

In his Preface to *Ecclesiastical Polity* (i.e. how to order a church) – Richard Hooker writes of “the dangers of the Puritan movement” – the very same Puritans who came to this new world in the events we’ll commemorate in a few weeks. Their strict “Bible only” interpretations led them to reject much liturgical practice of the day as “popish” and therefore as “anti-Christ.” Hooker observes this:

...when the minds of men are once erroneously persuaded that it is the will of God to have those things done which they fancy, their opinions are as thorns in their sides, never suffering to take rest until they have brought their speculations into practice. (*EP* pg 139)

To say that in more contemporary, American, English: when we delude ourselves into thinking that the hymns we like or the liturgy we prefer is “the will of God” and that everyone who disagrees with us is serving the devil, we are on very thin ice! Such people, Hooker concludes, who equate their own *preferences* with the “will of God” are very dangerous.

Moderation and humility seem to mark his *magnus opus*. We all know that a “middle way” can be wimpy. In the Revelation of John, the congregations in Laodicea are criticized for being “neither cold nor hot.” God wants to spit the Laodiceans out for being so lukewarm. And maybe some days God feels that way about Episcopalians too!

I remember once as a young and idealistic seminarian pushing my ethics professor hard—like Economics professors, ethicists tend to be people who say things like “on the one hand; but on the other hand...” I wanted to find myself a one-handed ethicist! And I told my teacher that I thought it was possible to be so indecisive in the search for “right” action that evil could just keep on prevailing while good people do nothing but “wait” in the middle. He granted me the point, but also added that his experience of the Church was that rarely had thoughtfulness and wisdom and patience gotten us into trouble over the centuries. And I’ve come to see how right he was.

For better or worse, over the course of four hundred years or so it has been rare to see Episcopal zealots—although that is being tested in our own day. In large measure I do think that’s because of the measured approach of people like Richard Hooker, the closest thing we have to a founding theologian. When you tell people that they must interpret Scripture, in the light of tradition, by using their own reason, then it is highly unlikely that you will end up with a congregation of automatons who conform to doctrinal purity.

And I believe that this is precisely Hooker’s intent: what he perceived as dangerous about the Puritans was their insistence on getting it *right* all of the time. Because for me to be right then you must surely be wrong! By pressing for moderation and the three-legged stool of Scripture and Tradition and Reason, Hooker gets us more than half-way there in forming thoughtful and discerning Christians.

The truth we seek in Christ, however, is always a truth that is multi-layered, a truth that cannot be discerned in isolation but only in community. That truth we see only through a glass darkly; and we need the light that others possess, even and especially the others who see what we cannot

or do not or will not see. Such a faith requires moderation and humility, especially in a polarized world.

And that, I think, is what tonight's gospel from the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel is getting at as well. It is the great ecumenical prayer, as you probably know: the Gospel that is read every time there is an ecumenical celebration. But being "one" does not and cannot mean being the same—not in a marriage and not in a Church. There are some in the ecumenical movement who essentially believe that "all will be one" when everyone else sees the light and becomes the same, and usually what that really means is that everyone else will eventually see how "we" have it right and join us. Of course, post-Vatican II, it isn't usually that blatant. But it remains an undercurrent in much talk that masquerades as ecumenism.

I believe that the Trinity is about both diversity and unity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are unique and different and yet still one. So, too, a couple who have been married for fifty years or so: one flesh but still two unique and distinct persons who may cancel each others votes on election day and disagree about virtually everything except their love of God and their love for their children.

So, too, Hooker insists, with the *ecclesia*—the Church. We need a polity that recognizes none of us has a monopoly on the truth. And the genius of Hooker and his great gift to us as Episcopalians is that he truly got that. That is what he means by distinguishing between a Society and an assembly. An assembly is self-selecting: we find people we like, people we agree with, and then we join together as Democrats or Republicans or Marxists or feminists or traditionalists. But the Church is called to a truth that goes deeper than an assembly: we are called to find space at the Table for all of the above and more in our search for a deeper unity that celebrates rather than denigrates diversity.

In the midst of bitter controversies it is easy to settle for assemblies. But we are called to be part of a Society that is both catholic and reformed and to keep finding that "middle way" (with God's help!) not, as we prayed tonight, "for the sake of peace but as a comprehension for the sake of truth." Amen.