

Covenant  
Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade  
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Saranac Lake, NY  
April 11, 2010  
John 20:19-31

Good morning. My name is Frank Wade and it is my pleasure to bring you greetings from your brothers and sisters in the Diocese of Washington, DC. I was asked to come to the Diocese of Albany and to be with you here at St. Luke's to talk about the Anglican Covenant. Briefly put, this kind of covenant is an attempt at putting a relationship into words. It is a daunting task at any level – could you describe your family relationships in any complete way or could you tell what holds this congregation together? When people try to do it for the Anglican Communion we are talking about 75 million people stretched across 38 institutions in nearly fifty countries and innumerable cultures and contexts. That is what the Anglican Communion is trying to do and we are part of that effort. There are, as you might imagine, some issues to be addressed and obstacles to overcome. That is what we have been talking about.

You will be glad to know that I am not going to ruin your morning by droning on about those issues and obstacles. We can talk about some of them in the coffee hour if you would like. This is time for the sermon and sermons are about the Gospel. Honoring that fact, I would like to set this covenant business in the context of the Gospel, specifically the Gospel story we just heard. I think you will find that it says something about the households, congregations and communities of which we are a part as well as the wider Anglican Communion.

The central figure in today's Gospel is known as Doubting Thomas. As we say in Washington he suffers from a bad press because he did not immediately buy the story of the resurrection. But look at it from his point of view. He is holding what might be called the traditional position: people who die generally stay that way. That has certainly been my experience and perhaps yours as well. Thomas is a traditionalist. Peter, the chief disciple who told Thomas the resurrection story, is a revisionist. He has taken a position that has not been held or even considered as a possibility before. He says that Jesus rose from the dead. Thomas has the weight of experience, long standing opinion and tradition on his side. Peter has a burden of proof that he is not immediately able to satisfy. He is saying that based on his experience, your experience and that of tradition notwithstanding, the resurrection story is true. Thomas knows, of course, that revisionists like Peter have a key role to play. Where would we be if we only understood things as we have always seen them? Revisionists are sometimes right but nowhere near always. Jesus was a revisionist and so were all of the heretics through history. Thomas is not convinced and who can blame him?

The story tells us that a week later Jesus appeared to the disciples and straightened the whole thing out. But the key to our purposes this morning precedes that resurrection appearance. Our point is in the week between Peter and Thomas' disagreement and Jesus' arrival. The disciples were in the house and Thomas was with them. That is important! In that week people of reason and faith, goodwill and passion were in disagreement about a profoundly important point. Tensions must have been high. People shook their heads at the blindness, arrogance and foolishness of the others. Attempts at reconciliation failed again and again because there was no way to reconcile such basic differences. Yet – here is the point – they stayed together. The disciples were in the house and Thomas was with them. Way to go Thomas! Way to go Peter! The Gospel for this morning would not have been written if Peter and Thomas had not hung on for that hard week.

But what if instead of a week it had taken a month or a year? A decade or even a century? Suppose it involved not just eleven friends but 75 million strangers? The story we are living right now is the same one shared by Peter and Thomas. Revisionists are saying that God is calling us to a new understanding of human sexuality. They say that people whose affections are directed toward members of their own sex can lead

moral Christina lives together. Revisionists are saying, as Peter did, I have seen it and therefore I know that it is true. Traditionalists are saying quite rightly, "That is not the way we have understood it before. It was not even considered a possibility. You revisionists may be convinced and passionate but that does not preclude the possibility of being wrong." Everyone knows that while revisionists have rendered great service they have also rendered great harm. They are not always, nor even often, right. The burden of proof is on the new understanding. Tradition, some significant passages of scripture, culture and the instincts of most of us are on the side of the traditionalists. Science, compassion, some significant passages of scripture and, for many people, objectivity favors the revisionists. It is not simple. God does call us to new understandings. My great grandfather owned slaves and his great grandfather believed in the divine right of kings. But every new understanding does not come from God. This will not be resolved in a week or a month or a year, a decade or even a century. As much as I would like for Jesus to pop through the door and straighten it all out I do not count on it.

What we do count on is staying together in spite of the tension. That is true in the world wide Anglican Communion, The Episcopal Church, the Diocese of Albany, St Luke's Church and in your own home. In a time of tension, when people of reason and faith, goodwill and passion, are in head shaking, finger wagging, eye rolling disagreement with one another the most basic task is to stay in touch so that we will be together when the truth finally emerges. That is what the covenant is supposed to do for the Anglican Communion. It tries to remind us of what holds us together while we are in the tension of disagreement. Whether this particular covenant does that or not is what the conversations are about. Our point here is that what it is supposed to do is hold us together until the truth emerges. And that is important.

It is not important just because it is nice to be together. We need one another. A hundred years or so ago a man named RH Tawney wrote that "those who seek God in the absence of their fellows find not God but Satan, whose countenance bears a striking resemblance to their own." He knew that we need each other because by ourselves we begin to worship ourselves. Without the press of contrary opinions God becomes our creature instead of our creator. People will say they don't need to be in church with us because they can worship God walking in the woods. That is true but does the God we meet in the woods ever say anything we don't want to hear? Not likely. That is why we need to come together as a congregation, a diocese, a church, a communion. An old saying puts it another way, "If two people agree on everything, one of them is not necessary." We need each other for support but we especially need each other for challenge, correction, broadening and deepening. Our differences are among the greatest gifts we have to give one another. That is why revisionists need traditionalists and traditionalists need revisionists. It is why generations need one another. It is why political parties need each other. It is why I need you and you need me.

Differences create tensions. If there were no tensions we would not be growing and continuing our spiritual journey. We would be God's finished product with no improvements yet to be made. We would all get along just fine. We would not need a covenant, congregation, a communion or even a conversation. We would not be dead but we would be deadly to everything we touch. But because we are alive, because God is not through with us, because we are sinful people, because we have not arrived there are tensions among us. The first business of being alive is learning to be together in the tensions that life necessarily entails. I doubt that Peter and Thomas liked each other very much in that week of tension. But I think they knew that they needed one another. And that made all the difference