

Brian McLaren's Sermon at the July 16 Eucharist

"We live in a strange time in relation to the E-Word"

[July 16, 2009] The following is the sermon by author and activist Brian McLaren presented at the Thursday, July 16 Eucharist at The Episcopal Church's 76th General Convention in Anaheim, California. (Video is available on the Media Hub, <http://gchub.episcopalchurch.org/>)

Brian McLaren Episcopal Convention 2009

Buenos días, hermanas y hermanos. Para mí, es un gran placer y honor estar con ustedes y pensar juntos sobre el evangelio de Jesús, que es el reino de Dios. Me gustaría mucho dar todo de esta charla en español, pero cuando hablo en español, hago millones de errores gramaticos, y por eso, será mejor para todos hablar en inglés. Con permiso . . .

Sisters and brothers, we live in a strange time in relation to the E-Word. For many of us, the word evangelism evokes ugly and morally tainted associations with colonialism, religious supremacy, and shabby televangelism. As a result, many Episcopalians would say that evangelism may be Southern Baptist or Pentecostal, but it's not Episcopalian, thank you very much. May I humbly propose that the time for this reactionary prejudice against evangelism is over? May I further propose that from this day forward, we see Episcopal and E-vangelistic as a holy union joined together by God, and what God has joined together, no one should put asunder. Amen?

Think of it this way: If only fundamentalists evangelize in America, what predictions can you make about the future of the American religious landscape? If Christian moderates and progressives seldom if ever share their faith with love and enthusiasm, what will their future be? To rediscover the good and true essence of evangelism, we need to rediscover evangelism in a more biblical light.

And we can start with today's reading from 2 Corinthians. There we see evangelism as our call to demonstrate and proclaim a new creation in Christ. We see our call to live and invite others into a new way of life. We see evangelism as recruiting early adopters to be part of a radical new beginning for the human race – which Paul calls the new creation in Christ.

This world and its empires are living by an old script, Paul would say. Politics of domination and exploitation, economies of consumption, sociologies of exclusion and prejudice, and psychologies of shame and self-justification all flow from the old destructive narrative that is passing away. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ mean for Paul, among many other things, that it is time for a new politics of service and the common good, for new economies of sustainability and regeneration, for new

sociologies of reconciliation and love, and for new psychologies rooted in grace and faith . . . in short, in Christ, all things are made new, and evangelism means recruiting and training people to defect from the old order and throw themselves wholeheartedly into the new way.

The E-word for Paul, then, is the R-word: reconciliation. We are God's reconciling co-workers; we are God's reconciling co-conspirators; we seek to demonstrate what it looks like to be spiritually and socially reconciled individuals and communities in the Spirit of the risen Christ.

This ministry of reconciliation gives us a vibrant new identity, according to Paul. We are not merely religious insiders huddled in our stained fladd ghettos, nor are we religious outsiders living without reference to the living God, but instead we are God's peace ambassadors, insiders who intentionally move outside to invite – actually, please is Paul's word – to plead with others to be reconciled to God.

So we plead with them to rethink everything and follow the way of Jesus. We plead with them based on the good news that in Christ, God is offering amnesty for all offenders, whatever they've done, whoever they've been. We plead with people to stop being part of the problem, and to join God in Christ as agents of the solution, so God's will can indeed be done on earth as it is in heaven.

If we go to our reading in John seeking a more biblical understanding of the E-word, we see none of the ugly things that typically scare well-bred Episcopalians away from evangelism. Instead, we see intelligent and earnest people engaging with Jesus in mutually respectful conversation, and at the center of the conversation, we see Jesus ask a simple, powerful question: what are you seeking? In this way, evangelism first means inciting redemptive conversations, asking good questions, helping people think about what they're really seeking in life . . . and then it means inviting people to come and see . . . to come and experience . . . to join us on a journey of faith and mission and see what unfolds.

I'm sure agree that these are good things, beautiful things, needed things. I think that Episcopalians could get downright excited about evangelism if it were defined like this. And frankly, I believe Episcopalians will get excited about evangelism again. I think it's time. I think it's happening already. But dear brothers and sisters, three obstacles or distractions must be overcome for that to happen.

The first and most obvious is institutional conflict. I believe your community has been doing a difficult but needed service for the whole church and the whole world by wading into turbulent waters in recent years. But there is more at stake than the immediate outcome in terms of policy. What good would it be for your side – whatever that is - to win the debate if in the process you lost your balance and lost your identity as God's evangelistic agents of reconciliation? Your challenge, it seems to me, is to faithfully work through this season of conflict without letting it form or deform your identity. Your

challenge, it seems to me, is to reaffirm at this very moment of institutional conflict your deeper incarnational identity as ministers of reconciliation.

That brings us to the second potential obstacle or distraction, which I would identify as institutional identity. People like you in these times of institutional conflict and stress could easily be tempted to lodge your identity in the saving of a beloved institution. But here we encounter, I believe, a great spiritual paradox. To recall Jesus' words, what if those who try to save their institutions will lose them? What if the best way to save an institution is to focus on saving something else, something bigger? What if the point isn't saving the institution but rather leveraging the institution in the saving of . . . the world, the world God so loves, according to John 3:16? In your simultaneous commitment to the Millennium Development Goals and to true and deep evangelism, you are in the process of choosing this outward, missional focus . . . leveraging your institution for God's mission in today's world. So much depends on this.

That means that we can't afford to have a single one of you, as leaders in the church, to see yourselves as institutional maintenance people alone. From oldest to youngest, from the most seasoned bishop to the most newly baptized disciple, you must see yourselves as leveraging the institution for the mission of making disciples, and not vice versa. Do you see the difference? If you seek to do evangelism for the sake of the institution, I think you will lose ground and experience frustration. But if you align and retool the institution for the grand biblical mission of making authentic, fully-formed disciples of Jesus Christ for the good of the world, I think you will find God's empowerment and blessing at every turn.

Which brings us to the third obstacle which all denominations face, not just Episcopalians: along with institutional conflict and institutional identity, we must grapple with institutional rigidity. From my outsider's perspective, your most urgent issue of institutional rigidity related to the complex ways candidates are accepted and trained into ordained ministry. To put it bluntly: for all your system does well, it is perfectly designed to scare away from Episcopal leadership almost everyone with the spiritual gift of evangelism. And I have to make a confession: I am one of those people who was scared away about twenty years ago. I was deeply drawn both to evangelism and to the Anglican tradition while I was in graduate school in my twenties. But as I approached my discernment retreat with the bishop, I increasingly felt that a call to Episcopal ministry was at odds with my primary calling to evangelism. I hope that you will make it possible for people like me not have to choose one over the other in the future. May it be said to all people who are gifted and called in evangelism that the Episcopal church welcomes you. Amen?

The good news is that this would be a relatively simple thing to change . . . and the Episcopal structure itself, I believe, has remarkable inherent powers of self-renewal. And that's why, I believe, this moment of Episcopal crisis is also a moment of Episcopal opportunity. Perhaps, in the ways of the Spirit, the crisis and opportunity always go together. In that Spirit, let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, You stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you, for the honor of your name. Let us not forget the lessons of the past nor fear the challenges of the future. Anoint us with your grace and shine in our hearts as we reflect your light, seeking to be and make disciples in reconciling communities for the good of the world you so love. Amen. (BCP)