

Ours is a self-critical religion. You cannot be a Christian or a Jew, coming out of that Abrahamic root, without criticizing your faith and your tradition. This came home to me powerfully as a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School, which comes out of a Protestant base. One of my comrades in study was a Roman Catholic layperson called Jerry O'Sullivan. You couldn't get more Catholic or more Irish than Jerry. He was studying as a PhD student in theology, and he was one of the proctors in my introductory theology class. We were all filled with self-righteousness and assurance as young divinity students. And Jerry's fidelity to the Roman Catholic Church as a layperson was truly a conundrum to us. "Jerry" we would say, "how can you **still** be a Catholic?" And Jerry would always respond, "The church is a whore, but she's my mother." I have lived with that a long time, and the longer I live the more true I know that to be. Because what Jerry was saying was that the church is filled with error, and will go to the highest bidder, and we forget what we're called to do and who we're called to be. But we're family... we're God's family.

That statement is deeply rooted in the historical record of the Hebrew prophets, which we hear this morning preach to us from Isaiah, "Get up and shout!" says God to the prophets. "Tell Israel – 'I don't like their fasts, I don't like their worship, I think they are hypocrites because in the midst of them are hungry, in the midst of them are the poor and the oppressed, in the midst of them are the naked and the homeless, and all they can give me is fasting and prayer.' I spit them out!" But Israel is God's family, so He may choose to spit them out, but ultimately **who** does He go to, or **who** does She lean on?

“What I want,” says God, “is **not** your nice church. I don't really care about your vestments or where your hymns come from. I don't care what language it's in. I don't care that you all agree or disagree. What I care about is that you're not pointing your little finger each other... ‘you, **you** were the problem!’ ‘If only you would act right we would be alright.’ ‘Oh, we're getting old and white and irrelevant. Oh, we don't have enough money’, I don't care about any of that!” God says through the prophets. “What I care about is that you are a people that does justice and loves mercy, that you care for your kin, that you tell the truth, that you act in concrete forms to make the world look like my heart.”

The prophets are the voice of self-criticism. They invite us to change and to be who God has created us to be.

St. Stephen's historically has served a prophetic function within the Diocese of Texas. This call to prophetic life has been near and dear to us, and I would submit it's been the charism of our congregation. A charism is a gift of the Holy Spirit that comes in particular ways at particular times. This Parish called Helen Havens to be the first woman Rector of a congregation in the Diocese of Texas. That was the first time that this diocese had opened itself up to over half of its membership for ordained leadership. St. Stephen's has also been a leader in AIDS ministry and then taking the staff to full inclusion of LGBT people in the body of Christ, not only in this place but in the life of the world and in the life of the church. And today I'm so excited to be able to say that 30 years worth of work, and then some, is bearing fruit. Some folks in the Integrity chapter in the Diocese of Texas and Houston organized to put on the Diocesan agenda an amendment to Canon 43, which was just reported out by our

delegates, This was an unusual proposal because about 125 people signed on to this resolution, and that's just not the way it's done in the Diocese of Texas. To have that many people who aren't delegates to say "yes, this is important". What Canon 43 does basically is define marriage as between a man and a woman, and it came into place in our Diocese in the late 1990s when it became clear that the Episcopal Church nationally was going to take seriously gay and lesbian civil rights and full participation in the life of the church. There was almost an immediate backlash in the areas of the country that are conservative as is the Diocese of Texas. Part of our prophetic ministry at that time under Helen's leadership, along with lay leaders in our community (Melinda (Flannery) was part of that, Muffy Maroney, Carvel Glenn), was to reach out to folks at St. John the Divine Episcopal Church, which was kind of... on the other end of the theological spectrum, let's put it that way... I was going to say 'our nemesis', but they are not, they're our brothers and sisters. We reached out to say, "How do we talk to each other about this? We **really** disagree, we **really** see the world in a different way than each other, and yet we **really** love the Lord, and we are **really** called to the same ministry of reconciliation. When that request went up to the Bishop at that time..., because we had a model that was beginning to work..., it was rebuffed. The Bishop wasn't ready to spend the political capital to take leadership in the direction of dialogue. And as a result, year after year the Diocese of Texas had to deal with resolutions that would call for change or repeal of a clearly discriminatory rule. Bishop Doyle this weekend did something that was truly courageous - he acknowledged that the Church was wrong, that his predecessors lacked courage, and that dialogue and moving forward is what must happen if we are to be an authentic

Church that embraces the ministry of reconciliation. Andy knows, as do we, that you can't talk reconciliation out in the world when you are not reconciled at home. We know that from our own lives with our own families as we've come out, and as we've struggled with the reaction. Andy invited us to recognize our isolation – Laura (Thewalt) embraced that well, but what she didn't include was... for years the Diocese of Texas had manipulated its money away from the national Church, in opposition to the positions that the national Church as a whole group had taken on progressive issues, whether those were women, divestiture of South Africa funds, or the place of LGBT folks. And we had withheld that money in foundations, so it wouldn't count towards the assessment. The way our Church works is each congregation kicks money upstairs for common mission on a Diocesan level and each Diocese kicks money to the national level for common work in mission, domestically and abroad. By withholding our funds we withheld our heart, we withheld our participation, and we thought we were communicating judgment. What Andy recognized in calling us 'isolated', was that we had abandoned the body, we had been pointing the finger (to use Isaiah's words) without working on reconciliation, justice, and mercy. And so he publicly made a commitment financially to support the national Church, ending 30 years of estrangement. THIS IS HUGE!

While we may not trust this action, we must move forward, modeling but it is to be reconciling forces in this new conversation. I was part of the conversation to withhold or withdraw Canon 43 from discussion because the Bishop asked us to do so in light of his firm commitment. It was obvious that reconciliation needs to happen within the

Diocese of Texas and within the church. He called for an end to the culture wars, and an end to us modeling those tensions that we see in the world around us. And instead to be called into deeper reconciliation.

This is **so** important for us at St. Stephen's. Because we are being invited to lend our voice, our talent, our time, our people, and our money to make this reconciliatory ministry felt and known in the world. One of the big challenges and opportunities we face as a Diocese is we now have a billion dollars. The income from that every year is going to be \$30 million. Andy posed the question about how we shape the future. The people in the future will look back at us and say, "How much they trust God?" "How much risk were they willing to be able to engage?" "How much difference did they make?"

We have an opportunity at St. Stephen's to be part of that conversation. To put our money, our people, and our resources into that work of transforming this region of the state, and impacting the world for justice and mercy. It will be our failure if because of our lack of trust we fail to act. We will be the recipients of the prophets' judgment. "**You** pointed the finger, **you** did not feed, **you** talked bitterly, **you** did not clothe."

May we have the courage as a community to take the next steps forward, to **lead**. May we have the courage to risk a 'new thing', and to go in places that may be deeply uncomfortable to us, that may invite us to join forces with people that we would never go to a cocktail party

with, but for the love of Jesus we will serve. May we have the courage to become that city whose roads are repaired, that tree planted by the water whose flow never ceases. May we have the courage to be salt and light. Amen