

Sermon Preached February 2, 2014
The Presentation – Explaining Episcopal Church Governance
St. John’s Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

During worship the pastor announced, “There will be a meeting of the Church Board immediately after the service.” After the close of the service, the Church Board gathered at the back of the auditorium for the announced meeting. But there was a stranger in their midst -- a visitor who had never attended their church before. “My friend,” said the pastor, “Didn’t you understand that this is a meeting of the Board?” “Yes,” said the visitor, “and after today’s sermon, I suppose I’m just about as bored as anyone else who came to this meeting.”¹

¹ http://jokes.christiansunite.com/Church/Meeting_of_the_Board.shtml

Today we celebrate what is called “The Presentation in the Temple,” the day when newborn Jewish children would be brought to the Temple and a sacrifice to God would be offered in thanksgiving for their birth. The gospel tells the story of Jesus’ presentation and how he was recognized as the Messiah by some of the elder wise women and men in the Temple. It’s a lovely story and worth preaching about, and one day I will do that for you. But not today! Because today is our annual meeting, and I want to offer you a brief history lesson and what that means to us as Episcopalians.

As you know, by the eighteenth century, the thirteen colonies of America were all colonies of England. And in England, there was no separation between church and state. Bishops were elected to the House of Lords in Parliament. Clergy had to swear allegiance to the king in their ordination vows. The church was funded by taxes of everyone in the community, whether or not they attended church. Each church represented both church and state.

This was true for the Anglican churches in the colonies as well. So you can imagine the dilemma faced by these Churches in America after the Revolution! We had just fought a war to separate from England, but are left with these outposts of the British Government, the Anglican Church. Following the war, the church became very unpopular.

So the Anglican Church in America had to figure out how to be church without the mother country backing them up. This had to include a separation between church and state. Could a bishop be a bishop without a palace and a position in the House of Lords? Could a church support itself without taxing the local population?

Fortunately, 2/3 of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Anglican, and in this new world they put their smart heads together to save the church. After establishing the Constitution and seeing how well the organization worked, they thought to themselves, “Hey! I bet this would work for the church also!”

These same men who organized the democratic government for the United States, used exactly the same template for organizing their new church. And it included a separation of church and state. No longer would churchmen have political power. Bishops were not answerable to the King or President. No longer would priests and bishops be appointed by the King or church leaders. It would be the people, the laity, who would have the real power in this new church.

Please take out your “Chart of Parallels.”

Chart of Parallels

Nation.....	Episcopal Church
President.....	Presiding Bishop
Congress.....	General Convention
Senate.....	House of Bishops
House of Repres.....	House of Deputies
State.....	Diocese
Governor.....	Bishop
State Legislature.....	Diocesan Convention
State Senate.....	Clergy at Convention
State Assembly.....	Delegates to Dio. Conv.
City.....	Parish
Mayor.....	Rector
City Council.....	Vestry

So you all here at St. John's have power in the church. You elect representatives to diocesan Convention each year at our Parish Annual Meeting. These representatives bring the issues of St. John's before the whole Diocese. They vote on matters pertaining to St. John's and the diocese. Our current representatives, who you voted for, are Tom Peltz and Jim Thompson who faithfully attend Deanery meetings and Diocesan Conventions on behalf of St. John's. They then elect representatives from the Diocese to go to the national General Convention. This is where larger decisions pertaining to the national Church are decided.

At the Annual Meeting you also vote on your representatives to the Vestry. This lay board leads the church in your name. You have a say in who is elected to the Vestry. You are welcome at Vestry meetings and can offer your opinion on matters related to the church. Nothing is hidden. All is transparent. Your participation is welcome and encouraged at all levels of church life. Nothing happens at St. John's without the input of the people.

While we are a church of Bishops, our Bishops only have the power that the people give to them, and they enforce the laws that the people have voted on. We are a hierarchical church in a similar way that the U.S. government is hierarchical. We elect our congress-people and presidents to do the work we have voted on for them to do. (Whether we believe they are doing a particularly good job or not!). In the same way we elect our lay representatives, priests, and bishops to do the work we have voted for them to do. In addition, the clergy - deacons, priests and bishops - are elected by the people, not appointed from on high. If one feels called to be a priest in the Episcopal Church, one cannot simply show up in front of the Bishop and expect a decision to be made. Each candidate is trotted out in front of a Commission on Ministry of lay and ordained people, a community, to discern if the call to ordination is genuine.

Bishops are created by priests coming before the people of a diocese, both lay and ordained, the community, to discern if he or she is called to become a bishop within that community.

Bishop Tom is retiring and our Diocese is in the process of electing a new bishop – and that is the key word – “elect.” No one is appointed bishop. No person becomes a priest or bishop without the consent of the community in prayer. Our own Laurel Deery was the co-chair of the committee which chose the final five candidates for the new bishop. The election will be held in May and your two delegates and I will be representing St. John’s at the election.

Other parts of the international Anglican Communion, including England, do not have elections. A few years ago, the Anglican Communion was shocked to discover that the new bishop of New Hampshire was an openly gay man. One of the problems was that the Anglican Communion assumed Gene Robinson had been appointed by the other bishops and that the American Church had made a universal decision supporting the ordination of gay people to the Episcopate. At the time, the American bishops would never have done any such thing because they feared the firestorm that would erupt.

But because our polity assumes that the local community and those pesky laity know who will serve them best, the Holy Spirit was permitted to move within the New Hampshire community and Gene Robinson was elected. We are not bound by the existing leadership and “the way it always has been.” It allows the Episcopal Church to be more nimble and respond in real time to the needs of the local community.

Sometimes people complain about our annual assessment to the diocese, the money we pay to the Diocesan offices to do their work, as though we are the victims of a money grab. One need only learn about the amazing work done on our behalf to dispel one of that belief. But even more importantly, thus far you have, through your delegates, every year, voted to accept the assessment. We are a democracy. No money is taken, no priests or bishops elected, no rules are past, without your consent. Every one of you who attends Annual Meeting and votes is participating the democratic process of the Episcopal Church. We believe in transparency and the community guided by the Holy Spirit.

All that Jesus did was in community. He traveled with disciples. He healed the crowds that gathered around him. He told us to love our neighbor as ourselves. He told us to eat bread and drink wine in his name, and we call it “communion” because it is communion with God and the community. That is why we as Episcopalians believe the best way to organize our church is found through the entire community in prayer (not just the ordained). The manner in which we order ourselves is unique among churches. It is both hierarchical and yet democratic, recognizing the voices of all its members, believing that the Holy Spirit can speak through any of us, and that the fullness of God’s will is best found in community.

Amen.

Now everyone can go back to getting ready for what really matters: today's Feast of the Presentation/Super Bowl Sunday/Groundhog Day liturgical extravaganza. (ie. Will Simeon see his shadow? And who does Anna predict to win the big game?).