

PBS's Ray Suarez July 11 Sermon at the Episcopal Church General Convention

It is a joy to be asked to speak to this gathering of my brothers and sisters from all across the country and the world. I left a reporting trip in Tanzania to come here in full confidence that these invitations don't come every day. It's a privilege to speak to you on this day when we remember Benedict's radical welcome to all who come from what the old prayer book called "the blessed company of all faithful people." With outstretched arms we take a big, broad, view of what that beautiful phrase means... "the blessed company of all faithful people." That includes our partners and friends from other branches of the family who are with us today. At this point in the life of the Episcopal Church, some of us, and some of the parishes we call home, may not be feeling they are in a blessed company right now, and forced to think about what welcome means, who is included in welcome. It is a tough time, even if your attendance is good, your pledges are strong... even if you have more baptisms than burials in an average year... we are forced to fight the battles, forced to live out the arguments that history conspired to make converge right now, in our day, in our time. Benedict had some plain-spoken advice for this gathering: "Let the house of God be wisely managed by the wise." I'll let you decide if you are in the wise. None of us in this room could have chosen, could have elected to be born, grow up, or be called to serve at another time. We have no choice but to play history's hand... So we are struggling, perhaps in our buttoned-down, Anglican way, to figure out what to be in the 21st century, to keep the lights on, the altar set, and wait for people who left after the storms got bad, and trying to bring others in through the door for the first time and say welcome, you are home... while still very much having to be a place of coherence, love, service, for the people who've never left.

We don't give you a spiritual means test when you come to the front door before we let you in. Instead, we say as Jesus did, "Come, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

There are people lampoon us, wish us ill, use us as a punchline for lame jokes based on some very old stereotypes, and frankly, from material that wasn't all that funny to begin with. But at least those old jokes, poking fun at imaginary church of WASP matrons, using 'summer' as a verb, country clubs, white shoe law firms, and pedigree - those old jokes had some measure of affection in them. These days the jokes contain more derision, condescension, and harsh judgment born of ignorance. Recently I was reading the religion blog in the Washington Post and one essayist, John Mark Reynolds, wrote: Do you know what you get when you cross an Episcopalian with a Southern Baptist? I didn't know, so I kept on reading. You get someone who comes to your door and rings your bell, but once you open it has no idea what to say.

No idea what to say? Really?

I could swear I was in church at 7 am on Ash Wednesday morning, heard our challenging lectionary, was called out, forced to confront myself by a strong sermon, and then called to be holy by our penitential rite. I thought we had a lot to say, and when I picked my head up to look around there was a big crowd of witnesses sharing that sobering moment with me.

Nothing to say?

When my son and daughter and the youth of our parish head out year after year to the storm-ravaged Gulf Coast, and to the Lakota Sioux lands in North Dakota, and to our sister parish in Honduras... they worked hard, very hard... and began and ended every day with worship. Like so many of our youth, they have plenty to say, "Not only with their lips but with their lives." Or, as Benedict himself might say, *ora et labora*, pray and work.

At a time of bewildering complexity and ever greater challenge some churches have told us that contrary to what you've heard, being a Christian in the 21st Century is actually a piece of cake, all you gotta do is follow a few, very simple rules... The churches that say that have definitely had a good run the last 20 years. There are shelves in bookstores groaning under the weight of critical social science scholarship, marketing theory, and even, occasionally, theology; books that tells us what we're doing wrong and what the other guys are doing right. And in 2009 we can either stop being us, or hold on, and believe that what we are and how we got to this day has prepared us for whatever God's going to dish out in the years ahead. We may not know what's in store, but we must share Benedict's conviction, in the final words of *The Rule* that *ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus*, "that in all [things] God may be glorified."

It would have been easier in the 1970s to say, you know, this fight over whether priesthood is a privilege granted to men only isn't going to do us any good at all, so let's duck it. Just kick the can down the road. It would have been easier, much easier, to pull up stakes and run when our cities changed in ways that weren't so great for the bottom line, or, as I heard people say in the 60s and 70s, "too many of our churches are in the wrong places." But we suffered along with our cities, and in places like the west side of Chicago, and Inglewood and South Central Los Angeles, and the South Bronx we stood for something all right and we had plenty to say. And now, as we are burdened with another family fight over what part of our family is given the gift of servant leadership, what part of our family is called to carry the blessed burden of the episcopacy, and which families will be able to seal their life's commitment with the blessing of their church, that's a fight we can pretend to duck, but in real life... we just can't.

Proverbs this morning called for the search for hidden treasure. We're all on it. I go to church, with a few thousand other human beings who bring a broad range of life experience and religious conviction through that front door with them every Sunday. We don't agree on everything. But what do we agree on?

That we bring Jesus to a suffering world...

Orare est laborare...

That there is worship in work...

That the liturgy we share binds us to a procession through history that has lasted centuries, of a hope kindled since the Last Supper and the Resurrection, carried by faithful servants fired up by the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. All of those things are much more important than the things we can't agree on.

But, there are about a million fewer of us than there were a half century ago... and it's a much bigger country. American Society did not stand still in those years... there was increased mobility, intermarriage, a larger fraction of the American population rejecting religion entirely.. If critical observers are right, in order to have a strong and secure place in the diverse American religious marketplace we have to stop being who and what we are, who we have been, and start watching the people who are filling arenas and pitching best-selling books for cues. Those places have come to some conclusions about success, and we don't measure up. So let's stop clinging to that outmoded prayer book that happens to be one of the crown jewels of the English language, we've got to get rid of that hymnal, with all those tricky tunes and old-fashioned words... stop those long sermons delivered by people who always seem to want me to feel bad about something... the organs, the outfits, it's so archaic in a world where religion bestsellers are trying to convince me that Jesus wants me to be rich. I thought Jesus wants me to be holy, and it just goes to show you how wrong a guy can be. But hey, while we're jettisoning all these things that are leading us to what is called marketplace failure... let's also stop the radical welcome... Let's stop the willingness to live, sometimes uncomfortably, with the ambiguities of modern life. Leave behind that notion that we don't have all the answers yet. Then we can relaunch... EC 2.0, having acquiesced to those who, like that Washington Post essayist, think the only thing we're really for in 2009 is to be mocked, dismissed, diminished, pushed to the margins of the American experience of the struggle to be God's people in the world. When we do explain ourselves to the world, why not stop the explanations that come draped in ecclesiastical bumph, an impenetrable torrent of rounded-edged words that leave even me wondering what the heck they're talking about, and I'm fully bi-lingual in English and Church.

“This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.” 31 Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?)) In places where our natural feedstock, the kinds of Americans who have normally been Episcopalians going back to the 18th century, are gone, died, moved... in short supply, whatever... those neighborhoods need us in the 21st Century, because in 2042 this will be a majority minority country. We’ve got to act like a church that hasn’t already internalized the narrative of its own decline... We’ve got to talk about our heroes and assert, reclaim a place in the common culture: We aren’t trapped in some obscure corner, we have been immersed in making the country what it’s been for better or worse for 225 years... from the Constitutional Convention to abolition to the Social Gospel movement to the battles against child labor and disease and municipal corruption of the reform era, to civil rights and the second emancipation. So many people need what we’ve got... spiritual wayfarers who are already looking for us... would love to join a church that’s ready to love them back... we don’t know who they are yet, and they don’t yet know we’re there. We’ve got a calling for the 21st century. It’s the same calling it was in the first century, as it was in 1534, and yet the world we head out into the world to work in is changing all the time.