Reflecting on the 2009 General Convention
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Ephesians 3:14-21

Let us look again at the reading from Ephesians:

“Then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

So there I was sitting on the Tower of Terror at Disneyland in Anaheim, California. Naturally, this is part of my work at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. So for those unfamiliar with the ride: the theme is the Twilight Zone; and there we are reliving the moment when the hotel became an intersection between the living and the dead (especially, for some reason, the service elevators). So once inside the service elevator - you are suddenly dropped and then taken up again only to be dropped again. Up down, up down, up down, and finally you step out and leave the hotel.

Attending the General Convention is a little like the Tower of Terror. On the upside - there are 800 deputies and 200 plus Bishops (making it one of the largest parliaments in the world); there are lots of people who care a great deal about the Episcopal Church; there are thoughtful debates and passionate worship. On the downside, there is a self-preoccupation and there are lots of hurt feelings and high emotions (on every side of the debate). For me, it was definitely a mixture of admiration and concern - a Tower of Terror ride.

Here the author of Ephesians (probably not Paul) captures the nature of the Church. We are not “strangers and aliens”, but citizens in the best of company - the saints - building on the best foundation - the work of the apostles and prophets - and with Jesus himself as the first building block. It sounds great - we are a structure building into a holy temple.

Yet as the early church knew all too well, this building project can still be messy. We have the structure, but the basic shape is constantly shifting and moving. The total message of Ephesians is that God will succeed, sometimes despite us rather than thanks to us.

So let us return to our own embodiment of the Ephesians visions. Let us look again at our General Convention. Broadly there were three groups at General Convention. Each group with its own narrative. Group one, we can call the progressives. These are men and women who are committed to the justice cause of the full inclusion of gays and lesbians. Given what we know about
orientation, they argue, it is exhausting for these men and women to be second class citizens in our society and in our church. The Biblical witness, they point out, is harsher on divorce and remarriage (which the Church has rightly accepted) than on the condemnation of gays and lesbians. From this perspective, the difficult texts can be understood as follows. The rather odd story of Sodom and Gomorrah should be read as a condemnation of homosexual rape, which everyone agrees is wrong. The Holiness code in Leviticus is an exhortation to be different from those around us, which for our Jewish forbears included not wearing clothes with mixed fibers, and for us it will be different expectations. And Paul in Romans, one is right to condemn experiential homosexual intimacy in a vice list that includes rebellious children. But none of these passages are discussing a committed couple who know where their deepest feelings are and just need to be together. The Episcopal Church delivered on the three stipulations of the Windsor Report (we apologized; we provided a moratorium on openly gay bishops and we didn't develop any approved rites for same-sex blessings) but this didn't stop the cross-border incursions. Two of our most historic churches just miles away from St. Paul's are now under the supervision of Nigeria. For this group, we just need to do what is right and accept the consequences, which can't be much worse than the consequences we are already struggling with.

The second group, let us call the non-separating evangelicals, has a different narrative. They really want to stay in the Episcopal Church. They worry about Scripture and the relationships with the worldwide Anglican Church. They want to be in a denomination that connects the theological dots and are really confident that our purpose for being is to seek to discern the will of God. For this group, to change the definition of marriage is major. They are working hard to stay inside the Episcopal Church and, perhaps more importantly, are trying to keep others inside the Episcopal Church. They need the breathing space. They needed the conversation to continue. They need to know that their voice is welcomed. They needed the progressives to understand their predicament and pain. They fear that the hard theological work is not being done: and that we are now dissolving into an unthinking, liberal, sect that worries only about inclusion but not about God.

The third group, let us call the big picture group, feels that this might be a moment analogous to “eating meat offered to idols”. Paul told the Corinthians that it is okay to eat meat offered to idols, but for the sake of the “weaker brother” one might forego this entitlement. This is a group that knows the mind of the Church is made up. And this group supports the justice issue. But this group feels that for the sake of relationship, for the sake of friendship, for the sake of remaining connected with conservatives, we should allow both culture and the church some time to adjust. This is a group that admires the Windsor Report for keeping lay and priest sexuality off the radar and that the only restriction was the expectation around the Bishops. Given Bishops in the Episcopal Church make determinations on the appropriate circumstances for remarriage, it does sound odd when that person is technically cohabiting. For this group, three more years of being Windsor observant would have been wise.

The Tower of Terror ride felt different for each group. At different times during the convention, different groups were up and down. Initially it was the progressives that worried: the house of
Bishops was sending clear signals that they were disinclined to change the moratorium on openly gay Bishops; the third group was pleased and relieved. Then the mood of the Convention changed. And the first group — the progressives - moved up and the second and third groups — the conservatives and big picture groups - found themselves falling.

The decisions are now well known. But for those who missed them: we are open to receiving a openly gay Bishop as a nomination from a diocese and we are starting work on “same-sex” marriage rites to be considered at the next General Convention. So where does that leave us?

First, it leaves us where we have always been. Like Jesus in the Gospel, we are still in the business of service and care. Feeding the sick, preaching the Gospel, bringing the sacraments to the people. General Conventions come and go; our worship here is a constant stabilizing reality. Second, it leaves us in a church which is messy and complicated. But that is OK too. It has always been the case - just get use to it. God brings about the miracle of grace, not us. In the early church, it was circumcision and eating food offered to idols; thirty years ago, it was the ordination of women; now it is human sexuality. We are called to be Church in the midst of the disagreement - in the midst of the muddle. Third, under the leadership of our Rector, the position of St. Paul's is clear. This is a community that welcomes all three groups. We welcome all voices. We dare not presume that there is a test of one's views to be a member or receive the Eucharist here at St. Paul's. We come with our views, differences, fears, and anxieties, and we receive the loving embrace of God. As Ephesians puts it, it is in Christ that we are built: it is into Christ that we live.

Amen