

EPISCOPAL

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh
St. Luke's Episcopal Cathedral, Portland April 29, 2012

Easter 4B: [Acts 4:5-12](#); [Psalm 23](#); [1 John 3:16-24](#); [John 10:11-18](#)

This week I went to a conference put on by the Religious Coalition Against Discrimination (RCAD) called "Making a Joyful noise, Claiming our Faith voices for Marriage Equality." I went for two main reasons, first because as one of the panelists they gave me a free lunch and second because, having spent much of this winter trying to get people to tell their stories, I thought I should practice what I preach and learn how to tell my story a little better. I expected to hear good presentations. I also expected that we would be asked to partner with someone we did not know to practice. I did not expect that it would be as personal, as profound and as moving as it became.

It happened with the first question we were asked, "Why are you here?" We were challenged not to respond with a simple surface answer but to go deeper and respond with a story. After some coaching, I ended up telling a stranger a story I have not told you – the story of my coming to St. Luke's. It's funny because people at RCAD events see me as an advocate, an ally, and even an activist for marriage equality and assume that I have always been there. They hear me use words like about "the Radical Welcome of the Kingdom of God" and "the inclusion of Jesus" and assume that those have always been my themes. They don't know that my previous congregation in Maryland was rather traditional on these things... and that, whether in Africa, at Diocesan Convention, and other places, the theme of my work was Jesus' prayer that we would all be one, and my role was as a bridge builder between conservatives and progressives in the church.

Whether it was schools or water supplies or refugees or feeding the hungry, I sought common ground by focusing on outreach – not just to serve God through serving others but hoping that in doing so we would find that what united us ¹ was more than what pulled us apart. It wasn't that I didn't believe in inclusion, I just didn't want to offend anyone or cause anyone to leave. I also was afraid for my career, recognizing that any actions in this area would mark me in future search processes and that by performing an act of civil disobedience such as blessing a gay union, I was putting my livelihood, my ministry, and my ability to support my family at risk. Because of these things, I, in the very liberal diocese of Washington, I was seen as a conservative – and was initially thought by Bishop Knudsen to be too conservative to come to St. Luke's.

In fact, when she saw me hesitate she told me that if I was to come she hoped my mind would be open to change and that if I could not bless the union of two people I would call an assistant to work with me who would. (Interestingly, St. Luke's was equally reticent about the topic. Though GLBT people were fully accepted here and the vestry and bishop had approved the blessing of unions in the Cathedral, the profile and search committee talked only euphemistically about "celebrating our great diversity" – which for someone from Washington DC meant diversity of race and ethnic background, something not much evident in Maine at that time.)

¹ Credit goes to Dr. David Shambaugh, with advice given to my twin brother and me over Thanksgiving dinner not long after we began our careers and proclaimed ourselves as open to all people and points of view. <http://elliott.gwu.edu/faculty/shambaugh.cfm>

When I told my conference partner this story, she said, "So what changed?" I told her how I had been inspired by a relative told me "you can't always stay in the middle but need to take a position," a friend who once counseling me saying "You can't please everyone. If someone isn't made at you, you aren't working hard enough," and the work of Rabbi Edwin Friedman who wrote about the need for self-differentiation and taught that the job of a leader was to take a stand and stand there.² Then I told her about meeting the people in this place, how profoundly moving it was to get to know and love gay couples who had been together longer than I have been alive and to hear their stories and humbly realize that they are better Christians and more spiritual, and otherwise more grounded people than I will ever be.

I told her of what it was like to talk with people who had been hurt and wounded by the church but had found a church home here and how with all this I had come to a place where I realized that I needed to have integrity – not the group but the character trait – between what I believe in my head and have come to know in my heart.

In other words, I realized that I needed to match my actions with my belief in what the scriptures taught³ and in what the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed looked like. I had come to the point of First John where he says, "Let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action." I had come to the point of laying down my life – at least my career -- for my friends, deciding that it was better to take a stance for truth and for the gospel than compromising my character for a unity that wasn't there in the first place.

The same, by the way happened in the Episcopal Church. As I prepare for General Convention, I am aware that over the last decade membership has left in droves, a decline that many blame on "Bishop Robinson" by which they mean the full welcome of gay and lesbian people. To its credit, the Episcopal Church has stood firm, willing to sacrifice itself to maintain its integrity – not with liberalism but, as Peter proclaimed in our reading from Acts, with "the Name of Jesus of Nazareth... This Jesus is the stone rejected the builders that has become the cornerstone."

This is a story about the Episcopal Church and St Luke's that is not being told – I think that if it was people would come pouring in. What I am trying to say is that my real answer to the question "Why are you here?" was Jesus... and the people who make up his body in his place.

What about you? Are you here today because of Jesus? Are you here today because of the people who make up his body in this place? In a few minutes, we will renew our baptismal covenant, saying

² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin_Friedman I was part of a Friedman-centered Colleague Group for ten years in the diocese of Washington. Truly profound thinking, his ideas are embodied in his books *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985) and *A Failure of Service--leadership in the age of the quick fix* (New York: Seabury, 1997) published in after his death.

³ Contrary to popular opinion neither the Bible nor Jesus himself say anything against marriage equality. I believe that taken as a whole both would be in favor. For a good scholarly review that shows the "anti-homosexual passages" in the Bible aren't talking about what we are talking about today and excellent exegesis to answer those who argue "But the Bible Says...", see Daniel Helminiak's *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*. (Alamo Square Press, 2000) or his website, <http://www.visionsofdaniel.net/book3WBRS.htm>

what we believe and promising to live it out. In the baptismal covenant, we promise to live our lives with integrity, to have our actions match our words by not only following Jesus but also by being Jesus doing what Jesus did and would do. I am not asking that we agree. At St. Luke's we honor a diversity of opinion as well as people and I recognize that your story, your passions, your positions and concerns may be completely different from mine. My hope and prayer is that the foundation, the cornerstone we share is the same.

The theme of today's readings is Jesus as the good shepherd. Pictures of Jesus surrounded by sheep with a lamb on his shoulder have made us think of the shepherd in a rather as a bucolic or romantic role. We forget that a good shepherd did not just to feed and care for the sheep, but also protected them from wolves and other wild animals, even to the point of sacrificing his life. This is what Jesus the Good Shepherd has done for us. Would we, could we, do it for others in his name? Would we, could we, follow Peter's example and do good works, explaining when challenged that we are doing what we are doing because of Jesus? Our baptismal vows remind us for our own spiritual health we need to come out as Christians. As we seek to love, not in word or speech but in action, our passions, our ministries, our missions might be different but I pray that our foundation might be the same. When someone asks you "Why are you here?" what story would you tell? Would you skate on the surface or go deeper? On this day of baptism, our baptismal vows challenge us to take the plunge.