

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 18 & 19, 2005 Proper 7, Lectionary A  
**ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY**  
**The Rev. Fr. C. Clark Hubbard, Jr. Associate Rector Scripture: Matthew 10:(16-23)24-33**

**When is the ball game over?**

Let us pray. *Come dear, wonderful Holy Spirit and continue to give us boldness of heart, conviction of mind, clarity of speech and graciousness of action that we might always be faithful to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Saviour in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Nine year old Joey, was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday school. “Well, Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across safely. Then, he used his walkie-talkie to radio headquarters for reinforcements. They sent bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Israelites were saved.” “Now, Joey, is that really what your teacher taught you?” his mother asked. “Well, no, Mom. But, if I told it the way the teacher did, you'd never believe it!”

In some ways this story reminds me of Emily and my last visit to Alabama in April. As some of you know, we went there for my 35<sup>th</sup> high school reunion. We also went to visit family and friends and had hoped to worship at our home parish, the Church of the Ascension in Montgomery. The latter was not to be. Just a day before we arrived the Rev. John-Michael van Dyke, rector of the Ascension, announced his resignation. With him went one of the assisting priest, most of the staff, and 11 of the 15 member vestry, and many of the parishioners.

In the words of nine year old Joey, “You’d never believe it.” How could the rector of a parish for the past 15 years, who had seen his baptized membership climb to 1,400 people just up and leave? How could the rector of a parish whose annual budget was some 1.5 million dollars walk away from that? How could the rector of a building facility that looks like a cathedral, having a slate roof and floors and stone walls with a carved reredos behind the altar and stain-glass with biblical scenes in every window just turn his back on that?

How could the majority of the congregation go with him— leaving a building that had burned to the ground some twenty-five years earlier, but had been resurrected by their hard work, commitment and money? How could they walk away from a building where they had been baptized, confirmed, married, buried their kinsmen and friends, and found solace during times of great difficulty? How could they walk away from a building in which the best of ministries that any church could covet were alive and flourishing — Cursillo, Alpha, men’s and women’s Bible studies, as many as eight adult Sunday school classes on a given Sunday, prayer ministry, a puppet ministry for children, a youth house the size of where we worship here at St. Bart’s? My wife got the idea for Beth Moore from its success at the Ascension. How could they have left? Who would have believed it? But, the real question, the question you are probably asking yourself is this: why, indeed, did the Rev. van Dyke and many of the staff and parishioners up and leave the place of their spiritual home? The facility alone minimally would cost some 10 to 15 million dollars to replace. What could have made them leave so much? What?

I last preached on this reading from Matthew on June 23, 2002 — a mere three years ago. And, if I had told you back then what was going to happen in and to the Episcopal Church, you like little Joey would never have believed it. You would have thought I had lost my mind to some kind of paranoid

delusion. In that sermon three years ago there was one incident in particular I cited which in retrospect might have been the pistol shot that launched us, Anglicans, into a vicious world-wind of self-destruction. Do you recall what that might have been?

From a headline entitled “Anglicans Approve Blessing Same Unions” I read you the following, reported from Vancouver in the Canadian Press on June 15, 2002. “Some walked out while others celebrated at a Saturday meeting of southwestern B.C. Anglican church leaders, where it was announced that a majority had voted in favour of blessing same-sex unions. A crowd of delegates from nine churches walked out of the meeting after the vote results were announced and quickly issued a statement expressing their descent from the resolution of the Diocese of New Westminster.” These nine churches were committed to remaining firm in the Biblical faith.

In 1997, John Michael van Dyke, the former rector of the Ascension in Montgomery, similarly had expressed his commitment to remaining firm in the Biblical faith by signing on a document called “First Promise.” If you will turn with me now to p. 526 of the prayer book, where you will see what is part of the liturgy for the ordination of a priest. Look at the second paragraph from the bottom, where in the first sentence the bishop asks the ordinand: “Will you be loyal to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of Christ as this Church has received them?” Then in the bottom paragraph the ordinand responds. And, this is the priest’s first promise: “I am willing and ready to do so; and I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation; and I do solemnly engage to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.” Of course doctrine, discipline and worship can be changed but it has been understood from the standpoint of orthodoxy.

In signing “First Promise” Fr. van Dyke had affirmed his commitment to pastor the Church of the Ascension in the Biblical faith as summarized in the creeds. His preaching and teaching reflected that. The majority of his congregation embraced that preaching and teaching. But, of course, history did not stop in 1997 when Fr. van Dyke signed. In 2003 when the General Convention of the Episcopal Church voted to confirm Gene Robinson as bishop coadjutor of the Diocese of New Hampshire, many Episcopalians were shocked and responded by joining together to affirm their commitment to Biblical faith by taking a stand at a gathering of the American Anglican Council in October of 2003. You will recall that Fr. Ward and I attended that event. Fr. van Dyke was also there. Then in January of 2004 at the suggestion of the Most Reverend Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, the organization that is known as the Anglican Communion Network was formed in order to be a united, confessing community of Biblical faith, standing against the non-Biblical, heterodox dissolution fomenting in the Episcopal Church. We here at St. Bartholomew’s are members of the Anglican Communion Network. Fr. van Dyke is also a member of the Anglican Communion Network or ACN.

Where Fr. van Dyke’s and St. Bart’s paths diverged was when his bishop issued a pastoral directive, calling upon him to withdraw his name from having signed on “First Promise” and from having joined the ACN. Mind you this bishop did not vote in favor of Gene Robinson being bishop coadjutor. Still, because the bishop of Alabama believed what Fr. van Dyke had done was divisive, he insisted that he withdraw his name or be inhibited. For a priest to be inhibited means he cannot perform his priestly duties, often for a period of six months. But, that wasn’t all. One of Fr. van Dyke’s liberal, revisionist parishioners petitioned the Standing Committee of the diocese to bring him up for presentment, which could have led to him being deposed. No surprise, though, when you think about it, because Jesus warns in vs. 17 & 21. “*They will hand you over to councils . . . Brother will betray brother.*” But, the final straw was when the bishop through a mediator, requested Fr. van Dyke not to

teach a series, entitled “Where does the Church go from here.”

To put it simply, the answer to the question: what could make the rector, his assistant, 11 of the 15 vestry, most of the staff, and a majority of the congregation at the Ascension leave, was that they could no longer tolerate the direction being taken, and the abuse they had received from the diocese as a result of General Convention having affirmed Gene Robinson as bishop coadjutor of New Hampshire. They were not willing to compromise their faith so that they might keep the building in which they worshiped. They knew the building, as beautiful as it was and for as many rich memories as it held, was only a temporal one. They were not willing to throw away their eternal dwelling for an earthly dwelling, which would not last. As Jesus says in v. 23, “*When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next.*”

As you have probably suspected by now, what I have just told you about Fr. van Dyke and those who left the Church of the Ascension places us squarely within the context of our gospel reading. Jesus tells us in v. 24 that: “*A disciple is not above the master.*” In other words, because Jesus was mistreated, so too will his disciples be mistreated. If Jesus was called Beezebul or the devil by his contemporaries, then his disciples are to be assured that they too will be called all manner of scurrilous names. You know this. You have heard what some have said about us here at St. Bart’s: that we are bigoted, narrow-minded and intolerant; that we are fundamentalists—unloving, unsympathetic, goose-stepping homophobes. Again, as Jesus tells us in v. 22, “*you will be hated by all because of my name.*”

Despite this, Jesus tells us in v. 26 that we are not to fear those, who persecute us: “. . . *for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret will not become known.*” In this respect, I like the story of parish priest, who was being honored on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his arrival in that parish. A leading local politician, a member of the congregation, was chosen to make the presentation, but was delayed in traffic, so the priest decided to say a few words while they waited. “You will understand,” he said, “the seal of the confessional, can never be broken. However, I got my first impressions of the parish from the first confession I heard here. I can only hint vaguely about this, but when I came here twenty-five years ago I thought I had been assigned to a terrible place. The very first chap who entered my confessional told me how he had stolen a television set, and when stopped by the police, had almost murdered the officer. Further, he told me he had embezzled money from his place of business and had an affair with his boss’s wife. I was appalled. But as the days went on I knew that my people were not all like that, and I had, indeed come to a fine parish.” Just as the priest finished his talk, the politician arrived full of apologies for being late. He immediately began to make the presentation. “I’ll never forget the first day our priest arrived in this parish,” said the politician. “In fact, I had the honor of being the first one to go to him for confession.”

My guess is that most of us have discovered that the truth, perhaps to our own embarrassment, will eventually be known. What’s the expression: caught red-handed? It should be no surprise then that Jesus tells us that on the last day God will see to it that the truth will be victorious. All will be public and all the lies exposed within the Church and without. This includes the debate over Biblical authority and sexuality currently raging within the Episcopal Church. In other words, one day the private diaries of our lives, corporately and individually, will be revealed for all to see. Did you know that nothing you e-mail is lost? A record is kept. If technology can do that with e-mail, just think what kind of record God has of our every little action and thought. Therefore, those on the side of truth need have no fear.

So, we are to be bold in our proclamation of the way, the truth and the life in Jesus Christ. Proclaim Him from the housetops, as He tells us in v. 27. We are not to fear those who may harm us when we stand up for Jesus and the Word of God found in scripture, which Jesus himself affirms, not even if our very lives are threatened. Rather, we are to fear God, who can throw us into hell. For, if we

acknowledge Jesus before others, then He will acknowledge us before God as He tells us in v. 32. But, if we deny Jesus, He will deny us before God. Jesus has both warned us and assured us.

Three years ago, after I cited what had happened in the Diocese of New Westminster, Canada with its approval of blessing same-sex unions, I asked you the following questions: Will we like those in the Diocese of New Westminster, who objected to the sanctioning of non-biblical sexual behaviour, be called upon to testify to our faith in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who came to fulfill the law and the prophets, not change them? Will we be called upon to testify to our faith by walking out or by some other means? Then I added, “Only God knows.” What we must know and be prepared to do is to acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and Saviour regardless of the consequence to us in this earthly domain.

We, here at St. Bart’s, have stood strong in our faith, unwavering in our devotion to Jesus and what He calls us to do through Holy Scripture. The battle, though is not over. Several weeks ago in *The Sunday Times* on May 29, another article appeared, this time in England. It read as follows: “Homosexual priests in the Church of England will be allowed to “marry” their boyfriends under a proposal drawn up by senior bishops, led by Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury. The decision ensures that gay and lesbian relationships under the new “civil partnerships” law — giving them many of the tax and inheritance advantages of married couples — will not lose their licenses to be priests. They will, however, have to give an assurance to their diocesan bishop that they will abstain from sex.”

No, the battle is not over yet. This very week on Tuesday, June 21, representatives of ECUSA and the Canadian Church will be meeting with the Anglican Consultative Council in England to explain their failure to comply with the Communion’s Biblical understanding of sexuality. Yet, all evidence seems to indicate that neither the US nor Canadian Church will repent of their apostasy or their deviation from Holy Scripture and will, therefore, no longer find themselves a part of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

As I said three years ago, I say again now, only God knows what the future holds. And, so in closing, the story of little Joey, explaining to his mother how Moses rescued the Jews from Egypt, comes back to mind. Whether God liberates His people through modern means, which we understand, or whether He divinely intervenes is immaterial. What we must trust is that He will be faithful to us and so, we in response are to be faithful to Him. The time will come when we will be given the opportunity to cross over to the promised land. Whether some of us will be accused, deposed, bereft of our places of worship in the mean time, is yet to be seen. Regardless, we must be ready to make that leap, to trust where God will lead us. Like Moses’ faithful and stout followers, Caleb and Joshua, we are to be bold, less we, like those, fearing what they saw as giants in the promised land, be sentenced to forty years of wandering in the wilderness until they all died off.

You see, it is us, the faithful followers of Jesus, who must be the giants. Regardless of our numbers, we must be giant in the Holy Spirit and in Biblical faithfulness. For these are indeed the times that try the souls of men and women in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. The time is very, very near. So, in the words of Joshua (24:14), “. . . *choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*” You have been warned.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.