No Longer Strangers and Sojourners

preached at the opening service
of the 23rd Annual Conference of the Union of Black Episcopalians
in Holy Name of Jesus Church, New Orleans, Louisiana
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"You are no longer strangers and sojourners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and the household of God." — *Ephesians 2:19*

Whenever the last week in June rolls around, and it's time to head off for the annual conference of the Union of Black Episcopalians, the verse of Scripture which comes to my mind is one which flows from the pen of the Psalmist, which if I may paraphrase, goes like this: "Behold how good and joyful a thing it is for brethren — and 'sistren' — to dwell together in unity." Now the UBE conference is different things to different people. It is certainly for all of us a time for fellowship. It is like a big Sunday School picnic; it is, indeed, the gathering of the clan — that is, C-L-A-N. For many, it takes on the characteristics of "The Dating Game." Vestries and search committees come to woo prospective rectors, who, in turn, come to be wooed and to impress their suitors. Others come (to use the buzzword of the day) to network; others come, especially this year on the eve of a General Convention, to strategize; and still others, although admittedly far fewer in number, come to exchange gossip. But despite the respective agendas of the conferees — hidden or otherwise — we all come to the UBE Conference, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "to lengthen our loins and strengthen our stakes," to celebrate our gift of blackness, which we offer in all its diversity to our beloved church, a church in which we are often cast into the role, as Bishop Burgess suggests, of the "loyal opposition"; a "white" church, to borrow a theme from the Bishop's book, in which we labor mightily to preach a black gospel.

But this year, thanks be to God, we have a bigger, broader agenda. We have, it would appear, been cured of myopia all too present in the past, and we have decided to look beyond our shores, to hold up, embrace and identify with all of our brothers and sisters throughout the Diaspora, our brothers and sisters who make up, if you will, the colored tiles of the Anglican mosaic. This year, we celebrate, to use a phrase coined by Kortright Davis some seven years ago, and which has now taken its rightful place in the church's lexicon, our Afro-Anglicanism. And because that is our agenda this year, and because we are offering up tonight this beautiful and soulful mass for the mission of the church, giving thanks that God has sent his son Jesus Christ "to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are nigh," I ask that you meditate with me on the nineteenth verse of the second chapter of Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians: "You are no longer strangers and sojourners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and the household of God."

Courtesy of Harold Lewis

Now while scholars may differ in their opinion as to whether or not Paul was the author of the Epistle to the Ephesians, and while they may not be of one mind when it comes to whoever wrote it to the Christian community at Ephesus, there is one thing of which theologians are absolutely in agreement: the Epistle to the Ephesians is a virtual compendium of the faith. Not only are all things created toward an ultimate unity in Christ, it declares — in beautiful, poetic and yet unambiguous language — but it is in the church that the attainment of the consummation is to take place. In verse upon verse, the Blessed Apostle uses not only rich imagery but everyday concepts familiar to his readers, to drive his point home.

One of these concepts is that of the *polis*, the city-state. Paul is writing to readers all too familiar with the bitter enmity between Jews and Gentiles, and this division was nowhere more apparent than in the pecking order in the city-state. Only Gentiles could be its full-fledged citizens; the Jews, had no real ties to it; they believed their true home to be the Temple at Jerusalem. Such Jews fell into two categories: they were either strangers or sojourners. Now the word which we translate as "strangers" is *xenoi*, which, as my Greek professor would jokingly say, comes from the word "xenophobia." A *xenos* was more than just a stranger; he was a foreigner, an alien, an outsider, an exile, sometimes even an outlaw or spy, someone not to be trusted. While residing in the city-state, he had absolutely no rights or privileges in it. Now the sojourners, the *paroikoi*, literally "those outside the house," were a little better off. They had certain limited rights and privileges. They were akin to those traveling on a visa, or perhaps more accurately, to those holding a green card. For a while they could move about in the city-state, they were in it, but not of it; they were always technically "outside the house," and they lived under the constant threat that such privileges as they did enjoy could be summarily revoked by those who had granted them in the first place.

The Gentiles, it should be pointed out, got their come-uppance if they had the temerity to enter the Temple. Here the tables were turned. If Gentiles dared to attempt to enter the inner court of the Temple, they would see a sign (reminiscent of the "Right of Admission Reserved" signs in South Africa): "No man of another nation is to enter . . . and whoever is caught will have himself to blame that his death ensues."

Paul takes these exclusive concepts and turns them on their head. He strikes a blow for inclusiveness two thousand years before the Episcopal Church invented it. In the church of Jesus Christ, the Blessed Apostle exhorts us, there will be no more of this in-group, out-group stuff. Those differences have melted away in God's household, the church, where everyone — Gentiles and Jews; slave and free; men and women, are *sympolitai*, that is, one with the *polis* — the new *polis*, the city of God; they are now fellow citizens, and all have equal access to the Throne of Heavenly Grace, precisely because that right of access does not depend on the laws which men contrive, but comes instead from the free gift of the Spirit. What is more, Saint Paul delights in telling us, all sorts and conditions of men and women are one with the saints, the *hagioi*, those who have been made holy by the outpouring of that same Spirit.

Courtesy of Harold Lewis

My brothers and sisters in Christ, this ideal church, this perfect church, this exemplary church which Saint Paul describes has, for the most of the two millennia past, remained but a lofty concept, found only in Holy Writ, in the pious platitudes of countless sermons, and from time to time in the words of General Convention resolutions. For the church militant here on earth, comprised, lest we forget, of sinful men and women who have fallen short of the glory of God, far from eschewing the factious behavior exhibited by Jews and Gentiles, have instead raised it to the level of a new art form. For the church, while purporting to spread the Gospel of him who said that God is "no respecter of persons" has all too often conformed to the world, and has appropriated some its most exclusive "isms" — monarchialism, imperialism, classism, racism and sexism, to name a few; and along the way the church has invented a few "isms" of its own.

But I am preaching to the choir. For all of us gathered here this evening know only too well what it means in this church to be strangers and sojourners. We are painfully aware that Absalom Jones was ordained on condition that St. Thomas' Church remain "outside of the house" of the Diocese of Pennsylvania; we have oft been reminded that Alexander Crummel was denied admittance to the General Seminary because his race made him an outsider; we note with sadness that the catalyst which served to bring into existence our parent organization, the Union of Black Clergy and Laity, was the racially motivated and summary dismissal — read exiling — of my esteemed predecessor but one, Tollie LeRoy Caution. All of us, as black Episcopalians, have relived, at one time or another, the experience of the Gentiles who dared to enter the Temple: for we have seen many a sign, which though not in parchment or stone, are no less real, and which tell us, in effect, "Don't even think of going any further!"

So I would like to suggest to you something which is perhaps not so readily apparent — that what truly binds us to our brothers and sisters throughout the Diaspora is a common experience. When Bishop Cornelius Wilson tells us that the train which left Puerto Limón, Costa Rica, headed for San José, stopped when it approached the capital in order that the black driver might be replaced by a white one, it sounds vaguely familiar. When Bishop James Ottley relates the fact that as a young boy in his native Panama, he could be arrested by white U.S. military personnel just for looking "suspicious" on a street corner in the Canal Zone, that story strikes a resonant chord. When the late Archbishop of Burundi, Rwanda and Zaire told me that as a youngster he couldn't even have entered the neighborhood where his official residence now is, unless he had a pass which identified him as a houseboy (and it is interesting that the Belgians, so proud of the Gallic tongue, didn't bother to translate the English — it was simply *"le boy"*) we can identify with it.

And as to the church's activities, we can attest that whether the plantation crop was sugar or cotton; whether the missionary fields in which we were sought out were verdant jungles or asphalt ones; we were all the objects of the same paternalistic missionary enterprise, whose gospel was tailored to meet the exigencies of colonialism. There is more that a little truth in the old

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story that when the English missionary arrived in Africa, he had the Bible and the Africans had the land. He came across a group of villagers, whom he saw as potential converts. Then, in perfect pitch, he intoned "Let us pray," and bid the Africans reverently to close their eyes in an attitude of prayer. And when the Africans opened their eyes, they had the Bible and the missionary had the land.

Carleton Hayden, in a paper delivered at the Conference on Afro-Anglicanism held in Barbados in 1985, observed that the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, which sent priests, teachers and catechists to the colonies in North America, the Caribbean, and Africa, while "insisting that blacks were human beings equal to whites in every endowment and capable of salvation, education, and general uplift," nevertheless "accepted slavery as a vital factor in British prosperity," and "secured legal rulings and new legislation to the effect that baptism did not alter a person's temporal condition but freed him only from sin and death." It was not for naught that missionaries taught us to commit to memory and to carry out that onerous Catechetical injunction "to do our duty in that state of life to which it shall please Almighty God to call us."

If Afro-Anglicanism means anything at all, it means that we must separate the wheat from the chaff. We must distinguish between the truth of the Gospel and the motives of those who brought it to us. We must rediscover the radical Gospel of Jesus which does not oppress and subjugate, but rather liberates and empowers.

My friends, the Diaspora is here! We don't have to fly to Jamaica or Nigeria to experience it. Let me give you an example: one day in April, I was studying in the library at the General Seminary and chanced to notice on the schedule of the week's events, posted in the lobby, that Kortright Davis was preaching in the chapel that night. Knowing that I would be in for a treat, I decided to attend the service. When I perused the leaflet, I got my second surprise of the day: the Seminary, in its liturgical wisdom, was keeping the feast of Absalom Jones, which by fiat of the dean, had been transferred to the Tuesday after Low Sunday, which also happened to be the feast of the great English divine, William Law. As I sang "Lift Every Voice and sing" with gusto, I took note of the line-up in the sanctuary: Kortright Davis, a native of Antigua, and former vice-principal of Codrington College, Barbados, was the preacher; Jean-Rigal Elisee, a Haitian who had served as bishop of Gambia and the Rio Pongas in West Africa was the chief celebrant; and he was assisted at the altar by a General student who was a priest from South Africa. And somehow it seemed altogether fitting and proper that the life and witness of the first black priest of the American Episcopal Church should be celebrated by those with Caribbean and African roots!

The Diaspora is here! By conservative estimate, at least one-tenth of the active black clergy in the Episcopal Church are from Africa, and the number is growing.

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The Diaspora is here! Fred Williams will tell you in a minute that the Church of the Intercession, at 155th Street and Broadway in New York City, is the largest parish in the Diocese of the Dominican Republic!

The Diaspora is here! Tomorrow night's preacher is the rector of a parish whose Sunday attendance on a bad day is six or seven hundred people, almost all of whom happen to be recent immigrants from the Caribbean.

The Diaspora is here! It is a demonstrable fact that such strength and numbers as we have in the black Episcopal church would greatly diminished were it not for the presence and participation of West Indians, both clergy and lay. For more than a hundred years, the same Episcopal bishops who often have done little to encourage, and in many cases much to discourage the vocations of indigenous blacks, have depended on West Indian clergy to staff their "colored" congregations. Wave upon wave of West Indian immigrants have come to these shores, and have gravitated to, and in some cases founded, Episcopal parishes, precisely because they brought the faith with them, and therefore did not have to depend on half-hearted, or worse, non-existent attempts on the part of the Episcopal Church to evangelize the black community.

If the Diaspora is here, we must rejoice in that fact. But Afro-Anglicanism, like charity, begins at home. For starters, we must remove from our vocabulary snide remarks about Africans whose sermons we claim we cannot understand; and Lord knows, we must bury the hatchet once and for all when it comes to black American / West Indian relations. At a Convocation of Black Theologians, held in New York in 1978, E. Don Taylor pointed out that West Indians and black Americans have been calling each other names for as long as anyone can remember. "The West Indian," he observed,

> has been accused of being a black Englishman who negates his blackness and often stands aloof from the American black . . . . To many black Americans, the West Indian comes across as arrogant, selfish, class-oriented and at times hypocritical in that he is quick to speak about his glorious Anglican heritage, but too often his pocket is slow to respond with corresponding enthusiasm.

"On the other side of the coin," Bishop Taylor suggests:

> West Indians have often viewed the black American as being overly emotional, highly sensitive to and suspicious of the actions of white people, too strongly drawn to the fundamentalist way of Christian worship, too often prone to internal quarrels and dissention, wholly lacking in respect for episcopal authority and ecclesiastical protocol and at times lacking in sophistication.

Courtesy of Harold Lewis

Bishop Taylor addressed this problem thirteen years ago, but the tensions between the two groups are still alive and well. We simply cannot allow that sore to fester and continue to breed an unhealthy atmosphere among us, for if we do, we fall prey to another version, however subtle, of the old "divide and conquer" trick which has invariably worked to the detriment of all of us.

When all is said and done, my friends, we cannot be party to the hypocrisy inherent in criticizing the church at large for relegating us to the status of strangers and sojourners, while we, sometimes pathologically, but always pathetically, perpetrate the same injustice upon our own brothers and sisters.

And in our black Episcopal church, we have mirrored the elitism of the church at large and improved upon it. And we have managed to do this in oh! so many ways. Yesterday, Father Sisco spoke of the paper bag test. We could add to that the pencil test, which for those of you not hip, meant that if you put a pencil in you hair and it stayed there, you were in trouble!

We have concocted specious "pedigrees" based on how long we have been a member of a congregation. Once I was introduced to a new parishioner, and when I asked her how long she had been a member, she replied, "Twenty-five years."

In some congregations, it depends on which guild you belong to. Does the Rector's Guild outrank the Dorcas Guild? And is that more prestigious than the St. Veronica's Guild?

In some parishes, your place in the pecking order is determined by who brought you to the font — because, as you all well know, the holy water used by Father Founding Rector is always more efficacious.

And all of this is added to whether or not you hail from Jamaica, New York or Jamaica, West Indies!

And let me add, parenthetically, that there seems to be one point on which blacks from the Diaspora and homegrown blacks seem to agree, and that has to do with stewardship. West Indians still pretend that the church is established, and that the Crown is taking care of them, so they give the equivalent of twopence or threepence a week, and perhaps a shilling on Easter and Christmas. American blacks, so often the beneficiaries of the munificence of bishops and "mother churches," feel that the church is their entitlement, and that they are owed something, and therefore do not see it as their responsibility to support the church. So we are often faced with the anomaly of twelve vestrypersons, all of whose mothers gave them the same first name, "Doctor," with their BMWs, Mercedes and Lexi parked outside the church, all present at a vestry meeting, and the first order of business is: "How much will we get from the Diocese?"

Courtesy of Harold Lewis

And we won't even talk about converts who came to the Episcopal Church because they got tired of the third and fourth collection at Mother Bethel!

My brothers and sisters in Christ, the whole Anglican Church has just begun its Decade of Evangelism. There is an apocryphal tale that when the primates of the Anglican Communion decided to launch the Decade, a proposal was sent to Lambeth Palace for the endorsement of the Archbishop of Canterbury. After perusing the document, the Archbishop fell to the floor, doubled over in laughter. When he finally regained composure half an hour later, his shocked aides and chaplains said:"Your Grace, what's so funny?" "What is so funny," came the archiepiscopal response, "is that Anglicans can't bear to be evangelists from evensong on any given day. How on earth can we be expected to keep it up for ten years?"

We Afro-Anglicans of the Episcopalian persuasion are in a unique position: we can accomplish evangelistic miracles simply by reaching out and assuring our brothers and sisters though the Diaspora that we are one with them in their struggle. Some of the most meaningful moments in my ministry as Staff Officer for Black Ministries have been those times when such communication has taken place. How well I remember Bishop Garnier's statement at a luncheon for black bishops to which I had invited him: "I am so glad that the Episcopal Church recognizes that Haitians are black too."

How well I remember the feeling of pride evident in Barbados in 1985, when two hundred Afro-Anglicans gathered. After presenting our papers, convening our workshops and celebrating our eucharists, we told the world with a loud voice that Anglican theology did not come to a grinding halt when Hooker's pen ran out of ink!

How beautiful an experience I had in Banjul, Gambia, four years ago, when I appeared at the sacristy door at the cathedral one Sunday morning. "Is there anything I can do?" I asked. Little did I know that they were at that very moment deciding who would do morning prayer, since there were no priests in town that very day. They threw a chasuble over me, and we went to the altar. And when the M.C. opened the 1662 missal, and the thurifer and boatboy appeared on cue, I felt as if I had been there all my life!

Saint Paul tells us: *"You are no longer strangers and sojourners."* I would like to suggest to you tonight, in the words of the Virginia Slims ad, "You've come a long way baby!"

When, at Victoria's behest, the Cross followed the Union Jack to the remotest outposts of the British Empire, an Empire upon which, it will be remembered, the sun never set; and as missionaries were dispatched, as Bishop Heber's hymn reminds us, to deliver heathen lands from error's chain, Her Majesty would not be amused to learn that there are more Anglicans in Kenya, to cite but a single example, than in all the British Isles, Canada, and the U.S. combined. *"We are no longer strangers and sojourners."*

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When Anglicanism's first black bishop, Samuel Adonijah Crowther, suffered the most abject vilification at the hands of the Church Missionary Society, he could not imagine that the day would come when the primate of each of the ten provinces on the continent of Africa would be an indigenous bishop. *"We are no longer strangers and sojourners."*

When James Theodore Holly looked around at the Lambeth Conference in 1878, and discovered that he was the sole black bishop in attendance, the farthest thought from his mind was that in 1988, bishops of color would far outnumber white bishops, causing the official photographer to make serious changes to his f-stop. *"We are no longer strangers and sojourners."*

When Alexander Crummell was turned away from the portals of the General Seminary, he could not envision the day when that institution on Chelsea Square would number blacks among those who teach *and* those who learn. *"We are no longer strangers and sojourners."*

When Absalom Jones was rescued from an imposed perpetual diaconate in exchange for his agreement to keep St. Thomas' separate but unequal, he could not, in his fondest dreams, foresee the day when Franklin Turner would be a bishop in that diocese. *"We are no longer strangers and sojourners."*

When James Pernette DeWolfe, fourth bishop of Long Island and last of the great prince prelates, slapped me on the cheek (rather hard as I remember) in the rite of Confirmation, he would have been shocked at the suggestion that three decades later his apostolic successor would be Orris George Walker. *"We are no longer strangers and sojourners."*

When Tollie Caution found himself involuntarily terminated, after nearly a quarter century of bearing the burden of the heat of the day as "deputy for colored work," he would rejoice that today at 815, a fourth of the professional staff is black. *"We are no longer strangers and sojourners."*

When Mr. Proctor took the Bishop of Southern Ohio to lunch, as the story goes, and learned of the prelate's appalling salary, and vowed to endow the bishopric so that its incumbent would have, in perpetuity, an income comparable to his, as CEO of Proctor and Gamble, he did not think that one day the beneficiary of his largesse would be Herbert Thompson. *"We are no longer strangers and sojourners."*

And in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, where it is said the Lawrences speak to the Cabots, the Cabots speak to the Lodges and the Lodges speak only to God, it would have been nothing short of anathema, even a decade ago, to suggest that Barbara Clementine Harris would ever be in a position to ask a proper Bostonian to button the billowing sleeves of her rochet. *"We are no longer strangers and sojourners."*

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My friends, we have come a long way, to be sure, but we have not yet arrived. We can ill afford the luxury of being lulled into complacency because the church has deigned to place a few mitres on our woolly heads, or has given us a corner office at 815. My brothers and sisters in Christ, if we are serious about bringing others to Christ, if we are serious about building up our parishes; if we are serious about building Afro-Anglican bridges of friendship; if we are serious about raising up black men and women for the ordained ministry of this church, then we cannot rest until Saint Paul's vision of the church becomes a reality, when all of us, those who are far off and those who are nigh, who profess and call ourselves Christians "are no longer strangers and sojourners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God."

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