forward to about twenty years ago. Peg and I were living in Indianapolis and participating in a year-long catechumenal/inquirers' class at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. In one of the early meetings the fifty or so of us in the class were each asked to share what we liked and valued about the Episcopal Church. The beautiful liturgy was probably the most frequent response. When it was Peg's turn to answer this question, and I tell this with her permission, she said that she was not yet sure what she thought about the Episcopal Church. She told the group she had more questions than answers. She further stated that during worship, she didn't focus on the words of the liturgy, but rather entered into a meditative space where she could meet God in the way she needed to after a long absence from church. I rather imagined that Peg was taking her stand that night and that how the folks in that group responded would be a strong determinant of where she went from there. I knew from our conversations that one of Peg's questions was whether or not she could really be herself in this church, whether she could honestly share what she thought and felt, what she found difficult, and what her spiritual journey had been. The response of the catechumenal group was immediate and unequivocal. "Good for you;" "How wonderful that you can tell us that;" and "Sometimes I feel that way, too." After we heard the affirming responses to Peg's answer we continued around the group. We listened to the varying reactions of the very diverse collection of people who had come together with a desire to know what it would mean to become more fully a Christian and in particular what it would mean to become an Episcopalian.

III. I would later come to understand that the experience that night typified who we are as Episcopalians. We are open, we have inquiring minds, and we often do not rush to judgment over questions that confound us. We also take seriously the notion that discernment is a communal process despite the fact that discernment in a community can be challenging. In some ways it may seem easier in the short-run to be able to rely upon a central source of authority to make decisions in the church. But I sincerely believe that we are stronger in our discernment and make better decisions, whether in a family or in a church, when we participate in the decision-making process as a community. We are gifted differently, we bring different creative processes into the mix, and differing sensibilities and theologies that grow out of our diverse life experiences. Therefore, in our tradition we strive to be comprehensive, to create a container within which differing views on a topic can be safely exchanged and weighed.

But do our openness and comprehensiveness mean that all decisions are relative and that we can alter our collective theology based on who is participating in the conversation? In short, no. We have a three-legged Anglican stool to guide us in our discernment. The idea of a three-legged stool emerged from the writing of the most highly respected of all Anglican theologians, Richard Hooker. He helped us to formulate the understanding that we are guided in our deliberations by three sources of authority: Scripture, tradition, and reason. These three sources interact in a dynamic and powerful way. Let me explain what I mean. Our first and core source of authority is Scripture. If we lose that source, we are lost. But we bring to the process of discerning Scripture both tradition and reason. The Bible is a dynamic, living text. We believe that understanding Scripture comes out of a process of study that is informed by an understanding of the traditions of the earlier church and a systematic use of our minds. In the process of discernment, whether as the global or the local church, we commit ourselves to rely on these three sources of authority as we listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us.

- IV. Conclusion. This is the Anglican path to discernment. It can be demanding and sometimes messy. At its best this process is based on courageous sharing, active listening, and restraint while discernment is underway. This discernment is not tactical, and it does not attempt to manipulate outcomes. To many others in the world it may seem ludicrous. In the discernment process, particularly in the local church, we do our best to make decisions by consensus rather than by up or down voting. We realize that the bigger burden for change falls on those who are proposing that change; to the best of our ability we do not enter this process with the idea of superimposing our will on others. What we have going for us in the Anglican/Episcopal Church is that we have a tradition of being the “*via media*,” the middle way, and we have a tradition of bringing our minds into the process.

My sisters and brothers, the Spirit of Anglicanism is alive in the Church of the Ascension. The issues we face here are being faced in many other places by many other brothers and sisters in Christ. What I ask us to do is place ourselves in the larger context of Christian history. First century Christians had to decide whether and how to incorporate Gentiles into the church. Several hundred years later, Christians had to decide how to re-integrate fellow Christians who had denied Christ to save their lives. Every generation of believers has been challenged to deal with thorny dilemmas. In a recent edition of *The Living Church* there is a wonderful article about a parish that decided to remain together in unity as part of the Body of Christ by focusing on what

they had in common rather their differences. They found that their shared commitment to Christ far outpaced their differences. That is a part of our story as well. I ask us to reaffirm our commitment to Christ and to one another in this place, always relying upon Scripture and tradition and reason to help us deal with the challenges that face us. As long as we maintain our humility and our identity as disciples of the Incarnate Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit will lead us in any discernment we are called to undertake. *Amen.*