

Of Parish Halls and Airports: Fighting the Fear Factor

The Rev. Susan Russell

In my travels for Claiming the Blessing I'm spending what is turning out to be a huge whack of my time in either parish halls or airports. From Houston to Portland, San Diego to Cambridge, Austin to Las Vegas - the cities are as different as they can be, but certain things are oh-so-predictable. Round tables, folding chairs and marginal microphones in most parish halls are on one list. Metal detectors, wheeled-luggage-wending passengers and a long line at the Starbucks in every airport are on the other.

Very different places - parish halls and airports. One designed as a forum for hospitality and community - where parishioners linger over coffee and fellowship or gather for speakers and forums. The other is by nature a place of transition and anonymity - with travelers rushing anxiously trying to catch their plane or wandering aimlessly trying to kill some time. But the thing that struck me this week was not the differences but a striking similarity - and the similarity was the undercurrent of fear.

The fear factor in airports isn't so remarkable given the current international political climate. One longs for the days when travel involved worrying about things like lost luggage and the questionable quality of airplane food - delayed flights and too-little-leg-room. Now we deal with metal detectors and National Guard troops - security checks and ethnic profiling. Is it only a Yellow Alert or have we stepped up to Orange again? It seems there is much to be afraid of - and those in power are ever-so-busy "protecting the American public."

The question is, how much is about protecting us and how much is about protecting the house of cards built on lies about weapons of mass destruction and half-truths about wars on terrorism? Say anything often enough and we'll start to believe it, it seems. "There are links between Iraq and Al Qaeda." "It's not about oil; it's about nuclear weapons." "Pre-emptive strikes are actually a defensive action." Increasingly I wonder how much of that fear I feel in airports is fact based and how much is part of a wider national agenda of keeping the traveling public in a state of so much anxiety over our personal safety that we don't have the energy to be anxious over the erosion of our civil liberties at the hands of the current administration.

The parish hall parallel is subtler, but having encountered it again and again I believe it is no less influential. When folks gather to hear my CTB-dog-and-pony show it's most often a "preaching to the choir" event - but the fear factor is never far below the surface. As soon as we open it up to questions, I get ones like these:

If we pass this resolution, schism is inevitable. It is really important enough to split the church?

Won't we be "excommunicated from the Anglican Communion?"

and (my personal fav):

Aren't we exercising another kind of Western Imperialism by trying to impose our cultural understandings on the two-thirds world church?

I've got answers to ALL those questions. Good ones. What I don't have (yet!) is an antidote to the fear that underlies them all.

First of all, schism is NOT inevitable - everyone from the House of Bishops' Theology Report to the Anglican Primates Pastoral Letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury himself have said that different positions on this issue will not put us out of communion with one another. But just like the administration repeating over and over "the sky is falling" in order to keep us chicken-littles in line at the airport and at the ballot box, if you say anything often enough it starts to be perceived as truth. And the truth is there are those with power in this church determined to do nearly anything to keep it - including exploiting the fears of those who love this church that their love for each other will split it by repeating over and over that rupture of the communion is inevitable.

Enough is enough. It's time for US to speak the truth.

We are stronger than that. We have weathered greater than that. And while the Primates have indeed said they "cannot as a body authorise" the rites we are seeking, they ALSO said they "respect the integrity of each other's provinces and dioceses, acknowledging the responsibility of Christian leaders to attend to the pastoral needs of minorities in their care."

There's a message of hope rather than fear. That's a position deeply grounded in classical Anglicanism. That's the blessing we claim far greater than any rites or resolutions.

Verna Dozier, the prophetic biblical scholar and Anglican theologian wrote, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith: fear is. Fear will not risk that even if I am wrong, I will trust that if I move today by the light that is given me, knowing it is only finite and partial, I will know more and different things tomorrow than I know today, and I can be open to the new possibility I cannot even imagine today." [Dozier, "The Dream of God"]

We do not have all the answers - but that does not mean we have to be immobilized by fear. We have the opportunity to move forward in faith by the light we in front of us - to claim the blessing of God's inclusive love and to offer the Good News of both the Gospel and Episcopal Church to a world desperately in need it. We can offer faith rather than fear - we can speak of hope rather than despair. We have work to do and will to do it. Join us in claiming the blessing as we stay the course and fight the fear!

Susan Russell
Executive Director
Claiming the Blessing
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