

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia on Sunday July
20th 2008 by the Reverend Alan Neale
“Move the Fence!”**

Thus far in my ordained ministry it has always been a policy of great importance to me that a wedding policy is exercised that is liberal and welcoming as possible. There are many clergy who believe that only parishioners, members, of a church should be welcomed there for marriage... I respect such a view, just happen to disagree with it. Now, of course, this is not done lightly... apart from anything it consumes Friday evenings and, generally, most of Saturdays with interviews and weddings. Such a policy has sometimes earned me the ringing sobriquet of “marrying sam” or “the minister of the wedding chapel” – but I can cope with all that. I do it because I strongly, firmly believe that a so-called “open” wedding policy gives me wonderful unique opportunities to talk with others about God and His place in their lives. Of course not every single wedding leads to such profound conversations but many do and, as of now, I am not prepared to single out, to choose, to select the “right ones”.

In today’s Gospel the servants of the Master wanted to single out, to choose, to select the “right ones”. As the Message reads, “The farmhands asked, ‘Shall we weed out the thistles?’”. There seems to be something in human nature which, if left unchecked and unredeemed which if left untouched by the grace of God, always tends to want to choose, select, label and put into categories... PLU (people like us) and then definitely PNLU (people not like us).

Listen to these words of Bishop Desmond Tutu: "Jesus did not say, 'If I be lifted up I will draw some'. Jesus said, 'If I be lifted up I will draw all, all, all, all, all. Black, white, yellow, rich, poor, clever, not so clever, beautiful, not so beautiful. It's one of the most radical things. All, all, all, all, all, all, all, all, all. All belong. Gay, lesbian, so-called straight. All, all are meant to be held in this incredible embrace that will not let us go. All."

The servants in the Gospel express a very different attitude... they know, they are sure, that somewhere in this field are weeds and they need be removed now. Suddenly all the energy, the labour, the commitment to nourish and tend the field are gone... and growing in their place is a different energy, labour, commitment altogether. Senator Barbara Boxer once spoke of the “weapons of mass distraction” – how sad, how wretched, how pathetic! But is not this what is happening, in part, throughout the worldwide Anglican Communion and now specially focused and observed at the Lambeth Conference drawing Anglican bishops throughout the world.

What I observe is a chronic, destructive obsession to separate so-called, so-viewed wheat and weeds; to present to God now a field of purity and monochrome uniformity. This, friends, I believe is not the Anglican way and those who would secede from the Anglican Communion really should not appropriate for themselves the title of “true Anglican” – they may be right, but they evidence little of Anglican temper and mode in their “rightness”.

The servants in today's Gospel passage, for all their concern and dedication, the servants lacked two things... they lacked humility and they lacked patience.

When we lack humility we are those who want to separate, categorize, label and dispatch. But when we listen to the "Master" – when we pay attention to His voice, when we are moved by His Spirit, when we are captivated by His will, when we read His word in its entirety... then we draw away from a task that is surely not ours and surely is His alone.

And when we lack patience, we are those who want to separate, categorize, label and dispatch. But patience, which is really trust in God and in His will, but patience discourages actions that are reckless, harmful and unnecessarily divisive. The Message translation reads (Romans 8): "The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens".

I believe that when we practice humility and patience, when we are appropriately modest in the expression of views theological and social, when this happens then we will be surprised, amazed at what God can do... what seems like only a resting place, and a stony one at that, becomes the arena for the blessing and activity of God so that with Jacob we awake from the drowsy sleep of apartheid (in any of its forms, especially ecclesiastical and theological) and we exclaim with amazement: "'GOD is in this place—truly. And I didn't even know it! Incredible. Wonderful. Holy. This is God's House. This is the Gate of Heaven".

In the biography of Bishop Gene Robinson (Going to Heaven), the Bishop recounts this story: "Towards the end of the Second World War, three American GI's were traveling through France. They were great friends and much to their sadness, one of the three dies. They visit the local priest (Roman Catholic) and ask that their friend be buried in consecrated ground. The priest is truly in anguish... given all the circumstances, he wishes he could comply with their request but he cannot. All he can do is to bury the soldier just beyond the fence of the churchyard. The burial takes place. Years later the two friends return to the French church to pay homage to their friend... and to their amazement and joy, they see their friend is now buried within the churchyard. It was not that the priest moved the body, what he eventually did... was to move the fence.

Friends, the Master calls us, calls His church, not to move bodies but rather to move the fence. And so He treats us day by day. Alleluia.

AMEN

PS Bishop Robinson comments, "It seems to me that the God who loves us beyond our wildest imaginings is a God who wants us to move the fence ever broader and broader, to include all of God's children..."

