

Enthusiastically Episcopalian
Address by the Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade
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It is a real joy to be back with you again. It is always an honor to be asked to speak to a group. And always something of a miracle to be asked back. Thank you for this privilege. I bring you greetings from your brothers and sisters in the Diocese of Washington and along with them the assurance that we share your commitment to the goals and principles that define the ministry of this Forum. I was asked to speak about being "enthusiastically Episcopalian." It is something I can do with, pardon the word, enthusiasm. I would like to share some of the core values of our church that help me to be so enthusiastic about our faith community.

Truth and Power

Let me begin with a story from one of my first visits to Charleston. I came here as a Citadel cadet in 1959. After the shock of my introduction to the corps began to fade and I had opportunity to reflect on my experience, I felt that I was being taught that truth was the servant of power. I am sure no one was intentionally saying that but the implied point seemed to be all around me. If you were the upper classman and I the plebe, you were right - because you had the power of your seniority. If you were the captain and I the private, - same story. Napoleon is not generally thought of among the great theologians but he stated the principle with particular clarity - "God is on the side with the most artillery." To my mind that should not and indeed could not be the case. Power in any and all of its forms must serve truth and in any and all of its forms. I began to think about where I had seen people genuinely concerned about using their power in service to greater truth and my answer was The Episcopal Church. I began following that path and am still on it more than half a century later. I am not naive. I know that our church honors this principle, as Shakespeare would have it, "more often in the breach than the observance." But we know what is right, even when we are wrong about it. Our church knows that the powers we have by virtue of office, ordination, money or persuasion must always serve God's truth. I like that about us.

Judgment

Over the years as I continued along this path I could see that our church has much in common with every religion. William James wrote about the assumptions of religion in his 1906 classic *Varieties of Religious Experiences*, "There is something wrong with us as we naturally stand and we are saved from that wrongness by making a proper connection with the higher powers." The idea of what might be wrong with us is variously understood as original sin, mortality, fallibility, or dependence; all acknowledging that we are neither self made nor self contained. As a Christian, my connection with the higher powers is through Jesus. That is how I know God and it is the root and source of my "proper connection."

One of the questions that comes up at this point is whether Jesus is the only way to have a proper connection with God. After all didn't He say that no one comes to the Father except through him? In

considering this question, which seems to vex many, we must realize that there is both an answer and an implication to be taken into account. For the most part theological traditionalists get the answer right and the implication wrong. The answer is 'Yes'. If we understand that the Christ is part of the godhead, then Jesus is simply saying no one comes to God except through God. A point that is difficult to dispute. The implication, however, is important. This does not mean, as many conclude, if-you don't-know-Jesus-the-way-I-know-Jesus-you-don't-know-Jesus-at-all and, therefore, you are bound for hellfire. In the first place it is more than a little difficult to accept as genuine the love of one who will fry you for all eternity if you don't get the formula right. Secondly, when Jesus says no one comes to the Father except by him he means the same thing I would mean if I said no one can join the Forum except through me. I would mean that I get to decide who is in and who is out -- and that is what Jesus means too. If Jesus gets to decide, it means that I don't and neither do you or anyone else who presumes to pass judgment on the faith of others. If Jesus is clear about anything it is that we are not qualified to pass that kind of judgment. He told us that thieves and prostitutes would be in heaven before some we regard as righteous. He said rich people will have a particularly hard time of it but what is impossible for people is possible for God. He told the story of the wheat with weeds in it: when the workers volunteered to pull up the weeds they were told not to because they would mess it up and throw away the good with the bad. We are the agents of God's love and mercy, not God's judgment. In its heart our church is not judgmental and I am glad when we remember that essential truth.

Conversation

Apart from judgment, we have a rich and compelling faith story to share. The manner in which we discover and nurture that story is another thing I like about our church. The key word is "conversation." Richard Hooker illumined this path for us in the 16th century. In his day there were three distinct ideas about how people could find and nurture God's truth. Humanists like Erasmus maintained that reason was all that was needed. Puritans were convinced of 'solo scriptura' or only the Bible was necessary. At the Council of Trent Rome decreed that tradition, the wisdom of our forebears, was what would guide us. Hooker saw the wisdom of each and said that God's truth emerges in a conversation between scripture, tradition and reason. He did not coin the image of a three legged stool that is commonly used to describe Hooker's insight, and I doubt that he would have liked it if he had heard it. The three legged stool image implies an equality that I don't think Hooker would have bought into. For Hooker tradition and reason are in conversation about scripture. The Bible is central. Because of Richard Hooker we understand the truth of scripture to emerge in a conversation with reason and tradition. That is a point often forgotten in our current disputes.

Some may be aware that people also speak of experience along with scripture, tradition and reason. That is an especially important point in our current controversies. Anglicans began to include 'experience' in the 18th century when scientific discoveries made Deism very popular. One of Deism's conclusions was that God was no longer active in the affairs of the world. God had set the Laws of Nature in place and then left well enough alone. One image for this was of a watch maker who makes a time piece but is not involved in its subsequent operation. Many said that was not the case and that God could be experienced in this life. Jesus had promised that the Holy Spirit would engage us in life and lead us into all truth. The idea of 'experience' affirms the continuing fulfillment of that promise. This is important in our church today because some say that the Holy Spirit is leading us to a new understanding of human sexuality. People of reason and faith disagree on this point. But there are

many who adopt the Deist position or the Council of Trent position that God has already said all that is to be said on the matter. We may disagree on whether the Spirit is leading us one way or another but let us be very wary of those who refuse the conversation because new understandings are not possible.

Community

Because conversation is an important concept in our church, one of the natural questions is "Who takes part in it?" For many in the Anglican Communion as well as other churches the answer is like the Marine Corps slogan, "The few, the proud, the bishops." For many, wrestling with God's word and seeking God's truth are matters for the elite, whether qualified by scholarship as in the protestant tradition or ordination as in the Roman tradition. The Episcopal Church, however, takes a different and broader view. The key figure in shaping that view was William White, Chaplain to the Continental Congress and first Bishop of Pennsylvania. He played a role not unlike that of Richard Hooker in setting us on a unique path. White is the primal architect of the polity of The Episcopal Church. He is the reason General Convention, your diocesan convention and, less directly, your vestry function as they do. White was convinced that the whole community of faith belonged in the conversation because God's revelation does not confine itself to an elite corner, no matter how elite it might be. Bishops, priests, deacons and laity all must be heard before we can be sure that God's Word is being heard. That is the reason we have so much publicity about our current controversies. As we used to say in West Virginia, we do our laundry on the front porch. Everybody sees and hears our struggles because we are committed to the idea that our whole community should be included in the conversation. I can assure you that every church is dealing with the same issues we are. Most of them are doing it behind closed doors. We are in open forum because we are committed to a conversation that includes the likes of you and me as well as our elites. A modern philosopher, Mortimer Adler, defines peace as "the circumstance in which the conversation can continue." In that wise sense, as long as we are talking and listening, no matter how difficult that may be, our church is at peace.

The Road to Emmaus

If I were to see our church in a specific Gospel story, I would suggest the Road to Emmaus. In that account two people were walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus on Easter day. They were fully aware of the crucifixion and had heard rumors of the resurrection. They were doing their best to figure it all out. During their conversation Jesus, unrecognized, joined them and guided their discussion to a deeper understanding. At the conclusion of their journey they had a meal and it is said that they recognized the Lord in that great Eucharistic phrase "the breaking of the bread." I would suggest that our church is still on the Emmaus road, confident that when we are in conversation our Lord joins us and deepens our understanding. I would also suggest that in the original story if Jesus had simply shown up and broken a piece of bread without the preceding conversation, no one would have recognized him at all. Conversation is the key. Maintaining the conversation is a vital and difficult ministry in South Carolina and throughout our church. I commend you for your efforts to keep the conversation alive and Christ expectant.

Thank you for the privilege of this conversation with you.