

THE COVENANT JOURNAL

A COMMENTARY ON THE CHURCH • NUMBER 29, OCTOBER, 2008

Sidetracked by a Morality of Works

by Tom Woodward

In the church as in life, how easily we get sidetracked. Nowhere is that more evident than with our current struggles within the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion.

It seems clear to me that a good part of our problem throughout the church stems from treating Christianity as a moral code. People in all parts of our church are struggling with different moral codes—and identifying them with the Christian gospel. This was a major error of the Eames Commission, reflecting the notion that Christianity is a set of rules and regulations to which one gives assent rather than a response in faith to the revelation in Jesus Christ. This error then led to an enormous amount of mischief and grief.

The Episcopal Church and the wider Anglican Communion is not alone with this misconception. Here is a brief excerpt from Jacques Ellul's book *The Subversion of Christianity*:

"When I say that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is against morality, I am not trying to say that it replaces one form of morality with another... Revelation is an attack on all morality, as is wonderfully shown by the parables of the kingdom of heaven, that of the prodigal son, that of the talents, that of the eleventh-hour laborers, that of the unfaithful steward, and many others. In all the parables the person who serves as an example has not lived a moral life. The one who is rejected is the one who has lived a moral life. Naturally this does not mean that we are counseled to become robbers, murderers, adulterers, etc. On the contrary, the behavior to which we are summoned surpasses morality, all morality, which is shown to be an obstacle to encounter with God" (p 71).

What we now have before us is a morality of works, a litmus test replacing the grace and love of God. However, the parables of Jesus are subversive—often as with the parables of the Leaven, Mustard Seed and Prodigal Son they subvert the authority of the purity code. They also subvert the kinds of divisions in this church around human sexuality. We are not talking about Paul's distinc-

tions between flesh and the Spirit. We are falsely labeling some spiritual relationships as though they were flesh (the way of identifying ourselves with the world), thus undercutting the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

While we humans seem to have a penchant for the security of rules and proscriptions, Jesus refused to give into that penchant. Instead he spoke of human qualities in the Beatitudes (Mt 5), as Paul did of the marks of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5). In what we have in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks in hyperbole and metaphor, but not with rules and regulations.

As Christians, we are not governed by rules and proscriptions. We are governed by a Vision and a Life lived and given. As Paul notes, we work out the details in fear and trembling, but always in the context of trust and acceptance. That is the opposite of deciding the future of our Communion on the basis of a morality rooted elsewhere than in that Life. Living morally as a Christian is full of doubt and discernment and struggle. Absolutist versions of Christian morality detract from that vocation and eventually subvert and destroy it.

Put simply: our moralities are responses to the revelation of God through Jesus Christ, but they are not that revelation.

We have become so enthralled with the argumentative possibilities in defending our favorite morality or in attacking others' that in arguing about morality we really have come to believe that we are dealing with revelation and the content of our faith (relationship) in God. Not so.

The Revd Thomas B Woodward lives and writes in Santa Fe, NM. He was a regular contributor to The Episcopal Majority and serves on the Executive Council's Committee on the Status of Women. In his new career as a playwright, his one-act play, "So, What's with Eliot?" won Best Play and Best Playwright in the national competition, Benchwarmers VII.

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May it provide a safe place, a place where truth can be told, a place where we can trust one another.

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In Uncertain Times

Like many of us, I am watching the stock market in free fall. I am also aware of the effects of unemployment and the foreclosure crisis in the parish where I serve. Athens County is in the heart of Appalachian Ohio and is one of the poorest counties in Ohio. The economy is as bad here as anywhere, except maybe for parts of Michigan, our neighbor to the north, or of West Virginia (far nearer to this part of the state, and in fact closer to our house than Columbus).

We are in the middle of a presidential campaign, but truth is, politicians are at best a penultimate hope. In these uncertain times, we ought to keep our hope set on Christ, the one leader who never lets us down. For my part, I am convinced that Jesus will continue to lead us through the wilderness until he brings us safely home.

None of this is to say that we shouldn't be politically engaged. As one of my teachers used to say, Christians have a political vocation. That vocation has to do with an unswerving dedication to truth and the common good. We serve the common good best, I believe, when we keep the needs of the poor, whom God loves with a preferential love, front and center. With the biggest election in memory less than a month away, we need to weigh proposals carefully, we need to hold candidates' feet to the fire, and we need to get out and vote, perhaps even organize and canvass. There are massive differences between the candidates, and much is riding on this election, especially for God's poor.

Politics at its best is a means to an end. Human beings get together and make decisions about pursuing the common good as they understand it. But whatever the outcome, we are likely in for a rocky spell. We will need the creativity, toughness, and interdependence that characterize the people of our nation at their very best. We will also need the social witness of God's Church. People who would have never thought of themselves as poor are losing their jobs and, in some cases, losing their homes.

If you belong to a congregation like ours, you are probably facing some difficult budget choices as you enter a season dedicated to financial stewardship. As an outsider to your congregations, I would urge those of you who can to consider giving more. There will be anxious people who tighten their fists, and there will be others who need to trim back on charitable giving of all kinds and in precisely the hour when it is needed most. I would urge you to insist that your congregations reach out to those who are being affected by this crisis. Our own outreach committee has decided to raise an additional amount beyond what is budgeted, to help God feed the poor. Times of crisis are also opportunities for mission, if indeed our hope is set on Christ.

—RWC

Articles and comments that are not otherwise attributed are the work of the editors.

A covenant is a relationship initiated by God, to which a body of people responds in faith. (BCP p 846)

The Mail

Ruth Torri Hendersonville, TN Thank God for TCJ and all of you who bring some sanity into this divided church. Please add these four more names to your mailing list... Check enclosed.

The Revd Sarah Odderstol Park Ridge, IL I love The Covenant Journal and have been reading it ever since my friend Connie Jones introduced me to your publication.

Beverly Sweeton Lebanon, TN A belated thanks for all the Journals I have received. The articles are ever informative, thought provoking, and faith reinforcing. In the May issue, Giles Fraser's essay certainly was (and is). It should be widely published and read, especially by our government officials. What a difference in our world if we all did live by the words of the Baptismal Covenant! Enclosed is a small contribution for the very large contribution of the Journal.

*If you are neutral
in situations of injustice,
you have chosen the side
of the oppressor.*

*If an elephant has its foot
on the tail of a mouse
and you say that you are
neutral, the mouse will not
appreciate your neutrality.*

—*Desmond Tutu*

Different from Before

by William Hethcock

Most of us learned early in our careers as Episcopalians that ours is not a "covenant church." What we take that to mean is that apart from the creeds we are not bound by a set of doctrines or disciplines to which we commit ourselves when we are baptized or confirmed. Members of other communions are, and we think that this makes us Anglicans unique. We honor our kind of intellectual, theological, and spiritual freedom all this implies. We might even say that we are proud of it, and we want to keep it as it is.

So, when our Communion begins to talk in earnest about our need for a covenant, we flinch. That doesn't sound like what we had in mind. It doesn't sound like who we are. But our Archbishop of Canterbury made clear in his third and closing address at Lambeth that a covenant among our provinces is the direction we must go, and so appointed persons are working to devise one to be considered by our bishops. Is Anglicanism in danger of becoming something it never has been before?

If it is, what was meant by the Archbishop and our other bishops is that we become something much better, stronger, and even more Catholic than we have been up to now. What they had in mind as they fed information from their Lambeth discussions to the Archbishop is not a newly devised means of determining who is in and who is out. Rather, they have in mind strengthening our life together so that we may become more closely united in Christ to accomplish our common mission. The Archbishop calls the covenant we are seeking "an agreement to identify those elements in each other's lives that build trust and allow us to see each other as standing in the same Way and the same Truth, moving together in one direction and so able to enrich and support each other as fully as we can." The covenant will move us away from any pretense that nothing matters enough to risk a stand that might tarnish some outward appearance of genteel unity. We are indeed not merely as he put it "an association of polite friends."

The Archbishop took a good deal of time and care in his closing address to remind the Bishops and the Church of human suffering in the world and our vocation to unite in a "covenant of faith" that will promise to our fellow human beings "the generosity God has shown us; that will honour the absolute and non-negotiable dignities of all and strengthen us to resist any policy or strategy that implies that what is good and just for me is not good and just for all my human neighbours."

Having heard from all the Lambeth bishops, the Archbishop then nourished within himself a much broader and holier understanding of covenant than we have been using as Anglicans all these years. We are learning that for us not to challenge ourselves anew would lead us into further divisions and failure in our calling. Committing ourselves to each other in a new covenant way has the promise of bringing us more closely in touch with each other and more effectively united to accomplish our mission in the world.

The Revd William Hethcock is professor of homiletics (ret'd), School of Theology, University of the South, Sewanee, TN.

Lambeth: the Generosity of Death and New Life

by Elizabeth Kaeton

A long, long time ago, in a galaxy of reality far, far away, I was once a labor-delivery room nurse. My shift was characterized by long periods of anticipation and boredom punctuated by intense moments of activity.

A very short while ago, in a galaxy of reality which seemed further away than necessary, I was at the Lambeth Conference 2008 in Canterbury, England. My time there often felt very much like my shift in the labor-delivery room.

Our Presiding Bishop believes that something new is about to be born in the Anglican Communion. While she may be right, that was not exactly my experience or perspective. Rather, it felt to me as if some things very old and most ancient were struggling to stay alive. What things, you ask?

Patriarchy. Hierarchy. Sexism. The certainty that comes with the traditional cultural paradigm, the structure that supports it and the system which enables it.

The Indaba Groups, from the South African term for "doing business" proved, for the most part, to promote "business as usual." The prelates in our church spent much of their time learning from a variety of personal perspectives and world views what it means to be a bishop in the Anglican Communion. I suppose that is, in and of itself, not a bad thing, especially if it was as necessary, as the Archbishop of Canterbury and his planning team apparently determined that it, in fact, was. It does, however, beg the question, "Why?"

In the tediously long hours of anticipation and boredom, I had some time to consider this question. The short answer is that when we elect or, as in the case of some provinces, appoint a bishop in the church, I think we forget ourselves, what it means to be a bishop in and of the Church. We forget our own catholicity at our own peril.

Too often, we elect or appoint leaders who will make us feel good locally, who won't rock the board. We want someone who is strong, but not necessarily courageous. We want someone who is articulate, but not necessarily outspoken. We like to think we have elected a prophet, but woe be unto the bishop whose actions are considered "prophetic." We forget that, increasingly, a bishop is someone who will be a participant not only locally in our churches or at the diocesan level or even nationally at General Convention, but internationally on the world stage of the global Anglican Communion. Suddenly, the stakes of our actions in electing spiritual leaders in the church have become almost as high as electing the political leaders of our government. Let those who have ears, hear.

Which brings me to an insight about Lambeth in general and the Church in particular: I think we in the Episcopal Church and in the Anglican Communion are living out in

microcosm the tensions the world knows as globalization.

One of the highlights at Lambeth was listening to Sir Jonathan Sachs, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, UK. An orthodox Jew (but not in the sense that many Anglicans use that term), he is very concerned about the impact of the market-driven nature of communities around the world—from the most remote citizen in a primitive culture to the individual person in the pew in churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues in the sophisticated cities of the Western world.

He argues that globalization is "profoundly destabilizing" and that organized religion can provide identity and meaning, which lead not only to the stabilizing development of moral and ethical codes of behavior, but also to the development of sacred covenants of faith verses fate (this was the topic of his presentation to the Primates and Bishops).

In his book, *The Dignity of Difference*, he writes, "If we are to live in close proximity to difference, as in a global age we do, we will need more than a code of rights, more even than mere tolerance. We will need to understand that just as the natural environment depends on biodiversity, so the human environment depends on cultural diversity, because no one creed has a monopoly on spiritual truth; no one civilization encompasses all the spiritual, ethical and artistic expressions of mankind."

Not only do bishops need to hear this from and about their own cultural and spiritual contexts, but so do we who elect and/or influence the appointment of these spiritual leaders of our Christian communities need to be mindful of the need and respect for diversity in our own church, our Communion, our world.

One thing has become very clear to me, post Lambeth: something that is struggling to stay alive must die in order that something new can emerge and have life. We will require patience, as it will take some time—perhaps another decade or so—which will produce long moments of institutional boredom and anticipation. Mostly it will take what Rabbi Sachs calls a "spirit of generosity" to make room for others who are different.

The good Rabbi didn't say that we must "change for others." He said that we will need to "make room for others." That doesn't sound like anything vaguely familiar to patriarchy, hierarchy, or sexism to me.

It sounds more like life on a galaxy that is moving closer and closer to becoming our present reality. Are we ready for that? If Lambeth is any indication, I'd have to repeat a phrase we sometimes used in the labor and delivery room: "Ready or not, here it comes."

The Revd Dr Elizabeth Kaeton is rector, St. Paul Church, Chatham, NJ, president of the Episcopal Women's Caucus, and a member of the board of TCJ.

The Dynamic of Lambeth

by Katie Sherrod

Plenty of folks have analyzed what happened at Lambeth. I've done it myself on my blog. <wildernessgarden.blogspot.com>

But even as I wrote that analysis I was nagged by the knowledge that I was missing something important, something key to understanding the dynamic of Lambeth. I've finally got it.

It is the Baptismal Covenant.

We—The Episcopal Church—have one. Canada has one in an alternate liturgy. The rest of the Anglican Communion does not.

So what?

So I believe that in the years since the "new" Prayer Book was adopted we have been changed by the baptismal covenant in deep and fundamental ways that, when combined with our church's democratic polity, made a clash of world views between us and the rest of the Anglican Communion inevitable.

All these years of reaffirming the Baptismal Covenant have caused us to recognize that lay people also are "ministers" in the church and that our ministry is to be valued.

Increasingly, lay people are claiming the "ordination" of their baptism—an ordination we share with Jesus himself—and are speaking truth to power in the church.

As a result of all that, we expect our bishops to be accountable to us in ways unheard of in most of the Anglican Communion. We respect them but we also respect our own roles and responsibilities in the church. We expect our bishops to do the same.

This is definitely NOT the case with most Anglican Provinces.

Bonnie Anderson, president of the House of Deputies, recently made this point in a speech in the Diocese of Southern Ohio. The Episcopal News Service reported:

"Within the Anglican Communion, the Episcopal Church is the only province with a baptismal covenant, said Anderson. 'Our baptismal covenant brings us to an understanding of the gifts of laity that isn't really understood in the same way by the rest of the communion ... [In the *Book of Common Prayer*] the catechism says that the ministers of the church are lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons—in that order. And so we are called by God to do the work we are given.'"

The idea that we are all called to this work has given many lay Episcopalians the bold idea that we can change the church. We are empowered by the knowledge that we too ARE the church, that we along with deacons, priests, and bishops are the hands, eyes, feet, and mouth of God in this world. It takes all of us, all the Body of Christ, to keep moving toward the Kingdom of God.

Anderson suggested that people forget the triangle model of ministry, with the bishop at the top and the lay people at the bottom. Instead, think of ministry as a circle.

"Lay people should look to clergy and bishops to help—not tell—laity how to discern gifts and carry out ministry," the ENS article said.

That's why, when bishops at Lambeth talked easily of asking our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender brothers and sisters to sacrifice their relationships and vocations indefinitely with moratoria on rites for same-sex blessings and the approval of any more honestly gay bishops, many lay Episcopalians bristled.

It's not that we cannot understand talk of sacrifice—Christianity is built on the notion that sacrifice can be holy. But there is a difference between sacrificing oneself for others, and requiring others to sacrifice themselves for your benefit.

There are serious theological and moral implications to bishops seeking to force some of the baptized—LGBT Anglicans—to sacrifice their vocations and loves for what the bishops claim is the benefit of the "majority." It is lay people who must point this out, for in most places, it is often too risky for priests and deacons to do so.

It is lay people who must demand that our bishops not sacrifice our baptismal covenant for an Anglican Covenant.

And with God's help, we will.

Katie Sherrod is a journalist, was recently Texas Woman of the Year, and is a board member of TCJ. She lives and writes in Ft Worth, TX.

*A coward is incapable of exhibiting love;
it is the prerogative of the brave.*

—Gandhi

James P Carse, *The Religious Case Against Belief*, The Penguin Press, Hardcover, 2008, 240 pp, \$24.95

A review by G Richard Wheatcroft

Recently, a number of books have been published making the atheist case against religious belief. Now, here is a book making a religious case against belief. The title of the book is provocative. A common understanding is that the core of religion is belief. But the author's understanding is that the core of religion is not belief and moreover the identification of belief with religion has corrupted religion and spawned violence all over the world. James P. Carse is Professor Emeritus of Religion at New York University where, for thirty years, he directed the Religious Studies Program.

He uses the stories of Galileo, Martin Luther, Abraham Lincoln, and Jesus Christ to make his case that in any discussion of religion we must begin by dealing with the factor of "unknowability" which he describes as three types of ignorance. There is "ordinary ignorance" which everyone experiences daily in many dimensions of life, like we do not know who will win the next election. Then, there is "willful ignorance" which is an intentional avoidance or denial of accessible knowledge, like Biblical literalists who deny evolution. Finally, there is "higher ignorance," which is a learned understanding that rejects "willful ignorance." He writes that by learning a "higher ignorance" we can see the "unknown everywhere, especially at the heart of our most emphatic certainties."

Willful ignorance and higher ignorance are keys to the religious case against belief. Acknowledging that the word belief "has as many uses and varied meanings as ignorance," he explains that when he uses the word, he is referring to "belief systems." He describes a belief system as a set of beliefs which form "com-

prehensive networks of tenets that reach into every area of thought and action." He explains that belief systems normally have "distinctive historical narratives, an extensive mythology, a pronounced sense of community, a pantheon of heroes and martyrs, an array of symbols, scripted rituals, sacred geographical sites and monuments. On top of all this is an absolute certainty in the truth of their beliefs." When a person makes "an avowed commitment" to a belief system, a "willful ignorance" of any other truth claims becomes operational. The author writes, "Belief systems thrive in circumstances of collusion. They are energized by their opposites. For every believer there is a nonbeliever on whom the believer is focused, whose resistance is carefully delineated." Thus belief systems are a source of conflict and violence. Indeed, the author identifies the twenty-first century's "most forbidding villain" as belief.

Having made the religious case against belief the author turns our attention to his concept of religion. Recognizing that an inclusive definition of religion is out of reach, he states that all the major religions of the world seem to develop an awareness of the unknown. And he suggests that, as religious people, "we may begin to acquire "the art of seeing the unknown everywhere, especially at the heart of our most emphatic certainties" We can do this by using our "higher ignorance" to understand that our knowledge always falls short of truth and any certainty of belief.

He then stresses that nothing can justify our calling anything a religion except "its longevity as a unified people." He writes, "As I see it, each of the existing religions, regardless of its worth or its credibility, has a genius at sustaining itself in the face of at least hostile and often horrifying opposition." He then states that every religion is a *communitas*, which he describes as "a spontaneous gath-

ering of persons who identify themselves and one another as members of a unified body." The community "evolves spontaneously out of the desire of the participants to get to the bottom of the mystery that brings them together." And they engage in "active conversation about how it is to understand itself, and how it is to present itself to the world." If a *communitas* (religion) understands itself as a belief system, beliefs become absolutes, knowledge is denied and the conversation ends. He writes, "The great danger of belief systems is that the opposing sides are sure they do understand each other. When Christians fault the Muslim idea of God, calling Islam a false deity or a satanic creation, they have done more than reveal their flawed understanding of Islam, they have severed themselves from their own faith, They are no longer Christians, but willfully ignorant ideologues."

The author writes that "to counterpoise religion and belief is to make possible deeper insight it to both...In the process, however, we must take care not to pitch knowledge against religion, as though one is the violation of the other, for in truth they are in essential harmony. The challenge is not to make religion intelligible but to use knowledge religiously. Aristotle wrote that knowledge begins in wonder." This scholarly book is written in an engaging style which concentrates the mind on a critical issue with personal and global dimensions.

The Revd G Richard Wheatcroft is rector emeritus of St Francis Church, Houston, TX. He is a board member of TJC and lives and writes in Irving, TX.

Apoplexy and Deposition

by Elizabeth Kaeton

I don't understand the apoplexy around the anticipated deposition of Bishop Bob Duncan of Pittsburgh. Without looking at the report of the Task Force or the letter from the Presiding Bishop and without breaking a sweat, here's what I know about the actions of the Bishop of Pittsburgh:

- He had a primary role in the widely-distributed and equally widely viewed film "Choose The Day" in which he said that TEC was apostate and followed a counterfeit Bible.
- He has led his own diocese in changing their canons to disassociate from TEC and is leading them to ratify these changes in their convention next month.
- He has led and organized other disgruntled congregations and religious congregations who have left TEC or are considering leaving TEC who identify themselves as "Anglican" but are not in formal communion with Canterbury.
- As "moderator," he has taken a leadership position in this network of "continuing Anglican" churches which places him in the role of leading the charge to actively promote schism in TEC.
- He actively promotes the punishment and banishment of TEC for legally electing and duly consecrating an honestly gay man as the bishop of NH.

If I'm wrong or have misstated any of these things, I earnestly desire to stand corrected. A question: If Bishop Duncan were accused of boundary crossings, would he be rightly convicted?

I dare say that if someone in Duncan's own organization did these things, his actions would be swift and punitive and would leave little doubt as to where he and his organization stand theologically, philosophically and legally.

And yet, the charge is made by him and other "orthodox evangelicals" that the process of his deposition is "unfair" and "punitive" and "illegal," and the Presiding Bishop is "mean spirited," "incompetent," as well as a "coward and a wretch." Those are just the charges I can reproduce in a 'family' publication like this.

That "legal doubt" concerning the process is being raised is yet another thinly veiled attack on what it is that Bishop Duncan obviously and earnestly desires: no longer to be part of this apostate, impure church with its counterfeit Bible, inaccurate understanding of Jesus, and insufficient spirituality.

If Bishop Duncan really wants to leave and take Pittsburgh with him, what would have prevented the diocese from petitioning the General Convention mutually to dissolve the union between the diocese and the General Convention? You're right—it probably would not have passed with sufficient votes, but at least it would be using the appropriate channels of canon law in an honorable fashion.

The process would then be to salvage your losses, take what you can, resign your post, reorganize your base, put down your roots, and bloom where God has planted you. If this truly is a "breaking anointing" as someone prophesied the year 2008 would be for Bishop Duncan, then the gate will be opened. If you believe the first part, is it too simple minded to think that one would believe the second part?

So is all of this really only about the property? Is that it?

After all the high-flung language about Jesus and scripture, all the outrage at the "immoral and deficient theological drift" of TEC, it's finally, ultimately, all about the property? Are things 'of this world' more important than working to bring about the Realm of God as you understand it?

The Revd Dr Elizabeth Kaeton is rector, St. Paul Church, Chatham, NJ, president of the Episcopal Women's Caucus, and a member of the board of TCJ.

*You can safely assume
that you've created God
in your own image
when it turns out that God
hates all the same people you do.
—Anne Lamott*

*Let all of us, brothers, consider the Good Shepherd
Who bore the suffering of the cross to save His
sheep.*

*The Lord's sheep followed Him in tribulation and
persecution, in shame and hunger, in weakness and
temptation, and in other ways; and for these things
they received eternal life from the Lord.*

*Therefore, it is a great shame for us, the servants of
God, that the saints have accomplished great things
and we want only to receive glory and honor by
recounting them.*

—Francis of Assisi, *Admonition 6* in Armstrong,
Hellman, and Short, eds. *Francis of Assisi: Early
Documents, vol. I*, (New York: New City Press,
1999), p. 131.

Marsha Williams 1948 - 2008

To the poet Homer, libraries were holy places like churches, and the priestly librarians a blessed race, a saving remnant in a world of sin. Whenever God grew impatient and decided to destroy the world he remembered the librarians and stayed his hand.*

Marsha Williams was by trade a librarian. She was eminently qualified as this paper's webmaster/computer guru. She died late last May. In the waning months of her life, we planned together not only our usual joint editorial work, but her Requiem, as well. She wanted a full-fledged New Orleans service complete with Dixieland Jazz Band with me on cornet. She wanted "I'll Fly Away" and "When the Saints Go Marching In" among others. Smack dab in the middle, she wanted the Sacred Harp Singers. She got it all, complete with a marching procession and waving handkerchiefs. It was a remarkable occasion.

As you might imagine, it was quite a raucous surprise for all those unsuspecting Episcopalians and their friends. It was, I trust, a compleat liturgy for Marsha.

This Journal staff and I miss her very much. —JLD

*Jane Langton in *The Thief of Venice*, as quoted in *Library Juice*, 14ii01

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