

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

June 7, 2015; The 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: 1 Samuel 8:4–15, 16–20, 11:14–15; Psalm 138; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1;
Mark 3:20-35.

The Limits of Man-Made Systems of Governance

The stories of the Hebrew scripture, the Old Testament, are full of lessons for us.

Often we read these ancient accounts and find that thousands of years later, they still have much to teach us.

Today, we find of the people of God at a cross-roads.

We read, “All the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, ‘You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us then, a king to govern us, like other nations’.”

Samuel had been a good leader, but his sons were a disappointment, corrupt, and the people were not interested in being led by them, as well, the people looked around at the powerful nations near them and had concerns that without a king and centralized system of government, they would not be able to defend themselves.

Their concerns were valid, but was their request the answer?

Well, it is complicated...and that comes through in the biblical narrative.

Israel’s relationship status with God on Facebook would be, “it’s complicated.”

(God’s relationship status with Israel would be “married.”)

Relationship with God for Israel as the people moved from a tribal society to a monarchical society was complicated and resulted in two different presentations in the Bible of this transition - sometimes called the promonarchical source and the

antimonarchical source.¹

We get the anti today.

We don't get chapter ten of first Samuel, which makes
 having a king seem not as bad a choice, and maybe even what
 God wanted for the people.

But from our reading when we hear Israel say, we want to be "like other
 nations," well, that is not what God wants to hear.

After all, Israel is chosen and holy, not like other nations.

To be holy is to be different, set apart, to live to God's glory.

We are called to be holy.

Called to be different; called to listen for the Spirit.

Samuel knows the people are called to be different and holy and puts up a
 protest to this request for a king.

God, as described, is aware that Samuel might feel rejected...but puts it in
 perspective for Samuel --it is not you that the people have rejected
 Samuel, it is me, God says.

Not surprising to God: ...ever since I brought them out of slavery in
 Egypt, they have been looking to other gods (idols).

Issues of trust pervade this complicated relationship.

Let them have that for which they ask...but warn them...God says.

And Samuel does, telling the people that a king will take from them to
 create an army...take from them to staff his court...take from them
 out of every part of their lives in order to support the
 monarchy.

But moving to monarchy they were, and kings they would have.

What keeps such ancient writings from being exclusively the concern of
 historians?

¹ Among others, a good introduction to these matters can be found in Walter Brueggemann's book *An introduction to the Old Testament, The Canon and Christian Imagination*, Louisville: WJK Press, 2003.

We believe that through the power of the Holy Spirit, God continues to reveal truth to us, for us, in our time.

What might that truth be or what might a truth or two be that we can glean from today's reading from the 1st Book of Samuel?

Well, we are reminded that all governments, all ways of governing ourselves, be that in the realm of politics or in how we structure the Church, are a human invention...designed by people given the culture and circumstances in which they lived when they created it.

As we move into the time of electing our next president of United States, we are aware that even the best among those, who will run, are human and therefore limited and not perfect.

We trust in God, and work with our government.

The same could be said for the way we relate to the structures and governance of the Episcopal Church.

And this brings me to one of my favorite stories that some of you have heard before.

A number of years ago, I was going through the checkout line at the grocery store, wearing my collar, and out of nowhere, the woman checking me out, looks at me and says, "I don't believe in organized religion." And I replied, "Neither do I. I believe in God."

When I've talk about the Nicene Creed, I often say, quoting the book, *Your Faith, Your Life*, perhaps a better way to say I believe, a better translation is, to say "to give your heart to God."

I believe in God; I give my heart to God.²

The Israelites of long ago could have a monarchy; we can have a democracy; we can have a system of Church governance and structure, but our hearts belong to God, and we have to be careful not to make an idol of what we ourselves have created.

² Gamber, Jenifer with Bill Lewellis, *Your Faith, Your Life, An Introduction to the Episcopal Church*. Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2009.

This can be hard for us in the Episcopal Church because we are what is called hierarchical Church with a lot of structure.

Part of our structure of governance is General Convention.

Once every three years the General Convention is held, which consists of two houses, the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies.

This bicameral system of governance for the Church was created by the same men who created the government of the United States.

Both were created by men, and it was men.

Therefore, we are called to be open to the movement of the Spirit in how we govern ourselves as a Church.

And, I propose that when we know that we love God more than Church structure, we can be open to change for the good of the mission God has, and is, giving us.

I'm thinking a lot about General Convention because in about two weeks, I will be going as an elected deputy from this diocese to General Convention in Salt Lake City for two weeks.

I will be communicating from there with anyone who wants to follow along, through blogging, Twitter and Facebook.³

There are resolutions proposed to change, some might say radically, the structures and governance of the Episcopal Church.

To give you an example, we may have a chance to vote to move from a bicameral to unicameral legislative body at General Convention, meaning the Bishops would meet with the Deputies, the clergy, other than bishops, and laity.

What would that do?

It would perhaps make our decisions more in keeping with how the majority of the Church feels the Spirit is leading us.

And all this gets complicated...has to do with your theology of ordination and bishops and that sort of thing.

But if we all meet together and voted together, things would be different

³ <http://godatgencon2015.blogspot.com/> <https://twitter.com/HilaryBSmith>
<https://www.facebook.com/hilary.smith.9659>

and perhaps better represent the will of the people, and possibly the will of the Spirit, as discerned by the majority.

Right now the House of Bishops can reject resolutions passed by the Deputies, even though that house is much smaller.

This happened in 2012, the last time we met in General Convention: the House of Deputies passed the resolution officially allowing for the communion of the not-yet baptized, as a pastoral response to an on-the-ground situation...I voted for that as did many and it passed in the House of Deputies, but defeated in the House of Bishops.

Some would look at that and say that the Bishops are there to keep us inline with our tradition, but what is the Spirit saying, now in our time?

If only this were a problem for us; if only 100 not-yet baptized people would show up every week wanting communion...if only... what a great problem that would be to have!

It didn't pass, which means we continue to have the official statement, which is the norm of the Christian faith, but I like many, would never deny communion to anyone, believing that it is Christ who invites who Christ wants to invite, which I think is everyone, and that communion can be the entryway to life in community and faith and potentially led to baptism.

On another topic: the Spirit in civil society and in the Church is obviously leading all to full inclusion for those who feel called to marry someone of the same sex.

This will come up again at General Convention.

There are those who are saying the proposal to regularize the blessing of marriage of same-sex couples is not being made in the correct way based on our system of governance...and they will vote against it, at least they say they will right now.

I tell you this to let you know that it is the man-made system that could result in CNN saying "The Episcopal Church votes against

same-sex marriage.”

But that is not what will have happened (but maybe it will have a little).

It's complicated.

But for me it has become simple; life is now; and life is short; I will never vote for structure and a system of Church governance over justice, inclusion, and love.

Every step forward for justice, and I mean for all people, inclusion, and love, has always come about, first, outside of the norms maintained by those in power and those with something to lose.

Pray for us; pray for all who will be making decisions for our Church.

The path of the Hebrew people with monarchy would be a rocky one...ups and downs.

Even King David would disappoint the people.

It certainly did not guarantee safety and security; eventually the Kingdom would be divided, into Judah and Israel.

So that by the time we get to Jesus, there were many who hoped that he would be the king for whom the people had hoped and prayed.

But Jesus would turn all that upside down; his Kingship, his power and authority would not come from raising an army to fight the Romans, but instead, his power was known through sacrifice and vulnerability.

We continue to follow Jesus, the Christ, because of how he led.

Jesus was not big on supporting the structures of his day, even calling into question the meaning of family, a foundation of Judaism.

The Way of Jesus still brings people together to stand for justice, equality, love and peace in the world.

They said he was crazy and possessed by a demon...but there was something about Jesus...something about him that some were starting to see...starting to see beyond the structures.

We are here because we have a sense that life is more than we can see, and that there is a spirituality to life, which nurtures us and helps us to walk in the Way of Jesus...the way of justice, the way of peace, the way of hope and the way of love. Amen.