

**The Rt. Rev. Barbara Harris**  
**The 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church**  
**Integrity Eucharist – July 10, 2009**

Let there be peace among us, and let us not be instruments of our own or others' oppression. In the Name of God: Creator, Liberator, and Sustainer. Amen.

Good evening church!

*Good evening Barbara! (Laughter)*

Good response!

It is always good to gather for this Integrity Eucharist. It is a highlight of our General Convention and with each successive celebration it becomes important to more and more people. And it is significant that tonight, the focus is on the sacrament of baptism and God's grace to all the baptized. But it is to our lesson from the Book of Acts, which holds some elemental or elementary truths for us, to which I would like to turn some attention.

Unfortunately, many of the people who need to be reminded of these truths are not here, *(Laughter)* nor are they any longer a part of this Episcopal fellowship. And indeed, such truths may not resonate with many who are here. One such truth is Peter's assertion and his understanding that indeed God has no favorites, but that anybody who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God, or in more traditional language, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons." So that neither the self-proclaimed orthodox, the selective traditionalist, the evangelicals, nor the progressives and the reformers have any special claim on God's favor or God's approval. If indeed God, who doeth all things well, is the creator of all things, how can some things be more acceptable to the Creator than others? *(Applause)* It follows, for me at least, that if God is the Creator of all persons, then how can some people be more acceptable to God than others?

Next question: *(Laughter)* What right then, has anybody to draw lines beyond to whom God's care and concern, God's grace and favor, cannot and will not pass or extend? We all could benefit from a do over in our lives, *(Laughter)* not to change who and what we are, but to change how we relate to each other as people of God. Some glibly speak of our diversity and indeed we are diverse in mind, body, and spirit. I am also well reminded that there was diversity at the Tower of Babel, *(Laughter)* and confusion reigned. The confusion of that diversity, thankfully, was reversed at Pentecost and well might we pray that the Spirit of reconciliation may come again to our confusion in this Episcopal Church and this Anglican Communion. *(Applause)*

Again, we gather in Convention to debate and resolve who should or should not, who can and cannot, receive God's blessing. Some are lifting up the concept of all the sacraments for all the baptized, and I heartily agree. But as we buy into that concept, let us be clear what rightfully should be called 'sacrament'.

We also need to recognize the true division between the sacred and the profane. The true division between the sacred and the profane is that which is centered on God and that

which is not. For example, self-centered, self-righteous worship focused in a church may be as profane as any self-serving, secular pursuit. By contrast, some secular laboratory research for a noble purpose can be sacred in nature.

Moving right along, *(Laughter)* there also is some sentiment that Resolution B033 passed at the 75th General Convention should be repealed, revoked, or done away with in some fashion. This resolution, with its questionable language about a person's manner of life, making them eligible or ineligible to be a bishop needs to be seen for what it was, not just a grudging response to the Windsor Report but the ticket for active members of our House of Bishops, one of whom was blatantly excluded, to attend the Lambeth Conference of 2008 and to make some false peace with others in the Communion.

*(Applause)*

I could suggest that there perhaps or probably is little chance of the resolution and its dubious language being rescinded, especially after being told by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Don't make another unilateral move on the Communion chessboard. *(Laughter)* But having served its purpose, B033 needs to be superseded by something positive that recognizes the dignity of all God's human creatures. *(Applause)*

More importantly, if indeed the church honestly believes gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender folk should not be bishops, then the church should not ordain them to the sacred order of deacons. For certainly, if one is deemed fit to be ordained a transitional deacon, then one should be deemed eligible to move into the sacred order of priests and to be elected and consecrated to the episcopate. If you don't want GLBT folks as bishops, don't ordain them as deacons. Better yet, be honest and say, "We don't want you, you don't belong here," and don't bestow upon them the sacrament of Baptism to begin with.

*(Applause)*

How can you initiate someone and then treat them like they're half-assed baptized? *(Cheers and applause)*

And, and let me ask, *(Laughter)* that since we don't have any say in who gets see-lected as bishops in some other provinces of the Communion, why should those in other provinces be able to dictate who can or cannot be ee-lected by *(Applause)* – Oh, let me finish the sentence – who cannot be elected by the laity and clergy who they will lead in this branch of Christ's holy and catholic church.

Now, let me move on to what some call the 'sacrament' of marriage. *(Laughter)* Looked at in its true state, marriage, while a union between two persons who commit their lives to each other, is basically a civil contract between two persons that requires a license by the state in which it is performed. In Massachusetts where I live, an out of state clergy person has to get a temporary license from the state to perform such a ceremony. The person performing the ceremony acts as a licensed agent of the state, signs a marriage contract or certificate, and mails it, by way of the U. S. Postal service *(Laughter)* back to the state authorities. Marriage is a civil contract to which the church, in the name of God, adds a blessing. This has become even more pointed and problematic as the six states – Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont *(Applause)* – have

declared that the civil marriage of same-gender couples is legal, and other states may adopt a similar position as law in coming months and years. What then is the church to do?

And incidentally, it has been pointed out to me that until recent years, all we had was same-gender marriage. Historically, marriage was a contract between a father and a groom. Hello! *(Laughter, applause and cheers)*

It is the firm belief of many that the church should stop acting as an agent of the state in solemnizing marriages, or in other words, get out of the marrying business. Let people of the same gender, where legal, and persons of opposite gender, go and have a civil ceremony performed by agents of the state, such as justices of the peace. Let the church, then, administer the sacrament of blessing on all such couples and their lives. *(Applause)*

This we can do and do it well. If we can develop rites and blessings for fisher fleets and fisher folk, and for hunts, hounds, horses, and houses, including the room where the indoor plumbing is located, *(Laughter)* we should be able to allow clergy, in the exercise of their pastoral ministry, to adapt and to appropriate the pastoral office for the blessing of a civil marriage for use with all couples who seek the church's support and God's blessing in their marriages. *(Applause)* Friends, 'yes we can' do that! *(Laughter)*

While there are many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people who do wish to be married, there are some who do not. Some who I know do not feel the need for such confirmation or recognition of their committed relationships. I would hazard a guess, however, that all GLBT persons want some assurance and some protection that they will not be the victims of hate crimes, and that they will not get the proverbial 'you know what' beat out of them. A real and pressing issue for the church, I would suggest, is hate crimes and gay bashing. While the number of hate crimes may seem to have dropped, their intensity seems to have increased, and any fraction of any percent of increase should be unacceptable in the church and in society. This is an area in which some of us think the church needs to focus some real energy and to hone its advocacy skills. I, for one, would rather work to see people live without fear and in safety, rather than indulge in the exercise of ecclesiastical navel gazing that speculates about the suitability or the in-suitability of their manner of life. *(Applause)*

And because we need to move on to tonight's blessing of folk, I will conclude where we began, with Peter's bold assertion that, indeed, God has no favorites — whoever fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. So to you, gay man, lesbian woman; you, bisexual person; you, transgender man or woman; you, straight person; all of us, the baptized: Let us honor the sacrament of our baptism and our baptismal covenant, the only covenant we need to remain faithful *(Cheers and applause)* — I'll repeat it, the only covenant we need to remain faithful to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And we all can continue marching, marching in the light of God. Let the church say, "Amen."

*Amen!*