

Grace Episcopal Church Galena Illinois

July 5, 2015

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

Text: Mark 6:

This year, the 239th celebration of Independence Day followed immediately after the adjournment of the Episcopal Church's 78th General Convention 230 years after its first. Perhaps that timing has brought to mind the intertwining of the beginnings of both our nation and our church.

We have often been reminded that the Episcopal Church was established because the Revolutionary War – the independence of the United States from England – required that the church no longer pledge allegiance to the King of England, as the Church of England's canons and prayer book required. What we might not hear is just how messy were the 13 years from the Declaration of Independence in 1776 to 1789 when both the United States Constitution was ratified and the first American *Book of Common Prayer* was authorized.

Unlike other people of Protestant groups who came to the New World – Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers and others – those who settled in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607 (roughly 75 years after King Henry VIII became the head of the Church) were not seeking freedom from the Church of England. They became the established, state-supported religion in five of the colonies. They were unsuccessful in their pleas for a bishop of their own and loosely reported to the Bishop of London. So, the churches in these colonies had a very strong lay leadership. Their clergy were ordained in England, and many remained loyalists – after all, their ordination vows required that they pray for and declare their allegiance to the King. After July 4, 1776, doing so became an act of treason. Some suspended services. Some held lay led Morning Prayer.

It's no surprise that this was a recipe for trouble when we know that ¾ of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and many who participated in the Continental Congress and Constitutional Conventions were lay members of the Church of England in America. When the war ended in 1783, the church was disestablished, its land sold off. Nearly 40% of its members were said to leave – going to Canada or to England: the Virginia church went from 107 parishes to 42; Maryland lost half; only one parish in Georgia remained--in Savannah. The church that survived had no name, no organization, and no assets. They were, of course, no longer supported by the state.

At last, a potential bishop, Samuel Seabury, was identified and elected and finally consecrated by Scottish bishops in 1784 since the Church of England could not do so according to its canon law.

While the United States of America was learning that its Articles of Confederation were not sufficient for the business and the funding of this new country, and set about creating a governing structure and a constitution, the church was holding its first General Conventions.

It was William White, a priest in Philadelphia, who “saved the day” developing an argument for founding the American church modeled on Anglican principles but free of being governed by the Church of England or owing allegiance to it. At the first General Convention in 1785, the new church was named: “Episcopal” to acknowledge its continuing tradition of bishops (unlike the other Protestant churches in America) and “Protestant” to differentiate it from the Roman Catholic church that was especially strong in Maryland. William White became a bishop along with Samuel Provoost. Changes in English canon law allowed them to be consecrated by the COE in 1787. But one story says that Bp. Provoost soon retired, and went back to his land to study botany. He did not believe that the church could survive.

The second General Convention in 1787 defined the church structure and revised a proposed prayer book that was then put into use in 1789—the same year that the U.S. constitution was ratified. And, as we know, there are some striking similarities in the way our country and our church are governed. Possibly because some of the strongest leaders were involved in both.

So, why this history lesson? Well, aside from the fact that the 4th of July is a good time for history, it is a good reminder, I think, that the idea of there being some magical “good old days” to return to, is a myth. That’s one reason. And the other is that change is inevitable. It just is. And, for the most part, the just concluded General Convention is an indication that more change is coming.

If there was a “golden age” of “good old days” when would that be? Certainly not at the beginning of the Episcopal Church and Revolutionary War! Probably not at the Reformation and the beginnings of the Church of England with King Henry, his children, their successors. That was a terribly bloody time—there was that nasty business of beheading.

The Middle Ages with its plagues, its Inquisitions and Crusades? The time of Constantine and the established church when being Christian became legal and the Councils gathered to shape the doctrines that define the faith?

Even the first century was problematic--Jesus’ ministry and that of the apostles and those early days of carrying the Good News to the ends of the earth! Crucifixion, anyone? Persecution?

In today’s Gospel, Jesus has returned to his hometown, to Nazareth, and is teaching in the synagogue. At first, the people listened. Maybe they came out of curiosity, or to gape, but they did listen and watch. Enough to know that what they heard was wisdom. Enough to see Jesus’ deeds of power. But their wonder didn’t last long. They turned on this hometown boy. Maybe there was something about a carpenter that just didn’t jibe with teaching in a synagogue. Maybe they were envious that he seemed to be “making it,” doing better than their own sons. Whatever it was, the tide turned, and Jesus could not deliver his message.

As he prepared the disciples for their “trial run” of going out to do the work he had called them to do, he gave them instruction: travel light, be prepared to be rejected. If you’re welcomed, stay. If not, don’t push it, simply shake the dust off your feet and move on. But, did you notice, he sent them in pairs, not alone. Probably for mutual support and protection. If

one forgot what he had taught them, the other might remember. If one stumbled, the other could pick him up. I imagine them heading off – unsure. Maybe wondering, “just what have I gotten myself into?” I liked going around with Jesus”

Maybe the second guy was there for emergencies – able to run back to Jesus when they got into trouble: “Jesus, come quickly! Andrew chickened out at the last minute and didn’t heal the leper! The town is about to lynch him!” Or “You know that deaf guy who sits at the gate all day long? James put his hands on the guy’s ears, and now he hears. But...all the noise is driving him crazy! No one knows what to do with him. You’d better come.”

No, we never really know what is going to happen when we agree to follow Jesus. What we do know is that there will be surprises. Unexpected joys and unanticipated challenges. And change. Always, there is change.

Maybe you’re getting tired of hearing that from me. But you need to know that I didn’t make this up! It’s not some doomsday talk, though it might feel that way sometimes. It’s just simple truth. And it has always been so. Some lament – the church has gone to hell in a hand basket. Some wish – if only we could go back to the 50s and early 60s when the churches were full, the Sunday schools overflowing, the world calm and predictable. Everything was so good then! Really? Really? There’s some truth in it, I suppose. For some people. But not for all. Not for people of color in that world of segregation. Not for gays, locked in their closets. Not even for women, thank you very much. In the world of Episcopal Church, it was 1970 before women could be deputies at the Episcopal Church’s General Convention. Post WWII, men could be ordained as deacons; women, from the late 19th century on, could only be lay deaconesses. That did not change until 1970. And, of course, it took the 1974 irregular ordination of eleven women to the priesthood to finally spur the church to women’s ordination in 1976. The first woman bishop was consecrated in 1989. And, this year, there were no women as candidates for Presiding Bishop, because the pool of female bishops with the required experience was empty.

Still, we recognize the social problems we face each and every day. And the reduced role of the church in the public sphere. Maybe the church has become too much like society. Maybe it has lost its prophetic voice.

Our General Convention this year wrestled with these things. And made some amazing decisions. I’ve tried to keep up with some of the most debated ones in the e-Blast. The marriage equality resolutions. Structural changes to begin to streamline the organization. And the election of the first African American Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry.

Bp. Curry is a mover and shaker. He has been in his diocese of North Carolina. He has been in his preaching and his teaching. He uses scary words like “evangelism” and “Jesus movement.” He tells us that our job is to “Go.” Go into the world and make disciples of all people. Have you heard that one before? Change is on his agenda.

In his sermon at Friday's closing Eucharist in Salt Lake City he said, "God came among us in the person of Jesus to reconcile us with God , with one another, and to change the landscape....Let's work together to make this world more like God's dream and less like our nightmare." In regard to change and challenge, he said, "God is with us to the end. We have the power of love that will overcome. Nothing can stop us. " And quoting Bp. Barbara Harris, he said "the God who is behind us is better than whatever is ahead of us."

His ending charge to all of us: "If you've been baptized into the triune God – it doesn't matter whether you are traditional or progressive, **you** are in the Jesus movement. Now. So Go!...."

Amen.