

June 20, 2021  
The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 7), Year B  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

1 Samuel 17:32-49, 57-18:5, 10-16  
Psalm 133  
2 Corinthians 6:1-13  
Mark 4:35-41

*Note: There are two options for the Track 1 Hebrew Scripture reading for today. They are successive parts of the story of David. The reading above is the second half of the first option plus the second option.*

On Facebook, there is a closed group for pastors called “Things They Didn’t Teach Us in Seminary.” I think most of us pastors agree that there are A LOT of things they didn’t teach us in seminary. As with most professions, pastoring involves an abundance of on-the-job training. I’m not sure it ever stops.

Most posts to that Facebook group fall into one of two general categories. One category is crowd-sourced questions. For example, last week someone posted this: “Anyone ever done a memorial service for a venerable old tree? We have a beautiful old ash tree coming down today, one of the last big trees in our downtown area, and I think the village could use some way to mourn its death.”<sup>1</sup> That one caught my eye because St. Thomas’s has been advised to remove the gorgeous tulip tree on Cliff Street at the entrance the parking lot. Julie Kelly, our Parish & Property Administrator, has lovingly cared for that tree for thirty years. She describes it as looking like a giant bonsai, which is absolutely true. It should be honored before it comes down.

The other posts to the group are mostly anecdotal. It’s a place where pastors can share stories with people who “get it.” It’s nice because most pastors are pretty isolated these days. Sometimes the stories are funny, but more often they involve difficult, and sometimes conflictual, situations. I often read them and think to myself either, *UGH*, or, *I’m glad it’s not me*.

These things can be relatively small stuff, as in another post from last week: Things they didn’t teach us in seminary: “... why years after you retired from a given church someone loosely connected with said church would, in the course of conversation, feel compelled to tell you there were people in that church who didn’t like you.”<sup>2</sup> Lest you think the group is just for pastor self-pity, another post last week was the flip-side of that one: Things they didn’t teach us in seminary: “That so many deep conversations with parishioners would include stories of broken moments, poorly tended by long ago pastors. That unmet grief-needs rise back to the surface in stressful times.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet another post just last week was a crowd-sourced question that elicited tales of difficult situations, so it fell into both categories. It said this:

“I’m crafting a message on disagreeing without being disagreeable - looking for brief anecdotal stories of people leaving the church in disagreement. People have left over the addition of the organ in worship, the removal of an organ, the use of praise music vs traditional music, the time of the service being changed, the ordination of women, and so very much more. What are some of the stranger stories you may have encountered?”<sup>4</sup>

That post elicited far more replies than I have ever seen—275 as of 6:30 this morning. I selected a handful to share with you. It was hard to choose, but here goes:

- “People left over a pavilion being built on church property because they thought it would result in sex on the picnic tables.”
- “People left because we were trying to raise money.”
- “[People left because] I told thr (*sic*) 8th graders in confirmation class that Jesus died.”
- “[People left because we were] Abiding by CDC guidelines regarding masks.”

Many of these replies were funny, but not funny. As I read through, the thread just made me feel sad.

I typed all this into this sermon and then debated with myself whether to say it to y’all. I was afraid you would hear it as, “Look how hard it is to be a pastor!” Let me be clear: that is not the point. What I’m trying to say instead is this: “Look how hard it is to be in Christian community!” All communities experience conflict. In Christian communities, conflict often ends up magnified beyond what seems to be reasonable proportions. I think there are a lot of reasons for this, but I’m not going to get into all that, at least not in today’s sermon. I do want to say this: when there *is* conflict, it’s *not* just the pastor’s problem. There’s always at least one other person involved, and others almost invariably get sucked in. Sometimes the entire community is affected.

Let me be clear about this here, too: I don’t think there is any particular conflict happening at St. Thomas’s right now. It hasn’t always been this way at St. Thomas’s. There has been long ago conflict, and not-to-long-ago conflict, and we had some big conflict leading up to my call as rector two years ago. That conflict is over, but we’re still living with the results. Again, though, this sermon isn’t about St. Thomas’s. It’s more generally about churches and conflict and change. It’s about how hard all that is, and it’s about stilling the storm in the chaos.

In my sermon last week I mentioned that our Bible study group has been discussing the Book of Acts and offered this: “One of the things that Acts and the group have touched on is the establishment of authority in the burgeoning church, authority in terms of both organizational structure and foundational belief. But those early followers of Jesus couldn’t and didn’t start with that. They didn’t start with authority. They started by talking about Jesus, and things just took off.”

Things did take off, *and*, honestly, authority soon did become important. In the Book of Acts Paul is depicted several times as posturing in order to claim the authority to make decisions that will affect the communities of Christ-followers that he helped to establish. We heard that posturing today in Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians. I should note here that, while some letters attributed to Paul were not written by Paul; this one was written by Paul, mostly. I say “mostly” because what we have received as a single letter is actually fragments of multiple letters. Therefore today’s reading from Second Corinthians is a fragment of a fragment.

Knowing that there were *multiple* letters to the church in Corinth only adds emphasis to what we hear in the text: that Paul is writing in response to conflict. Other leaders have challenged Paul's teaching and authority. In today's fragment of a fragment, Paul is making his case that people should listen to him. As one author puts it, "This passage again sets out reasons for Paul's credibility. It opens (vv. 1-2) with a note of present urgency, followed by an argument for his own credibility based on a list of obstacles that Paul has overcome in his change-agent task (vv. 3-10), and concludes with a plea for openness (vv. 11-13)."<sup>5</sup>

Maybe Paul just wants to be in control. But let's give him the benefit of the doubt. If we do, I would say that Paul is convinced he's right, and that he does what he needs to do to convince others that he's right. I would add that Paul is keenly aware of the importance of making decisions that will keep the church in Corinth unified—unified internally, and unified with the churches in other locations.

You may have realized by now that church unity has been on my mind this past week. That's because of the news from two of our sibling denominations in Christ: the Southern Baptist Convention and the Roman Catholic Church.

In case you don't follow such things, I'll say briefly that the Southern Baptist Convention held its annual meeting in Nashville. Two issues captured the most interest: first was an especially contentious and important race for president, and second was a brouhaha over critical race theory. The result in both cases was *relatively* moderate. That came as a surprise to many. The result of the election for president was described well in this headline from *The New York Times*: "Southern Baptists Narrowly Head Off Ultraconservative Takeover."<sup>6</sup> And the resolution on race called for caution but did not specifically name critical race theory.

As for the Roman Catholic Church, last week also brought a virtual assembly of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. As *The Washington Post* summarized its big news, "U.S. Catholic Bishops on Friday voted to back a measure that could be an early step toward limiting Communion for President Biden and other Catholic politicians who support abortion rights."<sup>7</sup>

Let me be clear: there are many reasons I could not be either a Southern Baptist or a Roman Catholic. I'm very glad there are options now. Frankly, I sometimes get so upset that I follow proceedings such as these somewhat reluctantly. But I do it, and one reason I do it is the sheer numbers. These numbers are changing quickly but here's a snapshot:

- The Roman Catholic Church is the single largest Christian denomination in the United States. Nearly half of American Christians are Roman Catholic. Close to one-quarter of Americans are Roman Catholic.
- About half of Americans are Protestant. The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. About 10% of American Protestants are Southern Baptist. Therefore about 5% of Americans are Southern Baptist.

Somehow, I hear those numbers and they still surprise me. I think, because I live in New England, that everybody is fleeing Christianity. But no; let's hear it again: close to one-quarter of Americans are Roman Catholic, and about 5% of Americans are Southern Baptist. That's a lot of people. Therefore, theirs are the Christian messages that most commonly reach the American public, and not just the American public that is among their membership. What these denominations do affects us. It just does. It affects us because of the ways the leaders of these denominations have worked to develop political muscle. It affects us more intimately because it is so difficult to counter their messages with the people we meet one-on-one. There is a different Christian message, but it's hard to get out. And when it gets out, people are so jaded that they can't even hear it.

There are good reasons to *leave* a church or even a denomination. I know; I left Roman Catholicism to become an Episcopalian. Many of you also did some leaving in order to arrive here. But remember, there are also good reasons to *stay* in a church or even a denomination. And after all, you've also chosen to stay *here*. Stay or go, wherever you've been and wherever you're going, I encourage you to think hard about why all that is.

The church is hosting a free walk-up COVID-19 vaccination clinic next Saturday. We Episcopalians don't like to do in-your-face evangelism, but it still seemed like a good idea to have something to hand folks who might ask questions about the church. I drafted a very short card inviting folks to join worship on Sundays. During Tuesday night's Vestry meeting, we looked at it, and Denise suggested creating a short list of *why* they should join us for worship on Sundays. I'm going to show you what I came up with, and that the Executive Committee has seen:

**Are you looking for ...**

... fellow spiritual seekers for whom  
questions are as important as answers?

... a place where children  
learn the gospel of love?

... a God who still speaks,  
even about current concerns  
like racism and climate change?

... the Jesus who favors the marginalized?

... a community that fully includes and uplifts  
LGBTQ+ people ?

... meaningfully beautiful worship  
with outstanding sacred music?

... membership in a choir that sings such music?

**That's St. Thomas's!**

I don't know if this captures St. Thomas's or not. I feel like it does, but it might not for you. So I encourage you to make your own list. Think about why you're here; think about what you might be excited to talk about. And I encourage you to share all that.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Posted to the Things They Didn't Teach Us in Seminary Facebook group by Daria Schaffnit, on June 15, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Posted to the Things They Didn't Teach Us in Seminary Facebook group by Tony-Jarek Glidden on June 14, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Posted to the Things They Didn't Teach Us in Seminary Facebook group by Martha C. Langford, June 15, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Posted to the Things They Didn't Teach Us in Seminary Facebook group by Janice Dolye, June 14, 2021. The four replies that follow were posted on June 14 and 15. Because the posts are sensitive, the authors are not named.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 147.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Graham, "Southern Baptists Narrowly Head Off Ultraconservative Takeover," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2021, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/15/us/southern-baptist-convention-president-ed-litton.html> (accessed June 20, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Michelle Boorstein, "Catholic bishops back document that could lead to limits of Communion for Biden," *The Washington Post*, June 17, 2021, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/06/18/biden-catholic-president-bishops-abortion-communion/> (accessed June 20, 2021).