

Shorelines From the Helm

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Is Reconciliation Possible?

Yes, But We Must Have Tolerance, Empathy and Understanding

The first week of May, I attended a reunion of retired Army Chaplains in San Antonio. Immediately after returning, I spent three days attending a clergy conference of our diocesan priests. The theme of the clergy conference was reconciliation and the facilitator of our discussions was Bishop Steven Charleston, Native American, former Bishop of Alaska and now the President of The Episcopal Divinity School, EDS, one of our very good Episcopal seminaries.

Much of the discussion at the clergy conference centered on church and parish reconciliation over the division created by the consecration of a practicing homosexual person as a bishop in the Episcopal Church. Our parish is not troubled, but outside our walls, the controversy continues to rage in some parishes and dioceses, disastrously so in some places. Even within our diocese, which compared to most in the Episcopal Church is doing quite well, there are parishes experiencing serious division and some priests in this diocese will have nothing to do with the rest of us. They have separated themselves and cast us off, because we do not agree with them. Polarization happens when people become convinced that if their side is right, the other side can only be wrong. Tolerance is non-existent. There are no shades of gray. There is only black and white. Bishop Charleston asked, "Can't there be reconciliation without someone having to be wrong?"

This seemed so strange to me as I continued to bask in my great joy of reunion with my fellow Army chaplains. I thought how beautifully different the chaplaincy was. Not only did Catholics, Mormons and Protestants of every conceivable stripe work in harmony together; our fellowship also included Jewish rabbis as well as Buddhist and Muslim clergy. The love of God also exists beyond Christian boundaries. Being together again, the chaplains were instantly re-bonded; there were no denomination boundaries, no separation because of differing theologies or beliefs. We were brothers and sisters united by the common slogan on our regimental crest, *Pro Deo et Patria*, "For God and Country." The unity of the chaplaincy comes from the common recognition that our differences are insignificant, indeed they pale when compared to what we hold in common: love of God and commitment to his service; love of soldiers and commitment to their pastoral care and dedication to the service of our country. The Army chaplaincy speaks of "cooperation without compromise," which translated means mutual respect for the religion and beliefs of each other. Put another way, the chaplains recognize that difference does not translate as right or wrong, so they affirm the faith of the other without compromising their own. Those who enter the ranks of the chaplaincy and cannot do this soon leave, either by their own will or by expulsion.

Can the Episcopal Church be reconciled? Yes, but only to the extent that we are

tolerant of each other and commit ourselves to empathy and understanding. When we do that we open ourselves to the realization that those things we share are much greater than our differences of opinion; What do we share? We share an unwavering love of God and commitment to be disciples of Jesus. We recognize a brother and sisterhood in baptism. We share a great commitment to loving each other as Christ loves us. We share a mutual appreciation of our heritage and our liturgy and a strong belief that there is only "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all." We share a recognition that judgment is not given to us, but rather belongs to God alone.

Other clergy sometimes ask me how Saint James is doing in all of this. I tell them that we are doing very well indeed. We have lost very few, who were never really committed to us to begin with. Significantly, we have gained more than we have lost. We worried that giving might fall. Contributions are better than last year. We worried that attendance would decline. Attendance is higher than last year. We worried that parents might take children from our children's center. Now we are considering expansion because we have an ever-increasing waiting list.

I tell those who ask me how we are doing that the question for Saint James is "Where's the beef?" We not only love each other, but most importantly we like one another. Therefore we respect one another. We are bound by that which we have in common, not separated by our differences of opinion. We love our parish. We have no intention of going anywhere else simply because there is nowhere else that we want to be. We are a family. We are together and therefore we are thriving.

I wish we could export this throughout the Episcopal Church. While I'm wishing, I wish we could export this throughout the world. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all races of people, all religions, all cultures could say that what we have in common, our humanity, is far greater than those things in which we differ? Wouldn't it be wonderful if, instead of appointing ourselves as judges we appointed ourselves as healers? In the love, tolerance and respect that we all experience in our parish community, we have a glimpse of heaven. We are blessed.

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