

## **Homily – Speaking to Power**

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In June, Dcn. Susan, Jeff and I spent ten days in Louisville, Kentucky at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. General Convention is held every three years, and it is the governing body of our denomination. Changes to our rules and even to our ways of worship are all decided by General Convention.

General Convention is structured into two houses just like our U.S. Congress. The first, and much larger house is made up of over eight hundred deputies. There are four lay and four clergy deputies from each diocese, and Jeff and I were part of this House of Deputies. The second house is made up of about one hundred and fifty active and retired Bishops. Bishop Lucinda was the lone bishop from our diocese, but our prior bishop, Bishop Mary, was also there. She is also the vice president of the House of Bishop, so she had quite a prominent role in that house.

The most publicized result of General Convention was the election of a new Presiding Bishop. Sean Rowe will take office on November 1<sup>st</sup> after the retirement of the current Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry. We also approved a three year budget of \$145 million. We debated and voted on a response to gun violence, and we worked on the continuing clean-up of the discipline process for clergy. And, for me the most exciting things that we voted on were around the way we do worship. The Book of Common Prayer we use in worship was last updated in 1979, and some of the language is a bit outdated. While God is eternal, God continues to reveal God's self to us in new ways, but our Book of Common Prayer does not reflect the updated language of that revelation. For the last nine years our church has been working on compromises that would allow us to keep the existing Book of Common Prayer that we have in the pew rack, and also create a digital repository of updated ways of doing worship. Yes, this was a way to finally update our marriage rites so that marriage is no longer between one man and one woman. Instead, it is between two people. However, there were other long awaited changes about creation care,

gender pronouns when referring to God, and expansion of the two year cycle of daily readings that we call the lectionary. We also saw updates to our calendar of holy people, more expansive language for our eucharistic prayers, and, updates to our Good Friday worship which eliminates some of the anti-Semitic language. Common worship will continue to be at the center of who we are as Episcopalians, and we are becoming more nimble in the ways we do that worship.

Now, both Houses at General Convention are large enough that a lot of work is done in committees that range from ten to thirty people, and I was part of the Committee that updates the rules and processes for ministry. My committee focused on those who are ordained, but there is also the ministry of the laity. In general much of the committee work is structured by resolutions which are like Bills in the U.S. Congress. We worked through six resolutions on my committee that ranged from raising the mandatory retirement age to funding a deacon support group. Overall, across all of the committees we had more than three hundred resolutions.

For me the work could be a little intimidating since there were seven bishops on my committee, and lots of very knowledgeable people. Power comes from title and position, but it also comes from expertise and knowledge. Be that as it may, I found speaking to power to be a bit easier than it can sometimes be since all of these church people, especially the bishops, encouraged full participation from all. It also helped that I found some time to have meals with some of the people on my committee. For many, General Convention is a family union and a time to reconnect and meet new people. I think these relationships helped me feel more comfortable in speaking to power on my committee, and I am grateful that General Convention was a safe place to do that.

We all know that speaking to power is not always safe. Both our Old Testament reading from the Book of the prophet Amos and our Gospel reading from Mark show us the risks of speaking to power, especially when you are telling the powerful something they don't want to hear and don't want said.

In our Old Testament reading, Amos speaks to power and tells King Jeroboam that his cruel ways are not acceptable to God, and he extolls the king to repent and return to the ways of God. The king doesn't want to hear this, and the king's priest, Amaziah, tells Amos that he had better flee and never return.

And in our Gospel reading, John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, speaks to power, and tells King Herod and his wife, Herodias, that their behavior and actions are also contrary to God. Herodias is so angry when John speaks to power, that she has him beheaded and his head delivered to her on a platter. This gruesome story is very clear on the risks of speaking to power. Two thousand years ago, the crucifixion of Jesus is another example of what happens when one speaks to power. Neither John, nor Jesus would be silenced and there were serious consequences.

I am very grateful that speaking to powerful people at General Convention did not have these same repercussions. In general people were very civil to one another, but at times there was conflict. I saw this first hand as we debated about the appropriate language for resolutions concerning Gaza and Israel. In the House of Deputies we had quite a bit of debate on two words, genocide and apartheid. One of the deputies from our diocese has been to Israel and Palestine and in her experience as a tourist she thought the two words were an appropriate description of what she saw first-hand. However, our group of more than eight hundred deputies eventually bowed to the wisdom of Archbishop of Jerusalem and didn't use either one of those words. We hoped that this comprise, on our part, would be a step towards peace, but still, it all is so tragic.

Now, this is the part I added last night after the shootings in Pennsylvania. Both our Old Testament reading and Gospel reading are about speaking to power, but today's Psalm is a lament in which we bewail tragedy and look to God for deliverance. A lament is a demonstrative, strong, and corporate expression of deep grief, pain, sorrow, and regret. Lament and repentance deal with issues of the heart. They pave the way for outer change. Lament is a personal and corporate response to many things: evil, sin, death, harm, discrimination, inequality, racism, sexism, colonization, oppression, and

injustice. It is about mourning the painful, shameful, or sorrowful situation, about confessing sin and complicity and sorrow, about calling God to intervene and to change the situation. Finally, lament is about offering thanksgiving and praise to God, knowing that God will intervene and bring change, hope, and restoration. Lament is certainly an appropriate response to the tragedy of Gaza and Israel and we fall into lament after the shootings yesterday at the Trump Rally in Butler, Pennsylvania.

In lament we grieve the silence of the people of God about many of the tragic things in our world. In lament we acknowledge the complicity of the church in many of these things. And we recognize that the practice of lament is necessary if we are to experience healing and hope and transformation.

Speaking to power is something that Jesus models for us to do ourselves. I don't do it very often, and maybe I should. I expect that like many things in our spiritual journey, the first time is the hardest, and the more you do it, then the easier it gets. Though easy may be the wrong word.

And, it was certainly easier to speak to power in the large group of people we had a General Convention. I pray that our church continues to be a place from which we can speak to power and call out things that are not of God. I pray that we lament and repent of those things in our society that continue to behead John the Baptist and crucify Jesus. On the other hand, I am grateful that our Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement is able to declare and model things that are of God. And, I think that is what we did at General Convention. We want love for all. We want freedom for all. We want abundant life for all. And, we want Jesus for all.