

“The Church is Not Dead but Sleeping”
Pentecost IV, Proper 8
July 2, 2006

Texts: Deuteronomy 15:7-11 / Psalm 112 / 2 Corinthians 8:1-9,13-15 / Mark 5:22-24,35-43

The top headline for the Local & State section of the *Post & Courier* this past Thursday morning read, “Episcopal diocese takes step toward split.” Well, in the words of the old Negro spiritual: “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we’re free at last!” Folks, we are gathered together to worship a God who is, and who always has been with us, and will continue to be with us here at St. John’s and in the Diocese of South Carolina, as we move forward. This has been an historic week. And our Gospel today gives us nothing but Good News.

There are several things to notice in this passage. Notice first that Jairus was a ruler of the synagogue...he was in the leadership of the established religion. He was deeply invested in the Church. But, he was willing to step outside of his role for the good of his family, for the healing of his daughter. We, too, need to be ready to step outside the strictures of the Episcopal Church, or outside our own family structures, to find new life with our brothers and sisters in the world-wide Church of God and in the Anglican Communion.

Second, notice what Jesus says to Jairus when others are gossiping, spreading false rumors, and doubting and disbelieving His power. He looks straight at Jairus and says, “Do not fear, only believe.” Third, notice that when Jesus arrived with His closest disciples and told the people the truth, gave them a vision of health, and vibrancy, and life, they laughed at Him. Many are laughing at us right now. Many are saying that we are foolish to move out from underneath the powerful and wealthy Episcopal Church. Many are saying that the plans and the visions that Christ gave to the leadership of St. John’s are too much, too big, even foolhardy. Many are saying, why now?...why not last year...why not ten years ago?...or why not ten years from now? Jesus Christ says, “Do not fear, only believe.”

Fourth, Jairus, the Church official, is impatient. We skip the little story of the woman healed of a hemorrhage in our reading this morning. I wish we would read this little story, because this says much about Jesus’ timing. Jairus has convinced Jesus to come and see his

ill daughter. But, along the way, Jesus stops and spends some time with an outcast woman and heals her of her issue of blood. In that time that Jesus stops to heal her, Jairus' daughter dies. We are left with that tension...If only Jesus had hurried, he would have saved Jairus's daughter from death. Recall that Jesus tarried three days even when his good friend, Lazarus was dying. Why, because it is all in God's timing, not our own.

And fifth, notice that what Jesus says comes true. Jairus' daughter arises and walks. If God wants it, it is going to happen. Amen? And finally, notice that Jairus was a powerful man. Jairus was a religious man. But, even with all that worldly power, education, and understanding, He was nothing without Jesus. All that worldly power and wealth could not even save His own daughter. Only Jesus Christ Himself could do that. And, you know what, nothing has changed since that time. Nothing will save us, make us whole, but the shed blood of Jesus Christ: not our liturgy, not our Prayer Book, not our beautiful buildings, not good preaching, not our heritage, not our IRAs and our 401ks, or our Pension Fund. Only Jesus Christ can save us. Only Jesus Christ can give us peace and security.

Our Gospel story is all about true heart-felt belief and about transformation. Jesus did not come into the room and say, "well, she's dead, you have to accept this." No, he entered the room and immediately began his pastoral care. "Why do you make a fuss and weep? This child is not dead, but sleeping."

Folks, I feel that Jesus Christ is saying that very same thing to St. John's Parish today. We have for many years been in a great sleep, a great stasis waiting for the Episcopal Church to repent, to change its ways. We have been afraid to move forward. We have declared the Episcopal Church dead. But, Jesus is saying to us today...It is not dead, it is only sleeping. And our Savior will transform the expression of Anglicanism in North America into a new Church, a Church based on Holy Scripture and the transformation of souls, and the Diocese of South Carolina will be a leader in this new Church. The Church is not dead, but sleeping.

Our collect for the fourth Sunday after Pentecost says,

O Almighty God, Who has built Thy Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine, that we may be an holy temple acceptable unto Thee;...

Notice that middle phrase, “Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine.” Unity is not found through church membership. Unity is not found through enforcing The Canons of the Episcopal Church. Unity is not found in the House of Bishops or the actions of General Convention, or social justice, or acceptance of certain lifestyles. Unity is found by “their doctrine.” The doctrine of the apostles and prophets and Jesus Christ Himself. The doctrine detailed in...wait for it...**Holy Scripture!** The doctrine constructed around The Truth. Truth that is found only in Holy Scripture! That is where our only true unity will be found...throughout the ages that is the only place where it has been found.

Brothers and sisters, we live in a time of great tension. Jesus Christ has already come and given us an opportunity for new life in Him. But, we also know that we are still bound by sin. We will only finally be released and completely glorified at the final Resurrection of all at the Second Coming. We are being perfected by Christ, but we will not be perfect until after death. Theologians call this living in the “already but not yet.”

Well, the same is true of our present situation in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. We have already cast our ecclesial hopes on the leadership of the Anglican Communion. We have already seen the Episcopal Church sink year by year into further apostasy and we can handle it no longer. We have already asked our brothers and sisters in the Anglican Communion for help and they are coming to our aid. But, we have not yet been delivered from our troubles; we have not yet seen the required change in our leadership.

The second chapter of the Book of Revelation speaks of times like these, Christ says,

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place (Rev 2:1b-5).

Brothers and sisters, I believe Jesus Christ has removed the lampstand from the Episcopal Church. They have called themselves apostles and prophets and we have found

them to be false. And they have forgotten their first love...Jesus Christ. Forgotten His character: our Presiding Bishop-Elect even going so far as to pray to “Jesus, Mother God.” Jesus Christ has taken the lampstand from the Episcopal Church. And now we must guard against the admonition given by Christ, that we not forget our first love, Jesus Christ. That we not focus first on this church, or the Episcopal Church, or the Anglican Communion, or our pride, or right doctrine, but first and foremost we must fall in love with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And, having fallen in love with Him again, want others to know Him to fall in love with Him. Jesus is our first love and bringing others to the knowledge of Him should be our first act.

That is the Gospel message for us today. The same Jesus Christ who has the power to heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and bring a young girl back from the dead, also has the power to lead us from a dead Church – The Episcopal Church -- to a vibrant Church – The Church of Nigeria, or the Church of Uganda, or the Church of Rwanda.

Do not fear, only believe...The [Church is] not dead but sleeping.” And Jesus said, “People of God, arise!”