



THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
THE GENERAL CONVENTION

BONNIE ANDERSON, D.D.  
PRESIDENT OF THE HOUSE OF DEPUTIES

Grace Cathedral  
10/19/08  
Sermon by Bonnie Anderson, President  
The House of Deputies

Let us learn to love our neighbor, let us understand our love in word and deed, guided by the Holy Spirit and the Christ we see in each other.

In the name of the Creator, Sanctifier and Redeemer. Amen

It is indeed a pleasure to be with you at Grace Cathedral, indeed, a “house of prayer for all people”. I thank all the people of this congregation for your kind invitation to be present with you this morning and for your warm and welcoming hospitality.

***Matthew 22:15-22***

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

This reading from Matthew, and the words of Jesus in this reading are familiar to us. It has lovingly become known as the “render unto God” passage. Jesus reframed the question that was put to him, “What belongs to the emperor, what belongs to God?” This is a question of conflicting loyalties and Jesus framed it as such. Questions of conflicting loyalties and decision making between these loyalties is as much a question for us today as it was those many years ago when Jesus framed this question for the Pharisees and Herodians.

Making decisions between conflicting loyalties is hard work. Many of us when confronted with this situation don't know what to do. Worse, we are tempted to not decide, or to decide and not speak up about it, hoping that our decision will go unnoticed, but that we can still feel good about at least having made the decision. Or we are tempted to let someone else decide for us while we sit by passively and relieved, whether we agree with the decision or not, at least it is over.

I am reminded of this familiar quote:” "O Hamlet, thou has cleft my heart in twain!"

Indeed, decisions between conflicting loyalties are, most often, decisions of the heart and that is where we find the strength and courage to make these kinds of decisions. We reach deep into our hearts and there we find our moral authority.

So what is “moral authority” who has it, from where does it come, what do we do with it once we know we have it?

I say that we get our moral authority, as Christians, as Episcopalians, from our baptismal vows to strive for justice and peace, to respect the dignity of every human being and to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Our moral authority that resides within our heart and soul comes from our relationship with God and each other and from lessons learned from our life experiences. God gives us our ministry in baptism, and the vows we take and repeat in our baptismal covenant are the moral yardstick by which we can measure our actions.

The moral authority we find within our hearts comes from the vulnerability of the cross.

Moral authority and moral leadership are not the same things.

And it is just like God to ask more of us, because the choices we make when faced with conflicting loyalties, and the answers we give to the questions posed in this realm, require more than just answers.

We are also required to act. We are called by our baptism to be moral leaders. We are required to go beyond moral authority and into the acts of moral leadership. To be a moral person, to be a moral Christian, a moral Episcopalian, to then act on that moral authority and take moral leadership, leadership and a call to action, conferred on us at our baptism, requires that we get into trouble, not stay out of trouble as the passive interpretation of morality would have us do (a moral person stays out of trouble). That is the way of the cross. It is from Jesus, a servant, a troublemaker that we take our moral leadership direction. And if we follow it, if we keep our baptismal promises, we are willingly vulnerable and we will get into trouble.

Are there moral leadership role models present today? Absolutely. God has given us the gift of prominent moral leaders such as Gandhi, MLK, Jr., Black Elk, Caesar Chavez, Elie Weisel, Tich Nat Hahn, poets like Langston Hughes, Mary Oliver. You know moral leaders whom you would add to this list. They inspire us. They give us courage to take our place among them, even in smaller, but not less significant ways.

We are inspired by regular people. Friends, family, co-workers. There are moral leadership role models in this congregation, this morning. There are moral leadership role models in Episcopal and other churches and places of worship all across the world, right? Right here, right now, we could tell true, astounding moral authority stories about each other and ourselves.

God gives us moral authority. Our baptism calls us to Moral Leadership and the Holy Spirit holds our hand as we lead.

It is hard right now to ask each other to be moral leaders. Many of us are weary and fed up. We have decisions to make, who to vote for, what about our savings. We have conflicting loyalties: diminished income, how to help others when our own problems suddenly loom, what about really poor people? There is a moral leadership void that has nothing to do with political processes. It even begins in our families, how we relate to each other and what we teach our children about how to act in the world.

The currency of moral leadership is courage inspired by hope. We know from our own experience that being courageous does not mean being fearless. Of course, we are afraid, but we do it anyway, because we have courage. Let me give you an example:

In a NY Times webcast called “The Conversation, Nobel Laureate, activist and holocaust survivor, Elie Weisel said, “We need leaders with a moral voice. We need leaders committed to truth and compassion. We find our faith and courage in small things”. Weisel then went on to tell the personal story of the Christian woman who was a maid to the Weisel family in Sighet, Hungary when he was a boy. He recounts that after being forbidden by the Nazis to come to the Weisel home, she sneaked there late one night and begged them to go with her to her small hut in the mountains where she would care for them until the Nazi regime was over. Weisel says this happened just days before he and his family were deported to Auschwitz, where most of his family eventually died. “Had we known, we would have gone with her”. His final words at the end of this story summed up this long remembered act of moral leadership.

“She saved the honor of Christianity.”

Developing the capabilities that empower a person to act requires overcoming indifference, which, according Weisel, “is contagious just as evil is contagious. The opposition to evil can also be contagious”.

We find our courage and hope in the courageous acts of others, we find courage and hope in the stories of our tradition. We draw our courage, our inspiration and our hope from our relationship with God and with each other. To display that type of courageous moral leadership, in this time in our history – the history of our Church which we are living right now, and the history of the world, each one of us is required to act as the external reservoir of hope for the Church.

We must act as the guardians of God’s vision for God’s world, continuing as ones who can be counted on to stand up and speak up, not only when faced with big critical situations, but on a day to day basis. Live the promises made at baptism every day.

A great Church like ours is great when it understands its call and acts on it. A great church like ours is great when it remembers that we are not for ourselves alone.

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Amen.