

MARCHING ORDERS

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Pentecost 3: Proper 6/Year A

Exodus 19:2-8a; Psalm 100; Romans 5:6-11; Matthew 9:35-10:8
[Christopher Street West Parade Eucharist]

Here we are -- all dressed up with someplace to go! And don't we look fabulous? But not by accident: a lot of planning goes into staging an event of this magnitude: lots of lists, lots of schedules, lots of "orders". We got our "parking orders": come early ... hope for the best. We got our t-shirt orders: outward and visible signs that "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You" ... in spite of what you may have read in the papers. And now it's time for "marching orders" -- conveniently found in the Collect of the Day: the prayer that began our worship and celebration this morning.

"Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness and minister your justice with compassion."

It's the same prayer being prayed throughout the church this Third Sunday after Pentecost: in tiny missions and vast cathedrals; cities and suburbs; high church and low -- anywhere Episcopalians gather to pray their "common prayer" this morning. But perhaps no other congregation in all the church will have the chance to so promptly ACT on the words they've just prayed as this community gathered -- as we prepare to "proclaim God's truth with boldness" along this parade route.

So let's look at our "marching orders." First of all, let's be very clear: the truth we proclaim is the truth the Church has proclaimed throughout the ages -- the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus.

Listen to these words from a recent interview with Michael Hopkins, President of Integrity: "As we continue to proclaim our message of full inclusion and work toward its reality in our Church, let us not forget that it is simply the message of the Gospel. Let us now allow ourselves to be marginalized by talk about "issues that distract us from the real work of the Church" or "why can't we talk about mission instead of sex." We are talking about the "real work" of the Church, which is the proclamation of the Gospel. We are talking about the Church's fundamental mission. The full inclusion of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the life of the Church is not about sex or even about "an issue": it is about the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

The same gospel -- same good news -- that Jesus sends twelve apostles out to proclaim in our reading from Matthew today.

Note that Jesus summons twelve disciples -- and sends out twelve apostles, prompting one of my colleagues to reflect: "In our churches today it seems to me that we spend most of our time making disciples, and that is good, but we never complete the cycle by sending them out as apostles. Why is our world so hostile to the message of Jesus? Could it be that our introverted focus is a contributing factor? Send them out to tell the world the Good News, send them out to heal the sickness that surrounds us; sickness of spirit. Send them out to raise the dead, send them out in Jesus' name to do what Jesus did, to bring hope and a promise to a hurting and searching world. The harvest is great, but where are the workers? Sitting in church buildings."

Not this morning they're not -- they're marching in a Pride Parade: proclaiming God's truth with boldness -- BEING the Body of Christ ... not just talking about it.

As Verna Dozier, the African American Anglican theologian says: "Don't tell me what you believe: tell me what difference it makes that you believe." Today -- along this parade route -- it will make a difference that you believe. It will make a difference in the lives of those we may never see again or know that your witness has touched.

And today, as we take up the ministry of Jesus on earth, it makes sense to double check: WWJD? In the popular lingo, "What Would Jesus Do?" Look again at today's gospel: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Imagine the depth of the compassion our Lord feels for the crowds that will gather along this parade route today: many of who have spent most of their lives being harassed and feeling helpless -- told that the Good Shepherd wasn't for sheep like them! "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few," Jesus continued. "Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest."

That's us, brothers and sisters -- the Christopher Street West version of the Harvest Crusade. So come, labor on! Do you know that old hymn?

Come, labor on. Who dares stand idle on the harvest plain, While all around us waves the golden grain? And to each servant does the Master say, "Go work today."

Our work today? Proclaim god's truth with boldness. Our "marching orders" for this thirteenth of June.

But what about tomorrow? And the next day -- and the next? What about the marching orders we take back to our parishes and communities: our workplaces and our families? For as important as this morning's work is, if we miss the second half of the marching orders in the Collect of the Day, we miss another crucial harvest. Listen again: " ... that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness and minister your justice with compassion."

It takes tremendous compassion to minister God's justice -- compassion and patience and courage and endurance ... especially when we're taking about justice in the Church.

Come, labor on. The enemy is watching night and day, To sow the tares, To snatch the seed away; While we in sleep our duty have forgot He slumbered not.

There are in our own Church those who use selective Biblical literalism to exclude gay and lesbian people from full inclusion in the Body of Christ. Those who portray our ministry as "copping out to the culture" - - "abandoning traditional values." You've heard it all before. And they are "slumbering not" -- any doubts we had about that were surely answered by the most recent gathering of the Bishops at Lambeth.

How can we minister God's justice with compassion when faced with those who ask us to deny an essential part of who we are as the price of salvation? Where do we find the common ground that will give us places for conversation: the potential for conversion?

Well, I found some -- common ground, that is -- in a most unlikely place this week: on the front page of the AAC Newsletter in an article by the retired bishop of South Carolina. He writes: "The challenge before the churches is whether to go with the culture by accommodating our teaching to the values of society or to go against the grain of the culture from the recovered foundations of classical Christianity." And I found myself murmuring a hearty "Amen, brother."

I guarantee you Bishop Allison and I would disagree on a theological point or two -- but on this we are in solidarity. What we offer is not a "cop-out" to the culture but a call to the Kingdom. For what does the culture say about gay and lesbian people?

Let's start with this week's TIME Magazine. In an article of tribute to gay activist Harvey Milk. Here's what "the culture" has to say about being gay in America: "Realizing one is gay is usually cause for terror, or at least mortification."

In my son's high school, the most commonly heard insult is, "Oh, that's so GAY."

And as demonstrated by the recent defeat of the California Assembly Bill that would have added gay and lesbian students to the list of those protected from hate crimes in our schools, "the culture" continues to consider its gay citizens expendable.

And how is the church called to respond? By taking Bishop Allison's challenge and going "against the grain of the culture from the recovered foundations of classical Christianity." How about Irenaeus of Lyons: the second century bishop considered by many to be the first great systematic theologian - you don't get much more classical than that. And here are the words he is most remembered for:

THE GLORY OF GOD IS THE HUMAN PERSON FULLY ALIVE.

"Fully alive" ... isn't that what we are when we embrace rather than deny our sexuality? Isn't that the Good News we offer in counter-point to a culture that tells us we're "expendable"? We're not abandoning "traditional values" my brothers and sisters: we're reclaiming an essential piece of the recovered foundations of classical Christianity! We claim it every time we bring all of who we are to the altar in praise and thanksgiving of the God who created us, redeems us and sustains us: fully alive to the Glory of God!

Yes, homosexuals need healing. Healing of the belief that their only options are "terror or mortification." Healing of the shame and guilt the culture and the church has told them was their portion. And we have the chance to be part of that healing ministry: today as we "proclaim God's truth with boldness" along Santa Monica Blvd. and in the days to come as we return home fed by word and sacrament with new determination to "minister God's justice with compassion."

Come, labor on. No time for rest, Till glows the western sky Till the long shadows o'er our pathway lie
And a glad sound comes with the setting sun, "Servants, well done."

Those are our marching orders. So come ... Labor on! Amen.