

Year A, Proper 15
Genesis 45:1-15; Romans 11:1-2a,29-32; Matthew 15:21-28
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Conflict in the Church: What's God Up To?

God is always up to something. For me, at least, that's an article of faith. But the trick is to figure out what exactly God's doing, because frankly God sometimes goes about the work of the Kingdom in rather odd ways.

That seems to be especially true with us Anglicans. And over the past several weeks, we've seen God strangely at work once again, in the Lambeth Conference, the gathering of the bishops of the Anglican Communion that happens once each decade. The Lambeth Conference has no legislative authority, although in previous years it passed resolutions expressing the bishops' positions on issues. This year, they didn't even do that because of the intensity of the conflicts over human sexuality: whether the Church should bless the unions of gay and lesbian couples and whether gay and lesbian people should be consecrated as bishops. So, instead of having parliamentary debates, the bishops gathered in subgroups of about 40 to share Bible study and talk through these conflicts – as well as issues such as poverty, justice, evangelism, and other challenges perhaps more immediately central to the Church's mission. But ultimately, at least according to our own bishop's reports on the diocesan website,¹ the conflicts over sexuality were no less intense at the end of the 18-day gathering than they were at the beginning.

The news coming out of Lambeth has focused on the likelihood that an Anglican Covenant will be adopted in the next year.² The idea is that the national churches of the Communion would need to sign on the dotted line that they subscribe to certain core understandings of the faith and that they promise to behave in certain ways – primarily, by *not* acting on their own in ways that would likely offend much of the rest of the Communion. The idea of a covenant is a major source of conflict in itself because we've never had such a thing. We've always remained in communion with each other simply by mutual agreement, without passing rules to govern it. But now our conflicts are raging to such an extent that many people think a covenant document is necessary just to keep the Communion together. If a covenant is adopted, it might provide a framework for living with our disagreements and working through them – depending on what the covenant ultimately looks like. But, in any event, our conflicts will still be there – over sexuality, over how to interpret Scripture, and maybe most of all over who holds power in the Church in the 21st Century, the wealthy global North or the poorer global South? What seems clear is that the Anglican Communion will remain a place of broken relationships, division, and frustration – certainly for the bishops and perhaps for us, too.

And this is all very familiar territory for the God we worship. God has been at work through our conflicts for a very, very long time now. In fact, three of our readings this morning point this out, though it may not be so obvious on a first hearing because, in all three, we need some background to help them make sense.

In the reading from Genesis, we've come in near the ending of the Joseph story. There's been conflict and injury on both sides here: Joseph's brothers have sold him into slavery in Egypt; and Joseph, having risen to power there, has now been toying with his brothers as they come begging for food in the midst of a famine. So, in today's reading, Joseph comes clean and tells them that the powerful Egyptian official they see before them actually is the brother they wanted to kill. Joseph weeps for joy at the prospect of renewing their relationship, but the brothers' reaction isn't exactly joyful. They don't trust Joseph because of the way he's treated them – rather ironic, given how Joseph got to Egypt in the first place. So this reading ends with their relationship up in the air – and with the question unresolved as to whether they'll take Joseph up on his offer to save Jacob's family from famine by moving them to Egypt. We find God's people divided.

Then there's the conflict we heard in today's Gospel reading, about Jesus and the Canaanite woman who comes to him begging help for her daughter. On one level, this is a story about how a woman's strong faith brings her child healing. But the background of conflict is important here, too. This woman is a Canaanite, not a Jew. Jesus has traveled beyond his own land, into the territory of the indigenous people of Palestine. If you remember the stories of Joshua in the Old Testament, then you know the Canaanites – they're the folks Joshua's army was snuffing out as it conquered the Promised Land. So there weren't a lot of warm feelings between Canaanites and Jews, even in Jesus' day. This helps us understand Jesus' strange reaction to the woman. She comes to him, as so many *Jews* have done in the Gospel thus far, and she asks him to heal her daughter. First, Jesus ignores her. Then he tells her that he was “sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” not to people like her (Matthew 15:24). Then he tells her that it wouldn't be fair to take what was intended for God's children – the Jews – and give it instead “to the dogs,” meaning the Canaanites (15:26). There's a lot of historical conflict at work here, and even Jesus is not immune to it. He understands his mission as serving his own people, *God's* own people, not “them.” But this woman's incredible humility and deep faith in him turn his heart and open him up to the possibility of including *all* people in the gift of God's healing grace.

And then there's the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. Taken out of context as this is, I have to say, this reading makes very little sense; so if you didn't get it, you're in good company. What we hear is the end of Paul's argument in chapter 11, but it helps to know what that argument is: Paul is wrestling with the reality that the people to whom Jesus came, the Jews, have largely rejected him, while the Gentiles – the Greeks and Canaanites of the world, who *weren't* the target audience – are flocking to the faith. This was not a happy situation for the early Church, whose leaders were in deep conflict about whether non-Jews could be part of this movement and, if so, under what conditions. So Paul is trying to make sense of this conflicted reality by arguing that Israel's rejection of its messiah serves a larger purpose, which is to bring the Gentiles into God's plan of salvation. Then in a final plot twist, Paul says, God will also bring Israel into salvation once “the full number of the Gentiles has come in” (Romans 11:25). In their own times and in their own ways, both Jews and Gentiles have been disobedient in terms of living under God's rule and authority, so God uses the disobedience of each group to bring the other into God's reign.

So what do these three readings have to do with us and the state of our Anglican corner of Christ's Church today? The mysterious truth that I hear in all this is that, surprisingly enough, God sometimes *uses* our division and estrangement to bring about a unity we couldn't have imagined on our own – a *new* kind of unity that accomplishes God's purposes. In the Joseph story from Genesis, the brothers have plotted to get rid of Joseph, and he's planted evidence on them and locked some of them away on trumped-up charges. But out of their deep conflict, God has found a way to save the brothers' households from starvation and thus ensure the survival of the people of Israel. In the Gospel reading, Jesus and the disciples find themselves wrapped up in ethnic prejudice and conflict that goes back centuries. But the Canaanite woman's humility and faith turn their hearts toward a new understanding of who might be included in God's family. And in Romans, Paul explains that from Jesus' apparent failure to win over the people of Israel, and from the resulting conflict between himself and the Jewish leaders of the Church, God is actually working *universal* salvation – which hadn't been on anybody's radar screen.

Conflict in the Church is nothing new, of course. And it certainly isn't limited to bishops arguing over sexuality at international conferences. We have plenty of conflict right here – churches always do. The issue *du jour* might be money, or leadership, or worship styles, or music, or ... you name it. But we should remember that, whatever it is, God is big enough to work with it. Conflict is one of God's raw materials, out of which God is always bringing about new creation. We need the kind of faith that the Canaanite woman showed in today's Gospel reading. We need to remember that even those who seem to be on the "other side" have something holy and life-giving to offer. We need to be humble enough to present ourselves before God and before those on the other side, knowing that none of us has all the answers on our own. And we need to live in the assurance that God *is* always up to something, always bringing the Kingdom to life in some new way – no matter how conflicted or broken our relationships may be. As we pray every time we celebrate and bless a marriage in the Church, so let us pray now for the Church itself: Gracious God, "make [our] life together a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair" (BCP 429). Amen.

1. For reflections on the Lambeth Conference from our bishop, the Rt. Rev. Barry Howe, visit <http://www.episcopalwestmo.org/LambethConference2008.asp>.

2. For a summary news report on the Lambeth Conference, visit http://www.episcopalchurch.org/79901_99775_ENG_HTM.htm.