

Yr. B, Proper 16
August 23, 2009
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
1620 words

Lessons:
Psalm 34:15-22
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

We just heard what St. Paul wrote to the Ephesian congregation, “Pray for me...to make known the boldness and mystery of the gospel...pray that I may declare it boldly...”¹

When the air is thick with controversy, and there is deep tension and strife, when people are confused or abandoning ship, it is just plain common sense not to preach too boldly. In the life of the Church, or of a diocese, or of a congregation, these are the times when it is just plain common sense to avoid “rocking the boat.”

What would Jesus do? One of my teachers put it this way: “Jesus was in the middle of everything but the road!”²

I want you to notice what has happened in the story according to John’s Gospel that we have been hearing for the past month.³ In a lovely, green, grassy field by the sea; five thousand people gathered to see what Jesus was all about, and they ended up having an incredible picnic—a sort of holy communion on the hillside.

Jesus slipped away in the night, along with his closest friends; but the crowds came after them. They greeted Jesus, but he challenged their motivation for coming; and then he preached boldly, “I AM the bread of life!”

You can guess what happened next. The religious folks in the crowd began to complain. (This is what we “religious folks” do when we get offended.)

But what did Jesus do? He preached even *more* boldly, he kept on rocking the boat by saying, “Your ancestors ate the manna ...and they died. I am the *living bread*. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.”

There was even more confusion, tension and disagreement in the crowd. This is when good common sense should’ve kicked in. It is not hard to imagine one of the disciples—someone like you or me—pulling Jesus aside and saying, “Let’s adjourn debate on this whole “bread of life” thing for the day. It’s not polling well in the crowd. Your numbers are dropping. Let’s sleep on it, and start fresh in the morning.”

But what did Jesus do? He preached even *more* boldly, he kicked it up another notch by saying, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life...” I remind you that Jesus is speaking to people who observed unbelievably strict dietary laws. He just said the most offensive thing imaginable. Flesh-eating and blood-drinking were just too much for the crowd to stomach.

John records that the congregation declined from 5000 to 12. And so Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you *also* wish to go away?”

I want you to consider what it would be like to serve on a vestry for a congregation that experienced a similar, breath-taking drop in numbers. What would you say to a preacher like Jesus?

¹ Ephesians 6:19-20

² The Rev. Richard A. Smith, School of Theology at Sewanee.

³ These next several summary paragraphs are drawn from chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John.

Now imagine standing in the pulpit of that same congregation trying to summon the courage to preach boldly. What would you say to those who were leaving?

We would much rather hear some “common sense” preaching, wouldn’t we? Maybe some helpful hints for happy living!

How do you think this would fly?

“Dear people of God, it is time we had a black bishop for the Episcopal Church in South Carolina!”⁴

Does this sound too bold, given the tension that is already present in the Episcopal Church and in our nation? Does it feel like I’m trying to rock the boat, when our diocesan numbers are declining?

Well, listen to another story about bold preaching that cuts very close to home.

On Christmas Eve of 1860, God was working yet another miracle inside a young woman whose name was Margaret. She was married to a preacher in Eastover, S.C. They were probably at Church, singing hymns about the Christ child, and dreaming about the child *they* were expecting. On Christmas Eve—of all days—our state government declared its intention to secede from the United States. It was the “common sense thing to do” given the tension, strife and disagreement that was all around.

In 1861 the American Civil War began, Abraham Lincoln became President, and Margaret gave birth to William Alexander Guerry. Things were falling apart—Margaret died when William was just a boy. His father struggled to make ends meet. And his grandmother read to him on Sunday afternoons out of the Bible and the Prayer book.⁵ Many Episcopal Church leaders in the South wanted to secede from the Church during this time, much like the confederate states. Given the tension, disagreement and strife in the Episcopal Church back then, it was the “common sense thing to do.”

William graduated from high school in Charleston around the end of the Reconstruction Era. It was a time of great tension and uncertainty. He went to Sewanee on a scholarship, and not long after graduating from college decided that he was called to ordained ministry.⁶ There continued to be much volatility and fear within the Episcopal Church in South Carolina. For example, black clergy and lay persons from St. Mark’s in Charleston were rejected as delegates at the diocesan convention.⁷

In 1888, William graduated from seminary and was ordained at Christ Church in Greenville. He served capably in a number of capacities in South Carolina and beyond during this tense and ambiguous period in the Episcopal Church in S.C.⁸ At one diocesan convention there was even a resolution to segregate the blacks into a distinct, and separate organization.⁹

⁴ Bishop William A. Guerry first called for an election of a black bishop in the diocesan convention of 1911 according to Albert Sidney Thomas, *A Historical Account of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina 1820-1957* (Columbia, SC:RL Bryan Company, 1957), p. 131.

⁵ Donald Armentrout, “Sewanee Priest Murders Sewanee Bishop” in *Sewanee Perspectives: On the History of the University of the South*, Gerald L. Smith and Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., eds. 2008, p. 406.

⁶ Donald Armentrout, “Sewanee Priest Murders Sewanee Bishop” in *Sewanee Perspectives: On the History of the University of the South*, Gerald L. Smith and Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., eds. 2008, p. 406.

⁷ Albert Sidney Thomas, *A Historical Account of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina 1820-1957* (Columbia, SC:RL Bryan Company, 1957), p. 88, 105, 112.

⁸ Donald Armentrout, “Sewanee Priest Murders Sewanee Bishop” in *Sewanee Perspectives: On the History of the University of the South*, Gerald L. Smith and Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., eds. 2008, p. 407-408.

⁹ Albert Sidney Thomas, *A Historical Account of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina 1820-1957* (Columbia, SC:RL Bryan Company, 1957), p. 129.

In 1907, at Trinity Church (now Trinity Cathedral) in downtown Columbia, William Guerry was elected bishop of the Diocese of South Carolina.¹⁰

It was a time of tension and fear not unlike our own time. There was anxiety about a new scientific theory by Charles Darwin, strife about developing new liturgies for a new 1928 prayer book, tension about race relations, and fear about the economy and about war. And South Carolina Bishop William Alexander Guerry preached boldly about striving for unity, and not uniformity in the Church.¹¹ He preached boldly that (quote) “the Church should be broad enough to embrace within its communion...every living soul.”¹²

So now you know that roughly one hundred years ago, a man who grew up in Charleston, S.C., someone whose *immediate* relatives fought as Confederate Soldiers in the Civil War, someone who was educated at a college chartered to serve young white men from the south—*this person* stood up in the building we know as Trinity Cathedral in Columbia, S.C. and preached boldly when he said:

“Dear people of God, it is time we had a black bishop for the Episcopal Church in South Carolina!”¹³

Bishop Guerry’s vision of the Church can be summarized in the opening sentences of what we proclaim at a Holy Baptism. There is One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism. One God and Father of all.¹⁴ Bishop Guerry wanted *all* people, regardless of race, to be part of the community of Christ in the diocese, and he wanted a black Bishop Suffragan to work alongside him to build up the Body of Christ in this state.

Bishop Guerry’s dream was never realized. And in 1928, a priest who passionately insisted on the principle of white supremacy walked into the bishop’s office in Charleston and shot him. He died several days later, as a martyr—a witness—for the faith.¹⁵ Bishop Guerry preached boldly, not only with his lips, but with his very life.

I don’t know who the candidates for bishop will be when we gather at Trinity Cathedral this December, but I pray that they will be women and men who are eager to preach just this boldly with their lips and in their lives. I pray they will insist upon a diocese that is broad enough to embrace within its communion every living soul.

There are only a few of us from this parish who will vote in the upcoming Episcopal election. On the other hand, every one of us is called to preach boldly with *our* lips and in *our* lives. Among the several promises we make in baptism and at confirmation, one is that we will all proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.¹⁶

In others words, you are called to preach boldly, alongside bishops, priests and deacons.

And we preach a Christian faith that is not about common sense. It is about common prayer.

¹⁰ Donald Armentrout, “Sewanee Priest Murders Sewanee Bishop” in *Sewanee Perspectives: On the History of the University of the South*, Gerald L. Smith and Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., eds. 2008, p. 407-408.

¹¹ Edward B. Guerry, ed., *A 20th Century Prophet* (Sewanee: The University Press, 1976), p. 18-19 as cited in Thomas Tisdale, “Bishop Guerry’s Vision on the Church as a Community” in *Carolina Grace*, ed. Calhoun Perkins, August, 2009, p. 22.

¹² Edward B. Guerry, ed., *A 20th Century Prophet* (Sewanee: The University Press, 1976), p. 18-19 as cited in Thomas Tisdale, “Bishop Guerry’s Vision on the Church as a Community” in *Carolina Grace*, ed. Calhoun Perkins, August, 2009, p. 23.

¹³ Bishop William A. Guerry first called for an election of a black bishop in the diocesan convention of 1911 according to Albert Sidney Thomas, *A Historical Account of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina 1820-1957* (Columbia, SC:RL Bryan Company, 1957), p. 131.

¹⁴ Book of Common Prayer, p. 299.

¹⁵ Donald Armentrout, “Sewanee Priest Murders Sewanee Bishop” in *Sewanee Perspectives: On the History of the University of the South*, Gerald L. Smith and Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., eds. 2008, p. 415-416.

¹⁶ Book of Common Prayer, p. 305, 417.

We preach a Christian faith that is not about uniformity, but rather about the unity we experience through one Lord of one faith through one baptism.

Jesus was obviously discouraged when he turned to the last twelve people still with him after he preached so boldly and rocked the boat. He asked them, “Do you also wish to go away?” God bless Simon Peter, who answered, “Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”¹⁷

The words of eternal life are not always easy to swallow. There are 4988 witnesses to that fact in today’s Gospel. Jesus preached about an intimacy with God that was too close for comfort, and the crowds melted away. Bishop Guerry preached about intimacy with God and one another that was too close for comfort, and it cost him his life.

Tension and strife, fear and uncertainty will always be part of this world and Christ’s Church. But we have promised to stand with saints like Simon Peter and with martyrs like Bishop Guerry, with saints from every race and nation, and with sinners from every theological, political and sexual orientation who are still willing to boldly proclaim one Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ because—like Simon Peter—we also have come to believe and know that Christ is the Holy One of God.¹⁸

Amen.

¹⁷ John 6:69

¹⁸ John 6:69