

Proper 11B
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Tearing Down Barriers

The buzz at the seminary when I and my classmates first arrived on campus was about the recently completed construction of the new chapel. Everyone was so excited about how beautiful the space was and how perfect it would be for the training of seminarians. I, however, did not share others' enthusiasm. When I first entered the building my heart sank. The massive, wooden doors were very hard to open and the uneven, stone floors were dangerous to traverse. However, what troubled me the most was that the altar stood on a concrete slab with concrete steps leading up to it. The lift for those who could not climb steps was tucked away in a corner, hidden from sight. I could not believe that a community whose mission was to prepare future leaders of the church would build a brand new, state of the art, liturgical space that was so blatantly inaccessible.

With the coaxing of my classmates, I shared my pain and frustration with the powers that be. After receiving a less than warm reception, my class decided that something more needed to be done. We sent a letter to the Dean telling him we were going to publicly boycott the Dedication Service of the new Chapel, if promises were not kept to listen and respond to my experience of exclusion. Several classmates and I were in his office the very next week. We got his attention! For the next two and half years I worked with the Dean and administrators to create more of an accessible and hospitable campus. And my class' gift to the seminary upon our graduation was the installation of an automatic door. This experience was instrumental for me and my fellow

classmates in shaping the prophetic aspect of our priesthoods- in calling the Church to be a place of inclusion, rather than exclusion.

Those of us who live with physical disabilities face so many barriers on a daily basis. We desperately yearn for our houses of worship to be different from the inaccessible, able-bodied world beyond their walls. Often it is the attitudinal barriers and not the physical ones that cause a greater sense of exclusion. It is painful to hear from our brothers and sisters that glass, stone and wood have more value than we do. In every generation the church has had to struggle with its own set of barriers it has created which exclude some of God's children from God's household. It has also endeavored to tear down those walls which keep us separated from one another and which try to deny access to God.

We hear about such a struggle in the passage from Ephesians. The church in its infancy spent a great deal of time discerning and debating whether Gentiles could be included in the community and whether or not they then had to follow all the Jewish rules and regulations to be fully embraced. Paul boldly declares that through Jesus the barriers between Jews and Gentiles are abolished. God draws together the people of the Covenant with those previously outside of the Covenant. The distinction between the circumcised and uncircumcised is no longer relevant. Through Jesus and the cross all the ways we categorize and discriminate and keep others on the outside are destroyed. No one is an alien or a stranger in God's household. It is a dwelling place of peace and reconciliation between God's children -a place where all are given full access to God.

This past week we witnessed our Church at General Convention trying to embody this message we hear in Ephesians. Both The House of Deputies and

The House of Bishops passed resolutions which affirmed the ministries of homosexual persons as well as their commitment to be in life-long, committed relationships. These decisions did not happen overnight. Just as our church worked through issues of racial inequality, the ordination of women, and the pastoral response to divorce in previous generations, today we are responding to the cries of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters to be welcomed fully into God's household.

Writer and Episcopal lay woman, Diana Butler Bass, reflected this week on the decisions made by those gathered in Anaheim. She writes, "Some may argue that the Episcopal Church has broken faith. No, Episcopalians are struggling to be faithful and to live justly as our society widens its understanding of human relationships and marriage. The attempt to do so is not somehow 'secular' or untraditional. Rather, adapting to local cultures is an important part of being Anglican. Around 600, Pope Gregory the Great saw a group of blond-haired children in a slave market and was told they were 'Angles,' from Britain. Gregory replied, 'Not Angles, but Angels' and dispatched missionaries to the British Isles. He instructed the missionaries to work within the context of the culture they encountered in order to preach the gospel and spread the church.

It is deeply Anglican to believe that God works within human cultures, in all their variety. Maybe Anglicans in the rest of the world won't understand what we did this week. Some people will see this as unbiblical. But, trying to figure out faith in particular cultural contexts is Anglican tradition. For 1400 years, Anglicans have believed weaving together the message of Jesus with human culture and experience is the best way to embody the love of God and neighbor.

We don't always do that perfectly, but we are trying. After all, we're Anglicans not Angels.”

I am proud of the work of our church. Now, we don't do this work perfectly. It is often messy and painful. I know that there are some of our brothers and sisters who feel disenfranchised by the very decisions we made this week. And if we truly believe that no one is a stranger in God's household, then we must offer them our gentleness, compassion and listening hearts. What I love about our Church is that we never stop trying to embody the love of God and neighbor by weaving together Jesus' message with our own experience, as Bass says. In our own, unique Anglican way we strive to break down the barriers which separate us from one another and which deny access to God and God's household.

As a person living with a disability I am fully aware that as soon as one barrier is torn down another one appears. As Anglicans, as Episcopalians, as Christ's Body, the Church, our work is not yet finished. As long as there are members of God's household who feel excluded and unwelcome our work is not finished. As long as we look upon the other in our midst and see a stranger rather than a brother or sister in Christ, our work is not finished. As long as our buildings of stone, glass and wood are of more value than the people who make up the community, our work is not finished. There is much to be done-many barriers yet to be torn down. The message to the Ephesians is the message we must continue to embody and proclaim each and every day as we strive to live as authentic people of faith. “So then”, Paul writes, “you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the

household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”