

I come to you in the name of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Good morning! It is good to be back with you all this day after spending the past two weeks attending the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Austin, Texas. For those who don't know, the Episcopal Church, having been continued and restructured by the same Founding Fathers and Mothers who founded this country, practices a democratic legislative process (with a few unique twists for church polity). Meeting every three years, clergy, lay people, and bishops gather to discern the movement of the Spirit on matters directly impacting the church, including matters that impact us as people in this world. This past General Convention started with a very strong statement regarding sexual harassment and abuse by those in power in our church, saw over 1000 Episcopalians arrive at the Hutto Detention Center to stand as public witness to the injustices faced by those immigrating into and seeking asylum in our country, and ended with deep conversation and a path way forward on prayer book revision and our budget for the next three years. All of this holy work is taken on by people volunteering to spend two of the hottest weeks of the summer in locations not usually known for their temperate climates.

One of the quirks to the General Convention scheduling is that, occurring every three years and in roughly the same two week span on the calendar, the propers that are around the convention are roughly the same each time, and after reading the gospel for today, I wonder if they didn't do it on purpose...

Seriously though, the gospel today tells an important historical record of the fate of John, explaining why he isn't part of this Jesus Movement as it begins to pick up steam, but it doesn't seem to teach much about what we are called to do as Christians, at least at first

glance. But in taking a step back, in viewing this gospel through the lens of being around 2000+ Episcopalians the past two weeks, and through the reality that what happens in our daily lives needs to be informed through what we hear and discern through the gospel, I began to see a thread emerge.

There has been a lot of discussion in the news on the concepts of appropriate decorum and civility when we are in conversation with each other, particularly when we disagree with each other. But what does decorum and civility get us?

For Herod, it paints him into a corner where he is “forced” to behead a man, a prophet, a man he both feared and recognized as righteous and holy, in other words, a man who did not deserve to be beheaded. For Herod, decorum and civility tie his hands, and he orders the death of a righteous and holy man in order to live up to the expectation that decorum and civility have put on him in his position, even though he is deeply grieved. He doesn’t want to behead John, but he “has no choice” in order to appease his guests and the oath he had made.

What if Herod had said no?

What if Herod had stood against the decorum and civility expected of him and continued to protect John? How might that have changed the story we have received in our gospels?

So the question then comes, how do we practice decorum and civility when the world is pressing down upon us, is oppressing and subjugating us, is killing us, is killing our neighbor, when decorum and civility only serves to keep those doing the oppressing, doing the killing, comfortable? How do we stand in holy opposition in ways that demand action,

that lovingly call out our neighbor when they have sinned against an entire people, that refuse to accept that passing resolutions in an air-conditioned exhibit hall is enough?

I think this looks something like the public witness made by over 1000 Episcopalians at the T. Don Hutto Immigration Detention Facility (privately owned and operated by CoreCivic). Standing in direct sunlight with the temperature shooting over 100 degrees, we sang and prayed loudly in the direction of the facility so the women captive therein could hear us. In fiery, impassioned remarks, the Presiding Bishop implored those in attendance to make our voices heard, for the benefit of the women held in captivity in the center, for the benefit of those witnessing our public statement of solidarity via a live stream or on their nightly news that evening. The Presiding Bishop called to Episcopalians everywhere imploring that “We must save the soul of America.” That the decorum and civility of conversation begins and ends with the humane and loving treatment of all people, that without all people being treated equal, those in power can not claim their right to a decorum and civility that they don’t come even close to affording to all of our siblings, regardless of color, or immigration status, or nation of origin, or gender identity, or sexual orientation, or experience of abuse. It was here that 1000 Episcopalians practiced a measured level of decorum and civility, while still pushing the boundaries. Of utilizing our privilege to march over to the front doors of the facility even though we’d been cordoned off in a field down the road, politely ignoring police and private security, in order to make it known to the women in the facility that we were there for them.

And, this public witness had immediate and hopefully lasting impact. A woman who had been held in the facility, being released only recently, came to the event and spoke with

a crowd of us, offering her thanks for our presence, thanks for seeing her and those in the facility as worth our time and energy. It was later reported to the convention that the grassroots organization we had coordinated our witness with, had heard the following report from a woman in the facility: "A woman called from Hutto after today's prayer and told us they were glued to the windows until the last bus left the detention center. Women inside were crying, saying they knew they weren't alone after seeing so many people there." This is what happens when we look at the public discourse, we look at the decorum and civility that is expected of us, and do the work we are called to do anyways, to recognize the righteousness and holiness of all people, to demand equal and fair treatment of all people, for no human being is illegal.

This experience stuck with me throughout the week as the convention approached important and divisive resolutions regarding prayer book revision, the use of inclusive and expansive language, the fact that our liturgies are still not available in translations utilizing dynamic equivalency (the standard for literary and poetic work, like prayers for example), the right for those who wish to marry to be able to do it in their church home. In debate and on twitter (where much of the conversation and analysis occurs) I was both moved and also disappointed with how we talked about each other, as if our viewpoints could be summed up in a label, progressive or conservative, millennial, for or against, a way of labeling and generalizing that feels all too common in our current society. An article was published during these conversations that struck me. This article held up a phrase I think needs to inform our understanding, that even when we need to stand up to oppression, that

when we break decorum and civility in order to be heard, we can still hold in our consciousness, we must be able to think if not say: “I might be wrong.”

The article begins: “The Rt. Rev. Kee Sloan, Bishop of Alabama, recently preached at an ordination service. As he looked down from the pulpit at those nine persons about to be made deacons, he suggested a sentence they would hopefully use in their ministry: ‘I might be wrong.’ This was a call, not to constant self-doubt or anxiety, but instead to the reality that there is much beyond our grasp in any given moment. Bishop Sloan spoke of how approaching conversations from this perspective of humility allows people who disagree to actually listen to one another in the midst of difference and challenge.” It continues, “‘I might be wrong’ isn’t solely about our own lack or blindspots. It is an acknowledgement of the dignity and integrity of the person with whom we disagree.”¹

Imagine if this was the marker of decorum and civility. Imagine if we approached our neighbor with the love of Christ, held them to important standards, but also held this sentiment “I might be wrong” on our hearts, for we often don’t know the person we are challenging with our truth, and we sometimes see a truth that simply doesn’t exist. We are not called to be like Herod, who in order to keep up appearances, beheads a righteous and holy man because a child requests it. We are called to be like Christ, we are called to be like John, to speak truth to power, to speak truth to the reality of the world, and in doing so, realize that we are not Christ, we are not John, that I am me, that we are flawed and broken human beings who are nonetheless siblings in Christ, and through that relationship it can help to hold onto the reality that “I might be wrong.” Even if you are fully convicted and

¹ <https://episcopalherald.com/2018/06/28/i-might-be-wrong/>

right about the stance you take, that doesn't mean you can't be wrong about how it is implemented or how you view those who disagree with you.

We are challenged today with a gospel that on its surface doesn't seem to have much to do with our life here and now as it simply keeps a historical record. But when we step back and view this story through the lens of our time, it is clear to see that we can learn even from a historical record. It is clear to see that decorum and civility are not always the best practices. And, it is clear to see that as followers of Christ, that even when we break decorum and civility, to hold on our hearts this simple phrase, "I might be wrong," because it allows us to continue to see each other with the neighborly, sibling-like love that we are called into as Christians, as humans, in this world today.

Amen.