



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“How do we choose our leaders?”
Third Sunday after Pentecost – June 9, 2024
Mark 3:20-35

A Homily by
The Reverend Jo Popham

In all things, all those who do the will of God are our Lord's brothers and sisters and mothers. And that makes all of us family. Later this month, the family of the leadership of the Episcopal Church will gather for the 81st General Convention. The General Convention is the governing body of the Episcopal Church and meets face to face every three years. The administrative and spiritual work of the Church continues in the interim.

The last gathering was truncated due to the Covid pandemic though much good work was done. The 2018 79th General Convention met in Austin, Texas. I was blessed to be there as an alternate deputy and had many hours on the floor where key issues were debated and voted upon. Perhaps the most important decision to be made this triinum will be the election of the next Presiding Bishop.

The Anglican Communion worldwide is a community of worshipping Christians, with more than 85 million members in over 165 countries. Our church is legally named the “Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America” but is called The Episcopal Church (“TEC”) in the USA. In other countries, the churches in the Anglican Communion are known as the Church of England, the Church of Ireland, the Episcopal Church of Scotland, or simply the Anglican Church in much of the rest of the world. All Anglican Christians are part of the wider Anglican family, unified under the spiritual leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury in England, the Most Rev. Justin Welby.

The Episcopal Church in the USA consists of lay persons, deacons, priests and bishops. The Episcopal Church is divided into nine regional groupings called “provinces”

which are further divided into “dioceses.” There are 2.4 million people who worship in a total of 110 dioceses throughout the United States, and in Europe, Haiti, Latin America, Micronesia, Taiwan, Puerto Rico, and Navajoland.

We Episcopalians consider all baptized Christians to be “ministers” who share their gifts and talents for the betterment of the church, its people, and the world. Some members of the church are called to be ordained as deacons, priests or bishops. In the Episcopal Church, both women and men are eligible for ordination. And the Most Reverend Michael B. Curry is the 27th and current Presiding Bishop and Primate and was elected by an overwhelming majority on the first ballot in 2015. He is the first Black man to be elected as leader of the Episcopal Church. The Most Reverend Dr. Katharine Jefferts-Schori was his immediate predecessor and was the first woman to be elected national leader of the Episcopal Church. Presiding Bishops serve for nine years. The Primate’s primary office is situated in New York City, New York.

Each diocese has its own bishop who has the overall responsibility for the spiritual well-being and administration of the churches within their region. We are part of the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast which extends along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and the land geographically adjacent to the coast encompassing the southernmost part of Alabama and Northwest Florida. There are approximately 18,000 Episcopalians in 63 congregations in our diocese. Our bishop is The Right Reverend J. Russell Kendrick. There is no term limit for diocesan bishops, however, the mandatory retirement age for ordained ministers is 72.¹

Every three years, the Episcopal church family meets as a bicameral legislature – the governing body that includes the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops to make decisions on the spiritual and administrative direction of the church. This is the primary governing and legislative body of our church to make decisions for the good of all the entire Episcopal family. This summer the General Convention will meet the last week of this month in Louisville, Kentucky, and notably will be electing a new Presiding Bishop.

In the House of Deputies there are equal numbers of ordained and lay deputies\ elected to represent dioceses from across the country. And each diocese (and an additional three regional areas of the church) are represented in the House of Deputies by four clergy deputies and four lay deputies – around 800 in total.² Here are the demographics of the 79th House of Deputies in Austin, Texas. There were 852 deputies; a majority were women for the first time – 53%); first time deputies – 44% – were also a record, and it was the youngest deputation ever. There were many firsts that convention.

All bishops – diocesan, coadjutor, suffragan, and assistant bishops³ – whether active or retired – nearly 200 in all – have seat, voice, and vote at General Convention. And resolutions must pass both houses. Between General Conventions a group called the Executive Council is authorized to make decisions on behalf of the wider church. Other counsel or advice is given by the “House of Bishops” -- a gathering of bishops of the Episcopal Church who meet regularly to reflect on spiritual and moral issues.

This year the most interesting vote at General Convention will be the election of our next Presiding Bishop.⁴ We have been praying for the work of Presiding Bishop Curry for nine years. Now the Episcopal Church will elect a new presiding bishop. The procedure for the discernment of nominees for presiding bishop is an arduous one. The slate of nominees was announced earlier this year. The vetting process for presiding bishop is thorough, involving voluminous disclosures, interminable interviews, and endless evaluations. Imagine having three different psych exams in one day.⁵ The state of the nominees’ dioceses weighs heavily in the nominating process. Bishops typically submit to the process only after considerable cajoling and encouragement by their colleagues. While the Presiding Bishop’s position is at the top of the hierarchy of our Church, the process for all three Holy Orders in the Episcopal Church – for bishops, for priests, and for deacons – involves long and prayerful discerning. It is most unlike a job search in other vocations these days.

I came across this supposed letter to Jesus about 12 unlikely candidates for the job of

disciples. The author of the memo is unknown. It is addressed to Jesus, Son of Joseph, Woodcrafter Carpenter Shop, Nazareth, from Jordan Management Consultants, Jerusalem:

Dear Sir:

Thank you for submitting the resumes of the 12 men you have picked for management positions in your new organization. All of them have now taken our battery of tests; we have not only run the results through our computer, but also arranged personal interviews for each of them with our psychologist and vocational aptitude consultant.

It is the staff opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education, and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have the team concept. We would recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capability.

Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that would tend to undermine morale.

We feel that it is our duty to tell you that Matthew has been blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau. James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus definitely have radical leanings, and they both registered a high score on the manic-depressive scale.

One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a keen business mind and has contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious, and responsible. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right-hand man.

We wish you every success in your new venture.

And a 21st century human resources specialist might have written the following to

Saul Paul as an applicant for serving at the First Christian Church in Antioch, Syria.

I have your application for missionary appointment before me and will be as frank as possible concerning your qualifications as a foreign missionary. We have to be very careful in choosing our missionaries, and our Missions Board has reviewed your case thoroughly. We have decided that it would be unwise to send you to the foreign field for the following reasons:

Your previous actions have been very rash and unseemly for a minister. We learned that in a public meeting you opposed Dr. Simon Peter, an esteemed minister with a high reputation. [Gal. 2:11-14].

We also hear that you refused to compromise with other ministers such that a special council meeting had to be called in Jerusalem to prevent a serious split in the churches. [Acts 15:1-30] .

You have taught counter to mature Jewish brethren in nearly every city you have visited where we had encouraged the converted Pagans to be properly circumcised. Mr. Paul, these men control the synagogues you could be ministering in if you would simply tone down your dialog into a more friendly and respectful exchange. [Gal. 5:2-12]

Further, you admit to being an unskilled public speaker. [2Col. 10:10, 11:6]. Instead of honing your oratory skills, you spend a considerable amount of time writing letters to insignificant little "churches" that meet in homes. [Acts 28:3-6] Honestly now; do you really think that such misguided activities are what will lead to your success in the world of religion?

And.....we have learned that you have a jail record in several places. [2Col. 11:23-27] If this is true, it puts you in a very bad light.

After enumerating many of his other faults, the employment specialist said that after close scrutiny of his case, that Paul was undoubtedly the most unqualified applicant they had ever seen for missionary ministry.

Thankfully discerning a calling to a vocation in ministry does not involve interaction with employment specialists. A calling to be ordained or to other ministries involves discernment in the community of the faithful. It requires much prayer. Often in discernment we trace our own and our prayer partners' and committees' spiritual journeys. And discernment always takes time – often more time than any of the parties want. A calling to serve God and God's people may come suddenly by the side of a fishing boat or in a blinding flash of light, as it did for St. Paul, or over a long time by affirmation of many friends and colleagues and family members. However, discernment is always done in community with the family of God though not necessarily with ones' birth family. Remember that after living into his ministry, healing, casting our demons, teaching God's ways to his disciples and taking God's message to the people, when Jesus went home his ministry was not affirmed, indeed his mother and brothers thought him foolish if not all together crazy.

I encourage us all to pray for the entire family of Episcopalians who will be gathered at General Convention. And may we continue to come together as the family of St. Andrew's By-the-Sea throughout the summer to worship and to learn from one another.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ There is a resolution that will come before the 81st General Convention that might extend that age limit to 75.

² The tally of this year's deputies will be published after the 81st Convention begins.

³ A coadjutor is a bishop had been duly elected but not yet officially consecrated, suffragan bishops are elected to serve in a diocese in an assisting role, and assistant bishops are retired bishops who do interim or occasional work under the diocesan bishop.

⁴ The nominees to be formally submitted this summer's General Convention are Nebraska Bishop J. Scott Barker, Pennsylvania Bishop Daniel G.P. Gutiérrez, Atlanta Bishop Robert Wright, Northwestern Pennsylvania Bishop Sean Rowe, who also serves as bishop provisional of the Diocese of Western New York, and Central New York Bishop De-De Duncan-Probe. Biographical information can be found on the Episcopal News Service Internet site.

⁵ Whew! We priests only had to fool one psychiatrist or psychologist to be ordained.