

SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE PRINCE OF PEACE?

If I asked you to describe the personality of Jesus what would you say? What adjectives would you use to describe his temperament? Most people would say that he's gentle, loving, kind, and compassionate. Then what do we do with Jesus as he appears in tonight's lesson? The Jesus who says: "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth, I did not come to bring peace but a sword."

Whatever happened to The Prince of Peace? What in the world is Jesus getting at?

Some Christians believe that Jesus was approving the use of violence. For them the sword is literally a weapon and a justification for violence, war, and capital punishment.

Other Christians see the sword as a symbol of conflict. I personally don't think that Jesus was advocating violence – but he was warning us that we might encounter violence or conflict when we follow his teaching.

Standing up for our beliefs is sometimes painful. When I first came to St. Andrews' several years ago, things were changing. There was a small group of people who had a vision of what St. Andrews' might become. They wanted to start a chapter of Integrity – the Episcopal Church ministry for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered people and their friends and families. They had a vision of St. Andrew's as a radically inclusive, loving church where ALL would be truly welcome. They proposed to our rector at the time, Fr. Bill Hamilton, to found a Palm Beach County Chapter of Integrity. Some of those founding members were Canon Nolan, Bob Pingpank, John Lacy, Vance Oden, and Herb Steer. Not only did this group have a wonderful vision – they were also fortunate that Fr. Bill is a man who understands something about the inclusive love of Jesus – not only did he understand, but he also had the courage of his convictions. So Integrity Palm Beach was founded! What a wonderful innovative addition to the life of St. Andrew's! What a great new ministry!

But guess what! It wasn't all wonderful. There were some in the congregation who felt that Integrity had no place here. Felt it so strongly that they left the church. I was new here at the time, so I didn't know all the people involved, but I did know one: a man that I became acquainted with in my short time at St. Andrew's – someone who truly loved the Episcopal Church and truly loved St. Andrew's. But under the circumstances he felt that he couldn't stay. He believed that the mission of Integrity was wrong. Now this was not some ultra conservative crank just making noise. He was a thoughtful man who served St. Andrew's in many ways. He was valuable to the church for any number of reasons. I couldn't understand his position but that was how he felt. So he left. And it really was a loss. I suppose some of the others who couldn't agree with the concept of Integrity left a terrible void as well.

Just as Jesus told us in tonight's lesson: "One's foes will be members of one's own household."

But as time went by things got better. Many of those who remained came to embrace the new ministry. Because of Integrity, we began to attract new members – and I don't just mean the gay community – I mean all kinds of people who are simply attracted to the idea of a radically inclusive church. One of the new people who came to St. Andrew's told me that she'd seen a flyer about Integrity in an ice cream parlor and as she put it – "I decided that that was the kind of church I really wanted to belong to."

It can't have been easy for Fr. Bill in those difficult days, and it can't have been easy for those who were on the vestry at the time. But following this moral struggle St. Andrew's has come to embrace Integrity and there's now a tremendous inner peace that we feel with this unique ministry. It was the right thing to do! Because the Kingdom of God is a divine place whose hallmark is radical inclusivity. None of us has a right to say who gets in and who doesn't: not the congregation of St. Andrew's Church, nor any Bishop, nor, may I add, the Lambeth Conference.

But just because we're home to Integrity doesn't mean that we're the perfect church. We have far to go in some ways. We need to think about the millennium goals of the Episcopal Church and what we can do about them. We need to look for new ways to be in relationship with our home, planet Earth, and with other children of God. We need to find ways to welcome in the Kingdom of Heaven even if it doesn't make us popular. Jesus is asking a lot of us, but that's the life of a disciple. Don't we come here every week to renew our discipleship?

Whatever happened to the Prince of Peace? He's still here, and he's still loving and compassionate. But sometimes he asks us to take up the sword of conflict. As we've seen right here at St. Andrew's, conflict can lead to tolerance, tolerance can lead to transformation, and transformation can lead to peace.