

**The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 11  
Church of the Holy Comforter  
The Rev. John E. Shields  
July 19, 2009**

**I want to talk about several things this morning – I hope there is a theme – the church runs on hope after all!**

**For starters -- Some of you may have seen yesterday's story in the Charlotte Observer concerning the Episcopal Church and the General Convention meeting in Anaheim, California.**

**The article focused on divisions within the church. And -- in the view of the author – the widening split that would be caused by the Convention's passing of a resolution concerning the ordination of homosexual persons who are in committed monogamous relationships.**

**Actually, if that article had not been in the paper, I would have waited to talk about this, because the bishops are meeting with all diocesan clergy this coming Wednesday to give us a report on the convention and the various things that happened there.**

**But since the article came out – and there may be others that I have not seen, I was afraid that if I did not at least acknowledge it – it would be akin to the large “Elephant” in the middle of the room – that everybody sees but no one asks -- - what is he doing here?**

**Since that is not a healthy way for any group to live --- just ignore it – maybe it'll go away! I thought I'd better acknowledge the issue and commit to give you a fuller explanation when I have more information.**

**For now -- let me say that it seems to me that the resolution really states that our church will not discriminate against persons because of their sexuality if they are living within the moral guidelines of committed relationships.**

**As some of you know, the church is also examining what its role should be regarding same sex unions – or marriage -- since this is becoming a more prevalent issue as states make such unions legal. The question becomes: How is the church to respond? Does it ignore the new situation that the law recognizes or does it see itself as a place of support and nurture for Godly living for all its members.**

**Of course if your only source of information is the popular media, you would think that Episcopalians meet for two weeks in California and only talked about and acted upon matters relating to sex.**

**Nothing could be further from the truth – the convention indeed wrestled with a number of issues concerning human rights, ecology, justice, and the role of the church in trying to meet human need. The church in convention also heard proposals for increasing the number of feast days with the inclusion of new persons to be honored in our liturgy – now known as Lesser Feasts and Fasts – and of course, just like any other governing body with fiduciary responsibility, a considerable amount of time was spent developing a budget – not an easy task in these particular times.**

**Perhaps what the convention did best is have inspiring worship and challenging preaching daily for the nearly two weeks it was in session.**

**Of course none of these items made your local paper or nightly news.**

**The next thing I want to talk about stems from something I read a while back in a Forward Day by Day meditation.**

**What I read goes something like this: “Being a Christian is not a self-improvement program --- it is a self-abandonment program.”**

**For me – that was an “Aha” moment. “Being a Christian is not a self-improvement program --- it is a self-abandonment program.”**

**That is so right --- Being a Christian is not about losing those extra pounds. Being a Christian is not about improving your backhand or lowering your handicap. It is not about becoming a better salesman, or a more effective speaker. It isn't about developing those social graces that smooth interpersonal interaction.**

**Being a Christian is not about self-improvement.**

**Being a Christian is a self-abandonment program.**

**There is an example in today's gospel. Jesus' disciples have just returned from their missionary enterprise – you may remember that he had sent them out two by two to heal the sick and cast out demons and to announce that the kingdom of God was near.**

**I suppose that Jesus felt that the boys deserved a break, so he has them go away to find a quiet place to rest awhile. So they load up in a boat and sail away. But people saw them and followed along on the shore and met the boat when it arrived.**

**The text says that when Jesus saw this great crowd, he was moved to compassion, for he saw that they were like sheep**

**without a shepherd. So, tiredness and other agendas aside, Jesus spends his time with those who wish to hear him.**

**Jesus sets aside the need for rest and abandons that need in order to act on the compassion that he feels for those seeking his teaching and counsel.**

**Christianity is about self-abandonment.**

**Now let me acknowledge that there is a risk here that one does not practice good self care (clergy can be pretty bad at this) --- I think when Jesus goes to a quiet place away from the crowds, he is setting a good example of that – and he seems to be encouraging his disciples to practice the same.**

**Christianity is about self-abandonment. So how do we go about this business of ‘self abandonment?’**

**This really harks back to what I was talking to you about last Sunday – community versus individualism. It is really about putting the self in relationship with others as opposed to the ever popular notions of ‘rugged individualism and individual salvation.’**

**The paradox one discovers is that as one lives in Christ and serves others, they discover their true selves. As one lives in relationship with community, the uniqueness of their individual personality becomes clearer and becomes an asset for all.**

**So how do we go about this business of ‘self abandonment?’**

**It might be as obvious as our being as concerned for those less fortunate than we -- as we are for our own individual wealth, health and well being.**

**It might be translated into working at the shelter or a soup kitchen – if time is what you have to give. On the other hand, it might be figuring out ways to raise needed resources for agencies and organizations that serve others – if finance and organization happen to be your particular gifts and talents.**

**It might be spending a certain amount of time each day praying for others and their needs.**

**Self abandonment might really mean --- just being yourself with and for others.**

**I think this applies to the church, corporately, in much the same way as it applies to us as individuals.**

**It is not an accident that we are singing “All Are Welcome” this morning. It is the perfect time for singing it and meaning it.**

**Why is this time the perfect time – for singing All Are Welcome?**

**Look out back – see what has begun -- \$3,000,000 in property improvements to Holy Comforter Church. Of course we are going to enjoy the expanded offices and classrooms; of course we are going to enjoy the amenities and visual beauty of this wonderful project. But is it just about our improvement? --- or is it about our being present for and with others --- particularly the ‘least of these’ – the hungry – the homeless – the stranger in our midst?**

**And you know the answer: – That new building will have significant space dedicated to the service of others – not**

**members of our church but members of our community who need us to be there for them.**

**Why is this time the perfect time – for singing All Are Welcome?**

**I am happy to report to you that the vestry last Monday night endorsed a new ministry initiative for our parish. For some time now, Lauren Cavins has sensed a call to become involved in Hispanic ministry. She has graciously accepted the challenge of helping our parish develop a more comprehensive Hispanic ministry.**

**You will be hearing much more about this ---- but for right now, be praying for the continuing ESL classes and their expansion. Be praying for the development of a five-day per week bi-lingual pre-school class housed here at Holy Comforter and be praying for the development of a Spanish language worship service and worshiping community here on Sunday evenings. This is the three program ministry the vestry has endorsed.**

**Why is this time the perfect time – for singing All Are Welcome?**

**What I have come to realize is that it is an exciting time to be a member of Holy Comforter – it is an exciting time to be an Episcopalian.**

**We may make mistakes and we certainly have our problems, but our denomination is trying to discern, practice and preach the gospel in a very fast moving and changing world. We will not be convicted of having our heads in the sand – we may make mistakes, but at least we are open and honest in our struggles.**

**Our liturgy for Holy Baptism states that “Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body the Church.” Maybe we are beginning to understand what the word full really means --- there are no second-class citizens in Christ’s Body.**

**All Are Welcome ... indeed!**

**Amen**