Second Sunday after Epiphany All Saints’ Church

January 17, 2016 Year C

Isaiah 62:1-5 I Corinthians 12:1-11

Psalm 36:5-10 John 2:1-11

In first grade, I attended the Catholic school down the street. There were 40 of us in the classroom- 5 rows of 8, and I can still see Sister who ran the class with an iron fist. I have memories of many rules.

Recess was the most rule-driven. There are many examples, but here’s one: The first bell at the end of recess meant that everyone had to freeze in place- exactly in the form your body was in when you heard the bell…. A real freeze. The second bell rang and you were then free to line up with your class, straight and in order. The third bell rang and you walked to your classroom.

If any of these rules were broken, you received a purple ticket from the playground monitors who were usually parents volunteering. We were told the tickets were purple because purple is the color of Lent!

At the end of the year, if you received no purple tickets for the year, you were awarded a certificate to honor your “sinless” behavior.

Just as first grade was coming to a close, I was sitting outside with my best friend and we were having lunch on the picnic table, just days away from summer. My friend was ecstatic. Both of us were “purple ticket free.” In her exuberance, with her wide Italian Catholic gesturing, as she told me that her family, so proud, was coming to our “graduation,” she knocked over her carton of milk. A mother on playground duty came running over and handed her a purple ticket.

We were shocked. “But she didn’t mean it.”

“It doesn’t matter… spilt milk is spilt milk.

My friend began to sob.

“I think that rule is for kids who start food fights,” I suggested.

The mother walked away. Spilt milk was spilt milk. And though I didn’t have words for it then, I knew that my friend was suffering under someone’s literal interpretation of the rules.

This past Thursday night, I had just come home from a wonderful dinner and I decided I should check in with the news to see what was happening with the Anglican Communion. I wasn’t prepared for the headlines, “Episcopal Church Suspended from Anglican Communion.”

What!! And that’s when this first grade memory flashed before my eyes. The Episcopal Church had just been given a “purple ticket” separated from all the good kids on the playground. In no way do I want to minimize what has happened…. And I understand that this memory came out of my own anger, impatience, sadness and loss. Yet the wailing of my friend was visceral…… very real.

Friday morning, with the help of Betsy Fowle, I began to read the news- not from the secular media sites which just had the news wrong, but from our own sources and academicians: Episcopal News Center, The Anglican Communion website, the actual Communique from the Primates (now there’s a name) and bishops across the country. The best analysis came from The Rev. Dr. Andrew McGowan, Dean of Berkeley Seminary at Yale who said:

“We have not been suspended; we are not second class Anglicans; we have not been removed in any way from the Communion.”

And the Communion is quite a force in the world. The third largest Christian community, we are 85 million people, in 165 countries, with 38 provinces tied together by tradition, polity, common history, rich liturgy, prayers, mission, and by our commitment to ONE LORD, JESUS CHRIST.

The Primates Meeting (bishops of the provinces) are one instrument of defining “communion” but they do not have the authority to tell us what to do.

For instance, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry could walk into All Saints’ and tell us that we cannot use the high altar any longer and we would thank him ***for his opinion*** and continue with our practice. We might be upset about his words to us, because of his moral authority, but he has no power to tell us how to worship… the Book of Common Prayer has that authority, Bishop Rob’s guidance would be consulted, the canons, the vestry, the architecture of our building….. the list goes on.

It’s the same with the Primates; there are other authorities that work to define “the Communion”: The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conferences, the Anglican Consultive Council (made up of clergy and lay) all work together to keep our communion healthy- committed to our mission and our autonomy. As Dean McGowan suggested, “calling these committees the Anglican Communion is like calling a Senate Committee the United States.” We are a beautiful tapestry and our individual global connections with each other have weight.

But something did happen. We were “disciplined” because we support not only same sex relationships, gay clergy, gay bishops, but also the right for same sex couples to be married in the church with a liturgy that honors the same sex language needed for that sacramental rite to have integrity.

The straw that broke the camel’s back. So my opening story has relevance here. It’s about interpretation of Scripture and how rules are to be followed and how community is to be envisioned.

As always, when I need to change my sermon on a Friday because of news crossing into our lives (seems to be becoming more of a habit than not), the Scripture speaks profoundly to our lives.

First Corinthians is Paul’s most passioned plea for unity, stressing the multiplicity and complementary nature of our spiritual gifts.

He is living and working within the most diverse congregation that he could ever imagine: Jews, Greeks, slaves, free, men, women, rich, and poor and YET they are united by their shared confession of Jesus as Lord.

We are not spiritual Lone Rangers.

Nor, is anyone second class. If you confess Jesus as Lord, then unequivocally the Holy Spirit dwells in you. End of story. And you are a part of the Communion.

It’s the diversity within the Unity which allows the gifts ***of all*** to be manifested. We must be diverse and express that unique diversity***if*** Unity is going to exist. Unity is born out of Diversity, not the other way around. Unity cannot be defined by Unification. Unity needs, must have, requires, relies on our diversity, or varied outlooks, our tensions, and our relationships with each other. That’s why the Trinity is such an important concept to describe God. God isn’t one Thing (thank God). The only way we can begin to understand this wild concept of ***Unity*** is to live with each other, willing to manifest our different gifts and strengths and joys and politics and history and geography …… without privileging one over the other.

But alas, given our human nature, we do classify “others” as second class….. gays, women, divorced people, people of different races and tribes, and different classes, just to name a few, have all been classified as such.

Yet Isaiah reminds us that God ***names us*** as belonging to God. God can’t keep silent. If your name was Forsaken or Desolate, you are now Married to the Lord. Your name is “My Delight is in Her. My Delight is in Him. My Delight is in You.”

What do we tell our children? We tell them proudly that All Saints’ Church is our future. Look at us: we are straight, gay, questioning, Democrats, Republicans, Independents, laborers, and professionals. We hold varied approaches to life and thinking: We disagree on gun control, the death penalty, the role of government, sexuality, even liturgy, and yet we honor each other and our relationships. We are the Body of Christ which fills us with hope and purpose and love. Prayer keeps us woven like a tapestry. Unity is not unification.

In John’s Gospel, we see Jesus’s first miracle. Persistent Mother meets Divine Reluctance in the no name town of Cana, ten miles north of Nazareth.

John is making a point. Jesus’ first miracle is about Joy: Yes to gladness, celebration and rejoicing. Yes to life, all of life, as religious, not just some set apart holy corner of moral certitude. Yes to mercy, peace and grace. Yes to hospitality.

Jesus swings into action- it was his time after all, and he turns water into wine and the party continues: the community of faith is to be a celebration of people.

One of the most influential experiences for my own faith development was when I was a member of St. Luke’s in the Field, in Greenwich Village in NYC in the 80s. We were very diverse: artists, professors, gay and straight, housewives, laborers, lawyers, children….. yet we were united by one mission: men were dying horrible deaths because of the “gay disease.” No one really understood what was happening, but young men were dying painfully and we knew we needed to serve them as best we could…. To walk with them. We created a lot of services, but what I remember most was the gourmet party we threw once a month. We cooked all day, put on recordings of different operas and then walked two by two to homes to gather everyone up, no matter how sick, and to bring them back to church, some carried in our arms. And we laughed and sang and drank wine and ate. Everyone knew that the wine at the Eucharist the next day may be the last drink for many of those gathered, but these men, full of faith and love, partied. They loved Jesus. Their faith will be part of my faith forever. It would be impossible for me to “cut these experiences out” or to label these gay guys as outside of the communion of faith or to treat them as second class. In their suffering and in their joy, I saw the face of Jesus.

The curious and powerful gift of Anglican Communion is God’s, not the Primates, to give.

AMEN