

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

One of the ways the Episcopal Church is different from other denominations is our form of governance. Our denomination is guided through its life together through the laws and regulations set forth in our Constitution and Canons. The Canons, another word for laws, are quite specific about how we are to function in the day to day life of our parishes and dioceses and in our larger church, which is now international. They cover everything from membership to elections of members to various offices, and include rules about qualifications for specific ministries, even describing the ways those ministries will be done, and requiring that those who participate in them be licensed to do so.

Having these Canons to guide us provides uniformity to our practice of faith in churches that are part of our denomination. This can be a good thing because it puts every Episcopal parish and mission on a level playing field, at least in terms of how we're structured to get things done. But the other side of our church life is a bit more ambiguous. That includes the way we worship and also the traditions and practices that are pertinent only to a particular parish—the way we've always done things here. Between the Canons and the traditions, sometimes it feels like walking through a minefield, trying not to step on something that's more important to people than it may seem! And sometimes we bear a pretty strong resemblance to the Scribes and Pharisees as we try to guard and protect what's important to us! All of us at times are like the chief scribes and Pharisees, me by saying that our canons won't allow us to do things a particular way, and all of us by hanging on to cherished traditions.

We come by this naturally, of course—through scripture and tradition that's been handed down to us through thousands of years. Hear again the words of Moses in today's lesson from the book of Deuteronomy, here read from *The Message* translation: "Now listen, Israel, listen carefully to the rules and regulations that I am teaching you to follow...Don't add a word to what I command you, and don't remove a word from it. Keep the commands of God, your God, that I am commanding you." No wonder these Pharisees and scribes were so critical of the disciples, who, from their perspective, did not live according to the tradition of the elders. Remember that the Pharisees were the keepers of the law; it was not only their tradition to practice what they had been taught, but to make sure everyone else did, too. Many times they focused on what we would call the "small" things, the rituals they observed, like the cleanliness and purity rituals.

We also do that, don't we? We get hung up on our own rituals—like the order in which the altar candles are to be lit, or the proper responses after the readings. Whether we're serving, or participating in worship, what matters to God is the motivation of our hearts and spirits, not whether we can do it perfectly! Jesus makes that clear when he says: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

As a priest, I frequently feel the tension between being a keeper of the law and an enabler of heart and spirit, and I think you'll agree there are often differences between the two. In this month's Lych Gate you'll read about how membership is defined in the Episcopal Church. What is omitted from that article is the reason that membership is important. In the Episcopal Church, you must be a member to vote in vestry elections, and you must be a confirmed member to serve on the vestry, to serve the chalice at the Eucharist, and to take communion to those who are homebound. What the canon does not, and cannot—define is the importance of what is in one's heart and how that motivates us. Jesus calls us back to that, reminding us that what God calls us to do and be matters far more than the rules and regulations we've imposed on ourselves and each other.

Many of you are familiar with what is considered one of the greatest American victories in the history of the Olympics. The United States hockey team was not supposed to have a chance in 1980. The Soviet Union seemed invincible and unbeatable. Their team included elite professionals who had played together for years. The Americans, on the other hand, had teammates who had never played together. None of them were professionals; they had come from colleges and universities across America. An American victory over the Soviets in the medal round seemed improbable, if not impossible.

According to the movie based on these unlikely heroes, the turning point for the Americans came in a practice led by Coach Herb Brooks. The coach was demanding, perhaps driven to a fault. Brooks was not happy with the play of the team, so he had the players skating sprints that brought them to the point of exhaustion. Some of the assistant coaches were worried that the players would either pass out or quit. They urged Brooks to stop. But he pressed forward.

During the practices, Brooks would ask a player who he played for. The player would respond proudly with the name of his college. Over and over again Brooks asked the players the same question during their grueling practices.

One of the hockey players, recalling Brooks' persistent question, looked up from his prostrate position on the ice after his last sprint. Gasping for breath, he declared, "I play for the United States of America."

That was the defining moment.

And the team responded. They would beat the mighty Soviets in the first game of the medal round, and they would ultimately beat Finland for the gold medal.

They got it. They did not play for the disparate colleges from which they came. They played for the United States of America. They not only knew the game they were playing; they knew for whom they were playing: "I play for the United States of America." They clearly understood their purpose. They clearly understood how to carry out their purpose.

At my ordination, I vowed to "be loyal to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of Christ as this Church as received them." I would never have done that unless I loved The Episcopal Church. But I'm always called to remember that in that vow Christ comes first. Sometimes it's hard to separate the two, but all of us should remember that it's Christ first, then the church.

Our Catechism tells us that the mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ, by praying and worshiping, proclaiming the Gospel, and promoting justice, peace, and love, all through the ministry of its members. It's easy for us to become so focused on how we do things that we lose sight of why we do them. As in most things in our lives, perspective is everything, and if we lose our focus, our perspective becomes skewed and dysfunctional.

Henri Nouwen once said, "Deep in the recesses of our minds and hearts lies the hidden treasure that we once had and now seek. We know its preciousness, and we know that it holds the gift we most desire: a spiritual life stronger than physical death." The gift that we most desire is the gift we're called to share with the world, the love of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Let's stop thinking about him as an unseen idol, but instead a coach who pushes us to focus on what he wants from us and encourages us to do our very best to please him. *Amen.*