

Do you know the story about the synagogue that was in a real mess—divided right down the middle over a bitter liturgical conflict? The *Shema* is at the heart of the Jewish liturgy and indeed of Jewish faith: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Well, one faction in the congregation felt that you should stand when the *Shema* was being read as a sign of respect and reverence. The other faction felt certain you should be seated—the posture of learning. So they tried to resolve the conflict by appointing three standers and three sitters to go see Mr. Finkelstein, the oldest living member of the congregation. And the sitters pleaded with him: “tell us about the days when this congregation was founded...surely everyone then sat when the *Shema* was read, right?” But Finkelstein told them he just couldn’t remember for sure. “Think hard,” the standers implored. “Surely when this congregation was founded everyone stood for the *Shema*!” “I’m sorry, I cannot remember,” said Finkelstein.

Both sides started yelling at once. “This is tearing our congregation apart,” they shouted. “Everyone has picked sides and no one is speaking with anyone on the other side, and it’s a huge mess!”

“Ah,” said Finkelstein. “Now that I remember.”

---

I like these mid-week Eucharists for any number of reasons. I like the intimacy of being together wherever two or three, or maybe even as many as a dozen but never more than fifteen or so Christians are gathered together. I like it that such small gatherings help us to remember (even when we don’t say it explicitly) that we are here not only to *receive* the Body of Christ but to *be* the Body of Christ. We see each others faces more than we tend to on a Sunday morning and that bodes well for authentic Christian community.

I also like these mid-week Eucharists because I like the way it reminds us that even in our smallness we are part of something very large: this holy, catholic, and apostolic Church that is continuing to work its way through human history in various cultures and contexts. In this month alone the calendar of lesser feasts turns our attention to Agnes, a fourth century martyr in Rome; Phillips Brooks, a nineteenth century bishop of this Commonwealth; and Thomas Aquinas, a thirteenth century priest—among others.

I like these mid-week Eucharists because usually those remembered are amiable enough characters—even when we know that saint is not a synonym for “perfection.” I mean who doesn’t like Francis of Assisi or Julian of Norwich or Nicholas of Myra?

William Laud, however, is a different kettle of fish. He was Archbishop of Canterbury in a difficult time—although truth be told I’m beginning to realize the older I get that all times are difficult times. But did you read the words of the little biography from Lesser Feasts and Fasts for tonight? Are we gathered at this table tonight to honor Laud as a martyr or to condemn him as an intolerant bigot? He couldn’t stand the Puritans—those same folks who fled to this country in search of religious freedom. I mean he couldn’t stand them and he pushed all their buttons. Ultimately he paid for it with his head.

Laud is a polarizing figure—think Bishop Spong or Bishop Duncan and you begin to get the point. Everyone has an opinion, and you either love him or you hate him but you don't feel lukewarm.

If you felt the reformers had gone too far and you wanted to revive medieval piety and worship and push the altar back against the wall and put a rail around it to keep out the riff-raff, well then you say this guy had it right. If you felt the Reformation hadn't gone far enough and there was more work to be done and Laud is turning the clock back, well then you may well be one of those who want his head!

I have a confession to make. When I was first attracted to the Episcopal Church I think I had a false and idealized version dancing in my head (like a kind of sugarplum) of what the *via media* was all about. I mean that at the time of the Reformation as we've all learned you had catholics and protestants killing each other in England but then good old Queen Elizabeth saved the day and we ended up with the Elizabethan *settlement*. It sounds so British, doesn't it? Everything was *settled*. It sounds as if they all got together and sat in a circle and worked it all out and then held hands and sang *Kum Ba Yah* together. And that this "middle way" held tight until General Convention 2003.

Of course once you say it out loud like that you realize how silly it all sounds. The fact is that nothing was ever *settled*. A new *Prayerbook* held things together but the tensions have always been there and from time to time they bubble up into crisis. Laud lived in such a time. Lines get drawn and some are accused of not really being Anglicans.

I think the danger of the Anglican tradition whether it is the sixteenth century or the seventeenth or the twenty-first is that we are prone to the sin of Laodicea: in our desire for things settled we can become lukewarm, neither hot nor cold. And yet our prayer tonight was that we might be not only constant in faith, but *zealous* in witness. If we are truly called to be zealous in witness that is a recipe for a community of faith where conflicts are certain to bubble up from time to time.

And if that is so, then I ask you this: what is it about our Anglican heritage we most need to remember? Perhaps it is time for us to take a page from the story with which I began. Perhaps we need to remember our tradition in ways that highlight the rougher edges and the struggles and the zealousness of our witness—on all sides. Don't get me wrong. I do believe we are called to a ministry of reconciliation. But I wonder if we don't need something more than that in this time and place: a theology of conflict. We need to, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once put it, let go of our "wish dreams" for Christian community so that we can recognize that Christ is present in the mess of it all. Yet even when it's a mess it's a holy mess—precisely because Christ is in it all. Maybe we need a theology of conflict to remind us that conflict is simply part of the deal, especially in a community that values and treasures each and every voice and perspective.

At the outset a theology of conflict has to insist on certain rules. It's more like boxing than the W.W.F. No scratching or biting or hitting below the belt. No making it personal. But beyond rules of engagement I think we need to celebrate the fact that we gain clarity when we encounter each other's truths. That there are gifts of the Spirit that emerge in communities and families that learn how to fight together. Indeed there is no intimacy where there is no passion. Just as with couples, the making up is the best part of fighting—so too in community the opportunity to grow and to love and to come to the table to share a meal is the best part. Do we dare to imagine such a community as a gift from God?

Tonight's gospel, if we take it seriously, insists that we at least consider this possibility. We are so used to hearing Jesus say he comes that there might be peace and goodwill and consensus and reconciliation. But we are prone to dismiss tonight's hard words as counter to what Jesus is all about.

Yet by all standards of New Testament scholarship and precisely because they are so grating even the Jesus Seminar would have to admit these words probably deserve to be in red letters. Jesus comes to bring division and conflict and strife. Wow!

Yesterday I had the privilege of spending some time with a retired priest in our diocese. He called me just after the New Year to ask if I'd bring communion to him in the nursing home where he now lives. I was honored and delighted to do so; he was incredibly welcoming to me when I arrived in this diocese and I was glad for the chance to become reacquainted.

He is on the far left both theologically and politically, and his mind is mostly still sharp. He was reading Barack Obama's book, *The Audacity of Hope*. He wanted to talk about Marcus Borg whom he believes gets it just about right. He, of course, wanted to talk about where the Episcopal Church is and what it means for us to have open doors and to stand for social justice. We talked about all these things and then we broke bread together and then I got up to leave.

And as I was almost to the door a woman arrived in a wheelchair with a newspaper in her hand. She asked me to please give it to Langford. I did and then walked as she wheeled toward the elevator. I turned to her and struck up a conversation on the one thing we seemed to have in common. "He is quite the character, isn't he," I said.

"You can say that again," she answered. "I adore him but he is way too serious. He and I always sit together at mealtime and we drive everyone here crazy because we don't agree on anything and we love to argue about what we don't agree on. But in the end we both love it and we keep coming back to the same table day after day."

As we got off the elevator a nurse greeted her. "Good morning, sister," she said. My new friend then told me she'd been a religious for more than forty-five years.

I think I glimpsed the Kingdom of God in that moment, and it isn't about finding consensus. It's about learning to fight with passion but still come to the same table to be fed. It's about being able to adore one another even when we are certain the other is dead wrong. Or maybe, just maybe, partly right.

I can imagine in God's eschatological vision and with God's sense of humor that somehow Bob Duncan and Jack Spong will be doing the same thing in heaven. And because I'm certain God is an Anglican and loves liturgy, every time that Maundy Thursday roles around they will have to wash each other's feet. I'm just as sure about the folks God has in mind for me to sit with which scares the daylights out of me.

I am beginning to believe that it won't all be settled, not even there and that if that's right then we need to practice now on how to fight in ways that still leave us room to say, "Excuse me, Archbishop Laud...would you mind passing the jelly, please?"

**The Rev. Richard M. Simpson. Holden, MA, January 10, 2007**