

WHAT TO DO

July 13, 2003 ~ Trinity, Santa Barbara ~ Susan Russell
Proper 10B: Amos 7:7-15, Psalm 85, Ephesians 1:1-14, Mark 6:7-13

Grace to you and peace – and many thanks for the wonderful hospitality of this parish and pulpit! I am the Reverend Susan Russell am so very pleased to be with you this morning representing Claiming the Blessing: a national collaborative ministry committed to healing the rift between sexuality and spirituality in the Church. Our focus right now is on General Convention – the triennial gathering of the National Episcopal Church Clan. It’s an amazing thing, General Convention: kind of like that wonderful Broadway musical – Brigadoon – where every so many years the village emerges from the mists – only to fade away again until the next time.

This will be my fifth opportunity to participate in this uniquely Episcopal experience: what one colleague has called “part parliament, part bazaar and part “My Big Fat Anglican Wedding.” My work for the last year has primarily focused on getting ready for the upcoming convention – traveling around the country sharing the hopes and dreams and goals the Claiming the Blessing collaborative has for this church we love. I’ve been to Houston and Portland, San Diego and Boston, Nashville and Boulder and lots of places in between. But now the orchestra is tuning up for the overture and the curtain is about to rise as our own Brigadoon – General Convention 2003 – prepares to emerge from the mists in Minneapolis in just a little over two weeks. And so this morning is really the last stop on the road show.

It’s a little like ending up back at home for me. I grew up in Santa Barbara – spent my high school and college years cruising State Street, hanging out at Ledbetter Beach – and avoiding attending church here at Trinity. It was nothing personal – I was avoiding attending church ANYWHERE – part of what I now call my obligatory-young-adult-lapsed phase. My parents handled it just fine – they were more or less lapsed themselves – but my Aunt Gretchen (who lived with us) found my heathen ways a source of great consternation – particularly, I think, because she’d tried to hard to be a “good influence” – taking me to Junior Altar Guild at the Cathedral and making sure I had plenty of those little doily things we were expected to cover our heads with in those days.

Yes, our family was a great disappointment to Gretchen. So, in some ways, was this church family she loved – she died (and was buried from this church!) a disgruntled Daughter of the King with a “Save the 1928 Prayer Book” bumper sticker on her car.

Years later, after I'd been ordained, I ran into one of her bridge buddies at a diocesan service. Giving me a big hug she said, "Oh, Gretchen would have been so proud!" ... and then she paused for a moment and said, "Well, at least I'd like to think she'd have come around by now!" And I think she would have come around, too – for she'd have certainly kept COMING around: not even women priests and new prayer books would have driven her out of this church which was in many ways as much her family as we were.

So for me, "My Big Fat Anglican Wedding" is really the best General Convention descriptor after all. In the end I believe the Episcopal family of ours is as distinguished by its divergent opinions as it is by its common prayer: providing us with both our greatest strength and our greatest challenge. And as we prepare to gather in Minneapolis, of all the prayers ascending for the work we will do together over our ten days of legislative sessions none have spoken to me so clearly of both those challenges and opportunities as the one we heard this morning:

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Help us figure out what to DO then give us grace to DO it. It brings to my mind the words of my favorite theologian: the African American Episcopalian and biblical scholar Verna Dozier. Verna said, "Don't tell me what you believe – tell me what difference it makes that you believe."

A prayer and a challenge we would be well served praying and hearing 365 days a year – not just this Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – "Proper 10" in the lectionary cycle – the day it's appointed to be read. But appointed it is – and so are the lessons for today. And it was in looking at those lessons for this morning through the lens of the Collect of the Day that I found both food for thought and strength for the journey – to General Convention and beyond.

Help us figure out what to DO. That was Amos's challenge – the reluctant prophet called to speak truth to the political and religious institutions of his day.

This is what the Lord God showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said,

*"See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by;
the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."*

In seminary we were reminded that the prophet has two jobs: to comfort the afflicted – and to afflict the comfortable. Here Amos finds himself in the latter role – afflicting the comfortable leaders of Israel with the news that they were not measuring up to their high calling to be God’s people in the world – and that all the sanctuaries and high places they could build were no substitute for aligning themselves with God’s plumb line – with, in the words of the prophet Micah, God’s “requirement”: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

That his words were not received as good news by the recipients will not come as a surprise to anyone who has ever rattled the cages of power or challenged the status quo of the establishment. And I know this congregation well enough to know there are many here whose personal experience will bear that out. The powers that be were perfectly happy with way it was – and the high priest invited Amos to take his action elsewhere. Amos’s reply? *"I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"*

Amos knew what he was supposed to do: prophesy. And God gave him – a humble herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees – the grace and power to do it. His call was to speak the truth to power – and he did what he was sent to do. His words, which fell on deaf ears at the time, remain for us – centuries later – words of both encouragement and challenge: to speak the truth to power when we are called to – whether we feel qualified or not, whether it works or not.

The disciples in this morning’s gospel were sent as well – sent by Jesus. He told them what to do: cast out unclean spirits. I love that He gave them an out – the “shake the dust off your feet” part as a last resort for anyone who refused to hear them – and that they didn’t seem to need it: *They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.*

Like Amos before them, they were both told what to do and given grace and power to do it. And so have we.

I am heading to General Convention convinced that God has not only given us to understand what things we ought to do, but has also give us the grace and power to accomplish them. Claiming the Blessing is about so much more than the authorization of liturgies for the blessing of a tiny percentage of the Body of Christ already blessed by each other's love. It is about the Good News that the fuller inclusion of all the baptized into the Body of Christ is not an issue which will split the church but an opportunity which will move the church forward in mission and ministry – if we will claim it and proclaim it. It is about an opportunity for evangelism which will breathe new life into our work and our witness to those yearning to hear an alternative to the strident voices of the religious right who have for too long presumed to speak to the culture as representing Christian Values. We have been given Good News to tell and it's time to get on with the business of telling it.

Yes, there will be those who do not hear our news as good. Neither did the high priest in Israel, but that didn't stop Amos. Yes, there will be some who will refuse to hear what we have to say, but Jesus offers us the same option he offered the disciples when he sent them out in twos to heal in his name: shake the dust off your feet if you have to, but keep going. The journey is too important – the stakes are too high – the work you have been called to do is too important to be held hostage to those who will not hear the truth.

And the truth is there are some with power in this church determined to do nearly anything to keep it – including exploiting the fears of those who love this church that their love for each other will split it by repeating over and over that rupture of the communion is inevitable.

Enough is enough. It's time for US to speak the truth as we know it.

We are stronger than that. We have weathered greater than that. There is indeed room in this Big Fat Anglican Faith of ours – this family of ours -- for differing opinions and perspectives – even theologies and practices. Our Primates – the heads of all the different national Anglican churches -- have said so, declaring that they “respect the integrity of each other's provinces and dioceses, [and acknowledge] the responsibility of Christian leaders to attend to the pastoral needs of minorities in their care.” Now that's a message of hope rather than fear – a blessing we claim far greater than any specific rites or any pending resolutions.

More words of wisdom from Verna Dozier: *“Doubt is not the opposite of faith: fear is. Fear will not risk that even if I am wrong, I will trust that if I move today by the light that is given me, knowing it is only finite and partial, I will know more*

and different things tomorrow than I know today, and I can be open to the new possibility I cannot even imagine today.” [Dozier, “The Dream of God”]

Jesus didn't call us to be “right” – he called us to be faithful. He called us to walk in love – with him and with each other. To believe in the power of love to cast out fear. To trust that the historic Anglican tradition we inherit can and will provide for us the “elbow room” we need to include all who seek to love and serve our Lord – all who desire to be fed by the holy food and drink of new and unending life we will soon share around this altar – all who seek to both be vehicles of God's blessing and abundant love.

We have been called to move forward in faith by the light we have in front of us – to claim the blessing of God's inclusive love and to offer the Good News of both the Gospel and Episcopal Church to a world desperately in need it. We have work to do and will to do it. And may the One who has given us the will to do these things give us as well the grace and power faithfully to accomplish them. AMEN.