The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Year B):  
July 15, 2012

“The Mystery of God’s Will”  
Ephesians 1:3-14  
The Rev. David W. Fleenor

“...he has made known to us the mystery of his will...”

God’s will is often a mystery. I recall several times in my own life attempting to discern the will of God. Where should I go to school? What career should I prepare for? Is God calling me to be a priest? How shall I express that priesthood? In what contexts of ministry is God calling me into? Lots of questions. Why? Because God’s will is so often a mystery.

For centuries the Church has been creating and refining processes for decoding the will of God. We call it Christian discernment and it is usually bi-directional: information comes from within the one seeking God’s will and information comes from without from trusted members of the community of faith. Paying attention in both directions is all aimed at discerning the voice of God.

General Convention  
The Church-at-large was deeply engaged in a discernment process last week as members of the Episcopal Church met for the 77th General Convention in Indianapolis, IN. The Episcopal Church – like so many, maybe even all, organizations — has found itself in what I like to call a “Moneyball situation.”

Moneyball  
Do you all remember the movie Moneyball starring Brad Pitt and Jonah Hill? (By the way, if this sounds familiar I did bring this up in a prior sermon several months ago.) Fundamentally, this is a movie about systemic change. Brad Pitt plays the part of Billie Beane, the general manager of the Major League Baseball team, the Oakland A’s. They are a team with a small personnel budget who continually lose games and players to richer teams, like the New York Yankees. Beane decides that he has to totally and fundamentally change the way he approaches the game. He has to upset the status quo. He has to interrupt his own homeostasis in order to bring about a new era for his own team. He hires Peter Brand, a young statistical genius who loves the game of baseball, to
be his assistant. Played by Jonah Hill, Brand helps Beane reinvent the team around a philosophy of getting cheap wins based on undervalued players. This line of thinking was considered absurd, but they were committed to it, and it worked. The old way of playing baseball passed and a new era was ushered in.

A poignant scene takes place when the head scout, who has become totally and absolutely frustrated, confronts Beane about his unorthodox approach. Beane simply replies, “Adapt or die.” That is what I am referring to when say the Episcopal Church has found itself in a “Moneyball situation.” We have to adapt or whither away and die.

The controversial retired Bishop of Newark, John Shelby Spong wrote a book several years ago that made a similar point. It was entitled, Why Christianity Must Change or Die.

Spong suggests that "the time has come for the Church to invite its people into a frightening journey into the mystery of God and to stop proclaiming that somehow the truth of God is still bound by either our literal scriptures or our literal creeds." He recognized the struggle of reconciling ancient worldviews with modern, even post-modern, worldviews. In other words, as Jesus put it, we find ourselves at a time in history where we are attempting to put new wine into old wineskins.

Which brings us back to the General Convention that met this past week. Lay and clergy representatives from all over the country met to discern God’s will for us as a large-scale community and to make decision about our future. Here is a run down of some of the issues discussed and decisions made:

- **Same gender blessings**
  In a historic move, convention authorized provisional use of a rite for blessing same-gender unions. “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” rite will be available for use starting December 2 (the first Sunday of Advent), but clergy will need the permission of their bishop under the terms of the resolution.

- **Access to Holy Baptism, Holy Communion** Resolution C029, affirming the Episcopal Church’s teaching that Baptism is the norm for those who wish to receive Holy Communion.

- **Episcopal Church Center**
  To approve a move away from, but did not authorize the sale of, the Episcopal Church Center headquarters at 815 Second Avenue in New York.

One of the most important issues discerned, discussed and decided upon was a governance structure for the Church. In response to the Moneyball situation, many seek to transform the structure.
Of the almost 400 resolutions submitted to General Convention more than 90 related to structural reform. Most significant was resolution CO95 which called for creation of a task force to re-imagine the workings of the Episcopal Church in the 21st century.

Bishop Stacy Sauls, chief operating officer for the Episcopal Church, said that the people of Episcopal Church have realized “that we are standing on the brink of an unprecedented moment; [we] have seen it as opportunity rather than threat.”

Change is always threatening because it may just disrupt our homeostasis and cause us to undergo a process of transformation and growth. Our work is to stay open to it recognizing that it may be the Spirit of God at work in our lives. And that is part of the mystery.

One author said, “Mystery does not mean the absence of meaning; rather, mystery is the presence of more meaning than we can comprehend.”

Management theories tell us that a great way to fail is to try to do too much. What we need to do is focus, commit, and not try to do everything.

What are we as the Episcopal Church focused on nationally and locally?

The Anglican Communion has five priorities:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Locally, in particular, in this parish, I would say our focus is as follows:

- Hospitality
- Creativity
  - The Music programs led by Claudia Dumschat
  - The Actors’ Guild
- Liturgy
  - We are committed to fine liturgy because it points to the transcendence and immanence of God, among other things.

Let’s get even more specific. What is God’s will for you right now? How does it connect to the 5 priorities laid out by the Anglican Communion that I mentioned earlier? How does it connect to what we focus on here at Transfiguration?
God’s will is often a mystery. And here is some good news: sometimes God’s will is no mystery at all — it is plain and clear. It is to do the work that is right in front of us. No more, no less.