

## Where does our church stand?

Many of you have asked where our parish stands now that the Primates of the Anglican Communion have spoken. Many have asked what we are going to do. Some have said we should do nothing. Like most places, we have a variety of opinions about the issues before us. Elsewhere in this Newsletter there is a resolution that was passed unanimously by our vestry. They asked that we share this with you so that you might know that St. Matthew's leadership is unified in our commitment to remain in the Anglican Communion and to remain faithful to Scripture and the doctrine of the Church. This is the faith that we have inherited and that we will pass on to those who come after us. Let me enumerate some of the beliefs that we are unified behind.

First, this is not about homosexuality. This is about the authority of Scripture and faithfulness to the faith. The Primates were clear that homosexuality is incompatible with Scripture and that no province has the right to unilaterally change the teaching of the Church. This is what the Episcopal Church has tried to do in confirming V. Gene Robinson as Bishop Coadjutor of New Hampshire and stating *"that local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex union."* It is this defiance against the authority of the Scriptures and the greater church that we are disassociating ourselves from. Let us be clear. It is NOT a sin to be homosexually oriented. It is a sin for any Christian to engage in sexual relations outside of marriage and for purposes other than those which God created sex to accomplish; the procreation of children and the bond and stability of the family. This is the two thousand year old teaching of the Christian faith, the witness of Scripture, and we will not turn away from it.

So, what is the position of our parish toward homosexuals who are not celibate? Our position is identical to our position toward all people. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We cry with John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostles, and the Church throughout the ages, "Repent! (See things a new way!) The Kingdom of God is before you! We invite ALL sinners to join with us to work out their faith in fear and trembling as the Epistle to the Hebrews commends. Does this mean that they must be celibate to a part of our parish family? No, it means that we expect them to be growing in their trust in Christ just as all of us need to. We would be betraying the Gospel if we began to rank some sins as acceptable and others as unacceptable. Each one of us has sin in our life and each one of us needs to repent of our sin or it will kill us. The wages of sin is death. It is important to remember that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That is Good News!

So why are we upset about Canon Robinson's consecration if we are all sinners? The problem is NOT that Canon Robinson is a homosexual. The problem is that he is teaching that his homosexuality is holy and righteous and a God given gift. This is a false teaching and is contrary to the witness of Scripture and the witness of the Church. The vow that he will take as a bishop of the Church obligates him to guard the unity and faith of the Church. Yet he is already teaching false doctrine and refuses to be responsible for the schism that he is causing in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion as a whole. He made clear that this was his position at his public hearing at General Convention and yet the Convention confirmed his election anyway. By doing so, these actions endorsed his teaching and his divisiveness. No vote can overturn God's clear teaching. We will not acknowledge the authority of such actions. The Church has an obligation to reach out to sinners while they are still in their sin. This is what

Jesus did and what he calls us to do. However, we should not leave them in the very chains that enslave them! We should equip them with the tools that will enable them to turn all of their life to Jesus Christ who can overcome the temptations to sin that is slowly killing them. This is true for us in our sins (whatever our particular brand is) and it is true for the homosexual. This argument in the Episcopal Church is about whether the Scriptures mean what they say or not. Our parish chooses to say that they do. We believe in a God who calls us to be transformed into the perfection he has prepared for us. He does not call us into a hopeless acceptance of our condition. God calls us to live our lives according to his purposes and those purposes are clearly laid out in Scripture. This parish will not succumb to the temptation to replace God's Word and purposes for our lives with purposes of our own making. We will call one another to the foot of the Cross and encourage one another to repentance so that each of us might be transformed into the glory that God has prepared for us. We will not change God's plain Word to eliminate sins that are not politically correct in our day. We will not abandon anyone to the sin that is destroying their God given life. We will trust a God who bears our burden that we might find new life. We will trust that Jesus Christ has overcome sin and can overcome each of our sins if we will but surrender to him.

Secondly, we will not allow the mission that Jesus has entrusted to us to spread this Good News to the whole world to be sidetracked by the political agendas of a few. We are called to spread the Good News that Jesus is greater than the world and we will disassociate ourselves from those who seek newspaper headlines and television cameras for their own purposes. Our mission is clear and it is urgent. We cannot allow ourselves to be distracted by the political arguments of our day and if the only way to accomplish this is to disassociate ourselves from those who are distracted then this is what we must do. We will not allow the actions of a General Convention to disconnect us from the Faith of the Church. We do not wish for this division but we cannot remain connected to those who would sever our relationship to the Communion of Saints. This would surely lead to our destruction.

Thirdly, I know many want to know what this disassociation means. Are we now leaving the Episcopal Church? The answer is "NO". We are disassociating ourselves from those who would teach false doctrine and leave God's children with only themselves to rely on for salvation. We will not go where they are going. It may be that they will leave us, but we will remain firm in our commitment to Christ who is our Lord. Only time will tell how this schismatic and polarizing action by the national church will play itself out. We will wait with patience for the Lord to guide us on the way forward. While we may not know the way to where we are going as of yet, we do know what the destination is. It will be where Jesus and the Anglican Communion are. This will take time but we will be patient and we will continue to focus on the mission of reconciling the world to God through Christ.

Fourthly, we are not alone. There are 14 dioceses and almost a million other Episcopalians who are where we are. The vast majority of the 38 Primates of the Anglican Communion with almost 60 million Christians that they lead are with us. They have promised to walk this journey with us. The Primates have asked that adequate episcopal oversight be administered by the Archbishop of Canterbury for those who are persecuted because of their adherence to the teachings of the faith. Fortunately we are not yet under such persecution. Bishop Thompson, our Diocesan Bishop was one of the 40% of bishops who voted against the confirmation. He has spoken clearly on this subject several times in the past and we trust that he will continue to uphold the faith. However, if this persecution should come, it is comforting to know that the

Archbishop of Canterbury himself will take us under his care.

Fifthly, we will continue to do the work God gives us to do. We will continue to mature in Christ. We will continue to worship Jesus every Sunday. We will continue to reach out to a broken world to tell them that we have found a way to overcome the brokenness of our lives and to invite them to join us on the journey to total surrender to God in Christ. We will not abandon them to a life that has the very hope that Christ has offered to us. We will share with the world the Good News of Jesus Christ.

While I am sure that we will not have 100% agreement in our parish family, I pray that we can all rally around the need to be faithful to the Scriptures and the greater church. This is not about taking sides. The side we take belongs to Christ. It is not about anyone's worthiness. Our worthiness can be found only in Christ. It is about complete and total surrender to the authority of God in Christ as he has revealed himself to us through the objective revelation of the Holy Scriptures. Jesus Christ saved my life and has blessed me even though I have been the worst of sinners. How can I turn away from the authority of the Scriptures that have given me life? I cannot for to do so would be my death. The words of Martin Luther echo to my ears from almost 500 years ago, "Here I stand. I can do no other".

My fervent hope and prayer is that you will also hear those same words and that you will stand with me. The way forward is full of unknowns. But I am certain that it leads to Christ's Kingdom and that he is the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness shall not overcome it. The journey will be longer than we want and harder than we want. There will be times of great anxiety. There will also be times of surprising grace and joy. The promise of the journey is not comfort. It is hope. Sacrifices will be required of all of us. That is what it means to follow the way of the Cross. However, with St. Paul we can rest assured that "the sufferings of this present time are nothing to be compared to the glories that are yet to be revealed". Let us unite together and stand up for the faith we have received. Let us lift up one another as we walk the journey towards his Kingdom. Let us leave no one behind who would go with us no matter the nature of the sin that binds them. Let us offer one another and all that we encounter along the way the cleansing power of Christ over the sin of our lives that lead each of us to our deaths. Let us be sure that all know that they can come as they are but that Christ will not abandon them to their own fate. They can join our family and we will love them because we see in them the person that Christ will enable them to become. This is the faith offered to us in the Holy Scriptures. This is the foundation which Luther stood on 500 years ago. It is here that we stand. How could we do any other?

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