An Episcopal Point of View

I did not choose to be an Episcopalian. My parents made the choice for me.

From the stories I have heard about my baptism, I objected vociferously when the water hit my head.

By the grace of God, I had a wonderful Episcopal family and extended family, stimulating priests, teachers by word and example of the Good News of God in Christ. I grew up believing in the vision of Anglicanism. I delighted in the idea that we were a communal faith rather than a doctrinal faith. By that I understood us to be connected with one another by friendship, mutual concern and love. We gathered to celebrate our life together.

Unlike other Christian denominations, we were not people of a book, a rule, a covenant, a doctrine, or a teaching of some person other than Jesus Christ.

We believed in catholic order and faith. We believed in the revelation of God in scriptures, expected the Holy Spirit to guide us, and keep in mind where we had been and where we were going.

What mattered most was the trust we had in one another to keep agreements, to care how others would deal with decisions, and above all, to nurture each other in spiritual growth. To be a member of the Anglican Communion meant to be in a communal relationship of trust and love as the primary bond that held us together.

Episcopal faith recognizes one thing, first of all, about the nature of God and humankind, and it is this: If God really is God, then God must, by definition, surpass our human understanding.

But, not entirely. We have Scripture; we have tradition; we have reason; we have religious authority; we have our own spiritual experiences of the Divine. But there is still something we will never grasp, because God is beyond our human categories, then God cannot be captured for certain.

Who can possibly understand the height and depth and greatness of a wonderful, immeasurable and incomprehensible deity to the point of knowing that his or her way is better than another’s. We cannot know with the kind of surety that allows us to proclaim truth with a capital T. There will always be something that alludes us.

If there weren’t, it would not be God.

In Anglican Christian faith, doubt is not a threat. If we have never doubted, how can we say we have really believed? True belief is not about blind submission. It is open-eyed acceptance, and acceptance requires persistent distance from the truth, and that distance is doubt. Doubt, in other words, can feed faith, rather than destroy it. And it forces us, even while believing, to recognize our fundamental duty with respect to God’s truth: humility. We do not know.

Which is why we believe.

You may approve or disapprove of the actions by General Convention. You may like or dislike where the church is headed. You may have rejoiced or disheartened by the election of Katharine Jefferts Schori as the Presiding Bishop. You may be saddened or couldn’t care less that The Episcopal Church may be relegated to second-class status in the Anglican Communion.

Whatever your views on issues and wherever you stand on the theological spectrum, one thing is clear: The Episcopal Church is in transition. It is not what it used to be, but what it will be is not yet fully clear. Episcopalians, of whatever label, seem anxious, uneasy, unsettled.

We should not shy away from the Episcopal label but affirm it all the more – because we have something wonderful to offer the world. We need to focus on the Episcopal way of being Christians – a way that transcends liberal and conservative ideologies but is inclusive of both.

When the first President George Bush spoke of a “kinder, gentler America” I immediately thought of a “kinder, gentler” Christianity. A kinder, gentler Christianity, is called The Episcopal Church.
Yes, The Episcopal Church can seem confused, uncertain, sometimes messy, at times stumbling, but almost always it is profoundly pastoral. Pastoral is the key word here.

At our best we are a pastoral church that blesses rather than curses, affirms rather than condemns, a church that counts people in rather than kicks people out; a church that is always willing to expand its circle of love just a little bit more so that no one is ever shut out.

Think how many of our parishioners are divorced and remarried, yet are members in good standing, or struggle with questions of faith but still find acceptance, or have had an abortion without automatically being excommunicated, or are living together without being married, yet are welcomed to receive Holy Communion; or have been ministered to and cared for in times of crisis, despite their marginal status as church members. There are many examples of how the very inclusiveness of this church allows love to seep through.

Most parishioners have known that love --- at a baby's baptism, at the reception of Holy Communion, at the marriage of a son or daughter, at the death of a loved one, in times of sickness and confusion, in a nursing home or hospital bed, the church is there for its people --- praying for them, blessing them, comforting them, anointing them with oil, pardoning their sins, and strengthening them for the journey ahead.

This is The Episcopal Church at its best – what the church is called to do and does so well – being a pastoral presence in the world. And this is how most of our people experience the church, as that community where God’s amazing grace and unconditional love touches lives.

That is why despite the rumblings most of our people want the church not only to survive but thrive --- not only for their own needs but for the sakes of their children and grandchildren as well as their friends and neighbors.

Because I believe in this Episcopal way of being a Christian, which is reflected in our parish life together, I can unreservedly and unapologetically ask you to join together with me in making The Episcopal Church more than it is --- more biblical, more faithful, more inclusive, more relevant, more Christ-centered, friendlier, larger, and more gospel oriented.

For this I know: when the church loves the world as Jesus did, then the world somehow becomes a little more of what God created it to be. After all, if we fail in love, we fail in all things else. All other matters are secondary.

In her book, Traveling Mercies, author Ann Lamott tells the story about a 7-year old girl who became lost one day. She ran up and down the streets of the big town where she lived, but she couldn’t find a single landmark. She was frightened. Finally, a police officer stopped to help her. The officer put her in the passenger seat of the patrol car and they drove around until finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the officer, and then she said in a firm voice,

“You can drop me off now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.”