

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
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Ninety-five years ago, a significant event happened at Calvary Church. The very first religious service ever broadcast over wireless radio, on KDKA, came from Calvary on January 2, 1921. A church service was broadcast even before the first baseball game or boxing match. There is a brass plaque on the front of the building commemorating the event.

The rector at the time, Mr. Van Etten, thought the new medium was just a passing fad. He said, "I thought there would be some sort of fluke in the connection and that the whole thing would be a fizzle." So, he did what any sensible and wise rector would do and had his assistant priest preach. He also had concerns about the wireless radio distracting parishioners from worship. He made the two sound technicians, one Jewish and the other Roman Catholic, dress in choir vestments so they would be less intrusive. The red velvet valance above the pulpit is also a vestige from that time. It was to help with the static from early, poor microphones.

Soon enough, people from hundreds of miles away began writing Mr. Van Etten complimenting his preaching and saying how they felt connected to God and the church because of the new technology. Apparently, the rector's mother also heard him from afar and approved. Needless to say, he became a regular preacher after that and, more or less, embraced the passing fad as the new reality.

That event helped Calvary, in a new way, continue to bring hope to the world. We have long been leaders in the community and the Church deepening our welcome to include all of God's children. We have done this in our role supporting the disenfranchised, women, and those suffering from addiction, to welcoming people who are gay, to the first ministry in western Pennsylvania with people facing AIDS. Each was a sign of hope and love casting out fear.

One more example... In 1906, one of our vestry was elected mayor of Pittsburgh. He was one of many at Calvary who sought and fought to make the city better for all. Over one hundred years ago, the rector and people of our congregation gained a reputation and nickname for our leadership role advocating for those with no voice. We were called, "That Damned Calvary Crowd." "That Damned Calvary Crowd" is going to be on our next t-shirt. It became a badge of honor and pride for our leadership role making our church and city welcoming to all.

George Guthrie was the warden who was elected mayor. He is known for two accomplishments. First, under his leadership, Allegheny City (what we know as the North Side) was annexed by Pittsburgh making us the sixth largest city in America. Second, at the time, Pittsburgh had one of the highest typhoid rates in the country. Politicians had argued about a water filtration plant for years. Mayor Guthrie, a son of Calvary, got it done and saved lives in addition to improving the quality of life for those less well off.

There were many, in each case of our leadership, that opposed and fought against it. It was an assault on the powerful who feared loss of power to those who did not have it. Another son of Calvary, Henry Clay Frick, opposed Guthrie as mayor and gave money to support his opponent. I can just imagine what those vestry meetings were like. Calvary has always been a diverse congregation in many ways but we have always, as whole, worked together to proclaim the Kingdom of God and welcome all people. That's who we have been, who we are, and who Calvary, God and the people willing, always will be.

And that brings us to the subject at hand. If you have read reports from various media you will hear something like, "The Episcopal Church is Suspended from the Anglican Communion" from one end of the spectrum. Or the other might read, "The Episcopal Church is Now a Second Class Citizen." Well, not really. The Episcopal Church does more fully welcome all people now but the news reports about suspensions have, shockingly, exaggerated the situation.

What happened? A meeting of all the Primates of the 38 autonomous churches of the Anglican Communion met in England at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury. A Primate is the leader of a "national" church, usually called an Archbishop or, in the case of America, a Presiding Bishop. That is, there were no priests or laity present. Each Archbishop spoke for his church with no other voice. There have been concerns from many that the Primates had no authority to do so. In America, the Presiding Bishop decidedly does not speak for all unless we, meeting as a General Convention of representatives, give him or her that responsibility.

The Archbishop of Canterbury is not like the Pope in that he cannot dictate doctrine or simply decide things for everyone else. He is considered the first among equals because all the churches in the Anglican Communion share a common faith, heritage, and tradition that sprung from the Church of England and spread throughout the world. We have always believed each of the "national" churches (England, America, or Uganda for example) is autonomous in their own administration but held together by relationships and common heritage. We call this collection of churches with a shared heritage, trying to be Church together, the Anglican Communion. More than rules or common tradition or anything else, what binds us together is a desire to continue to be in relationship. That is what the Anglican Communion is, at its best, a collection of bilateral and multilateral relationships to live out our mission more fully.

We, as this collection of 38 churches, have created various mechanisms to shape how we relate to one another but have no juridical or court-based organization. We call these the Instruments of Unity or Communion. The four Instruments have no legal authority but do carry moral authority because they try to help us live in relationship together. If we say we are all part of one Church serving and following Christ our Lord, it is helpful to pay attention to one another even if we disagree.

One Instrument of Communion is the Archbishop of Canterbury. A second is the Lambeth Conference, a meeting of all Episcopal bishops in the world every ten years in England. A third is the most representative called the Anglican Consultative Council with laity, bishops, priests, and deacons. The fourth is called the Primates' Meeting, a gathering of the senior bishops of each of the 38 member churches. The Primates' Meeting is the group that met recently and produced a statement that you may have heard about. No one else. Just the archbishops. I suspect many people in the pews or clergy may not agree with what their archbishop decided.

The Primates gathered to pray and share experience about climate change, war, and other topics. They also discussed how to “...preserve unity in Christ given the ongoing deep differences that exist among us concerning our understanding of marriage.” In particular they discussed the Episcopal Church’s decision to embrace formally gay and lesbian people to receive all the sacraments. They gathered to discern how best to live together in community when some members disagree or differ in how they live out the faith in their own cultural context.

The Primates’ statement asks, for a period of three years, that the Episcopal Church no longer represent the Anglican Communion on ecumenical or interfaith bodies or various Anglican committees. We are also asked not to take part in decision-making bodies pertaining to doctrine or polity, meaning church structure. The Episcopal Church will have, in effect, voice but no vote. The period of three years is because that will give time for the next General Convention, the highest legislative body in the Episcopal Church, to meet again and decide a response. The Primates also said, “It is our unanimous desire to walk together.” While we disagree, everyone is unanimously committed to staying together even though trust is strained.

How is this any different from the current state of things? Not much. As one scholar points out, “... the distinction is not so different from present practice; in a number of ecumenical conversations TEC is already not taking part, because of sensitivities ranging from same-sex marriage, to ordination of persons in same-sex relationships, to women’s ordination.”*

How will all this affect us in the Diocese of Pittsburgh and at Calvary? Not much. We will still pray for the Anglican Communion and our bishop. Calvary will still be Calvary.

The Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh is, surprisingly, a model for how the Anglican Communion might learn to live together in mission. That’s really what a Communion or diocese is for at their best, a community of relationships mutually supporting one another in mission. The Anglican Communion exists to help all of us live into the Kingdom of God, to serve the world in the name of Christ, and to help restore all people to God and one another.

In Pittsburgh, across the theological spectrum, we share a common heritage and faith even though we might live it out differently. We share a love for the city and its people; Go Stillers! We share the same love of Jesus Christ and desire to serve our neighbors making the city better for all. We share a passion for common mission, one people gathered around the Altar to share one sacrament. Trust *was* broken several years ago but it is being rebuilt. Most importantly, we share a common *future* to live out the Kingdom of God together in southwest Pennsylvania.

Where do we go from here? In all Christian charity and humility we must recognize we, the part of the Church who welcomes all, may not have gotten it all right. But I do believe we are right about this. I am willing to stand humbly before God and err on the side of welcoming all people. We should listen and learn from our brothers and sisters around the world with whom we disagree to learn how our actions affect them in their context. For example, how living alongside Islam shapes their own faith. One would hope they would practice charity and humility and know they might have something to learn from us.

As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, of the Episcopal Church, said after the Primates’ meeting, “And the truth is, it may be part of our vocation to help the Communion and to help many others to grow in a direction where we can realize and live the love that God has for all of us, and we can one day be a Church and a Communion where all of God’s children are fully welcomed, where this is truly a house of prayer for all people.”

In all of this, the Kingdom of God is paramount. The Kingdom is the message Jesus came to teach, share, and embody. It is faith, hope, and love breaking into a fearful world. We are baptized into Christ, not into any church. The institutional church is simply a vehicle to live out that mission in the Kingdom together. The Church is not perfect and should never claim to be but it keeps us connected. We are better together than apart.

Will we, as a Church and Communion and nation, look back in twenty or fifty or one hundred years' time and wonder how this was ever a discussion that caused so much pain?

Will we wonder how was it ever acceptable for a Church to exclude women from leadership or equal status?

How was it ever acceptable to exclude people of color or condone slavery for one moment?

Why, in the name of Christ, did we exclude people for simply being gay who wanted to be included like everyone else?

How, for people of faith, was it ever imagined to turn away refugees fleeing from war, to let people go without adequate medical care, or to live on the street, to be burdened with debt simply for getting an education, or to live in fear in the richest country in the history of the world that claims to be a majority Christian nation?

Our call is to give voice to the good news that Jesus proclaims and embodies... God's Kingdom is coming and we live like it is already here. Calvary learned over one hundred years ago, when we were given our moniker, there is a cost to discipleship and speaking up for those with no voice to welcome all to God's Table. Some people may not like us. That's okay. Always respond in love and faith, never hate or fear. Love... at the beginning and middle and end.

If this incident is causing you to be afraid or to doubt, I say to you, Fear not. Be not afraid. Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Having doubt can be natural; it is healthy to question so we can grow more deeply into Christ. No, doubt is not the opposite of faith. Fear- is the opposite of faith. We do not know exactly what the future will bring but it is filled with hope and we will face it together. God is still God. Jesus is still Lord. God's love breaking into the world will overcome all fear. Keep the faith. And share it, too.

* McGowan, Andrew. "No, the Episcopal Church has not been suspended from the Anglican Communion." January 16, 2016 • <http://abmcg.blogspot.com>