

Day One: Ubuntu

Ubuntu. I am because you are. For all of its lyrical and philosophical appeal, it is not a concept I come to naturally. My growing up - and perhaps yours as well - emphasized the opposite: the importance of the individual. In my world individuals come together and make communities. The ubuntu idea is that communities make individuals. It is one I must reach for intentionally and hold onto firmly.

For one thing ubuntu is a Bantu word rooted in the culture of sub-equatorial Africa. This is undoubtedly a fine thing but if the truth be told the closest I have been to that part of Africa is South Carolina, where the Bantu influence is not what one would call distinct. That means I have to stretch out of my limitations in order to grasp and hold a truth that has been nurtured by others. In a church that prizes diversity, such stretching is a skill we all want to develop more fully.

When I do that stretching toward ubuntu, I can first sense and then begin to understand its wisdom. The individualism I was taught to prize was never my own invention. The fact is we are all derivatives; drawing our sense of self from that which is other than our individual selves. We derive from God who creates us, Jesus who gives us value and the Spirit that gives us purpose. We are who we are because of ancestors of both flesh and faith, mentors and tormentors, friends and foes, those we have loved and those who have loved us. I know I am because they are. And you are because we are.

Ubuntu does not negate the importance of our individualism. Personal discipline, stewardship and responsibility are still at the heart of our moral life. Private joys, personal prayers and particular peculiarities are enriched rather than diminished by the broader perspective of ubuntu.

But it is still hard for many of us to grasp and hold onto. This was brought home to me dramatically when I came to Anaheim earlier this year for a planning meeting. I had been thinking about ubuntu on the long flight from Washington, DC. I had almost worked it out in my mind when I got off the plane and found myself in the John Wayne Airport. Now if you think about it John Wayne, at least as we knew him in the movies, is to ubuntu what Darth Vader is to the 23rd Psalm. If there is such a word as un-ubuntu, Wayne's characters embodied it. They influenced me much more than Bantu wisdom. I could almost feel my fragile concept of ubuntu trembling and shrinking while I smuggled it through the John Wayne Airport. The only thing missing was Frank Sinatra singing "I Did It My Way" over the PA system.

The culture of individualism is strong and not without merit. But ubuntu is wise and its broader perspective contains a deeper truth. We will work on it together. Some will have to work harder than others. But we will work on it together because together is not only what we are, together is who we are. That is the wisdom of ubuntu.

Day Two: The Answer to Jesus' Prayer

Those of us who work in theology do not often get to speak of a 'break through' the way people in science or the news media do. That is why I am tempted to begin this meditation with a phrase like "This just in..." or end it with "Film at 11." But there has been a breakthrough which greatly effects all that we do as a church and as a convention. It concerns the 17th chapter of John's Gospel, the text referred to as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. It is in this prayer that He asks the Father to make us – you and me and our contemporaries – one as he and the Father are one. The breakthrough is that the prayer has been answered. And the answer is a resounding "Yes!" Because of that response we – you and me and our contemporaries – are one, just as the Father and the Son are one.

I am told that when Einstein learned of the atomic bomb he said, "This changes everything except the way people think." So too God's answer to this prayer changes everything except, so far, the way people think. We continue to think as if unity were a goal to strive for rather than a fact to acknowledge. We continue to think that our identity as Christians is determined by the separating adjectives we put in front of the word – orthodox, progressive, emergent, Gen X, gay, traditional, anglo-catholic, whatever – when in fact our identity is determined by our connection to all that is orthodox, progressive, emergent, Gen X, gay, traditional, anglo-catholic and whatever. And ubuntu, the idea that our distinctiveness comes from our connectedness, is like the bumper sticker said about gravity: "Its not just a good idea – it's the law!"

We continue to scramble to mark the manner in which we differ and disagree with others. Those differences are important. They are in many ways our best gifts to one another. It is well and wisely said that if two people agree on everything, one of them is not necessary. We need those views and understandings that are different from our own lest our own views become stagnant and lifeless. Similarly, those others need our views for the same reasons. But we never have an adequate handle on our differences until we know that they are rooted in the great commonality established by the answer to Jesus' prayer. We remain painfully aware of how we contradict one another, but only dimly aware of how we actually complement one another. That thinking needs to change.

Our history is full of stories of separation: the Eastern and Western Church, the Protestant and Roman Church, Islamic and Christian discord, the centrifugal forces at work in the Anglican Communion as well as The Episcopal Church and this Convention. But mark this well: *Because of God's answer to the prayer in John's Gospel, separation is never more than the organizational expression of a theological impossibility.* There are times when we may feel the need to change the manner in which we connect but we are

not living into the reality created by Jesus' prayer until we determine what the new form of connection is. Ubuntu is a fact that neither our frustrations nor our righteousness can change. We are one because God has made us one.

Film at 11

Day Three: Community

Richard Henry Tawney was a boarding school classmate and life long friend of William Temple, the man who would be Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944. The two young men shared a deep Christian faith but their career paths went in different directions as Tawney became a leading economic historian and an advocate for more humane systems for society. It is not his economics, however, that bring him to mind as we explore the meaning and implications of ubuntu for our church. It is his insight into the importance of Christian Community. Please do not be distracted by the reliance on masculine terms which were common in his day but listen for what he has to tell us about being together. Tawney wrote these words: *" Those who seek God in the absence of their fellows find not God but Satan, whose countenance bears a striking resemblance to their own. "*

Dr. Tawney knew that by ourselves we tend to worship ourselves. That is one reason Christianity is a community faith as opposed to a spiritual path one can explore alone. Without the views of others to keep us in balance, our own view of God will shrink and narrow until it is as subjective as our view of ourselves. This means that while the agreement and affirmation we find in others is important, the most significant role of community grows out of our differences. As Bishop Tutu said, " God is smart [and] says it is precisely our diversity that makes for our unity." The differences that come from age, gender, culture, experience, education, perspective and priority are what we need the most from our faith community. Too often we treat these distinctions as enemies to conquer rather than as books to be read; as challenges to our world rather than enrichments of it; as a mark of weirdness rather than a source of wonder.

I doubt that Dr. Tawny knew much about ubuntu; but ubuntu and Dr. Tawney know a lot about us. We need one another if we are to be anything near what we were created to be. Specifically, we need the 'otherness' of others to be our best selves.

But because the 'otherness' we need is so hard for us to accept much less seek, we must ask God for the humility that ubuntu requires. We need not, indeed we cannot, be what every one wants us to be; and the spirit of ubuntu prizes our view as much as that of others. Our task is neither to conquer nor to cave in but to work for the emergence of community out of diversity; to trust that when my truth can be joined to your truth, a greater truth will be the result. In ubuntu every one is a teacher, every one is a student so that we might find God, whose countenance bears a striking resemblance to Jesus.

Day Four: Christianity is a Verb

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times... it was the epoch of belief, ... the epoch of incredulity...the spring of hope,... the winter of despair". Charles Dickens' description of Revolutionary France in *A Tale of Two Cities* is applicable to every age including our own and the era of Benedict of Nursia whom we honor today. Benedict was born at the end of the fifth century and died in the middle of the sixth. It was the Golden Age of the Mayan's in Central America and the age of gold for the West African Empire of Ghana. In what we call the Pacific Northwest people happily figured out how to fish for salmon and the competing tribes of Angles and Saxons arrived in England not knowing that they were destined to meld into a single word. But in Benedict's corner of the world, the Roman Empire was in the final spasms of its long sad death.

So Benedict, like his Eastern contemporaries we know as the Desert Fathers and Mothers, turned away from the crumbling world around him and staked a claim in the Kingdom of God. At Monte Cassino in Italy, he wrote his famous rule which became a guide for Western Monasticism and many contemporary Christians. I do not intend to unravel his rule in this brief meditation. But I would like to hold up a single truth that while not actually stated in the Rule is basic to its genius and to ubuntu and to our work at this convention.

Benedict realized that Christianity is a verb. It is something people do. Phyllis Tickle says that people connect to the faith in three ways. We belong, we believe and we behave. There are cultural Christians who are simply part of us, they belong. Philosophical Christians may agree with us, they believe. But our beating heart is mission minded Christians who act with us, belonging believers who behave as Christians. Benedict's Rule knows that we have to DO community or the community will not survive. Ubuntu knows that the community has to DO us or we become misshapen and distorted. The mission conversations of this convention know that we have to DO our faith or there will simply be no reason for The Episcopal Church.

Do you know why we are called "followers of Jesus"? It is because Jesus is going somewhere. If Jesus were not moving on, into the future; if Jesus did not embody the verb-ness, the mission motif, of Christianity, we could be called attached to Jesus or stacked next to Jesus, perhaps filed under Jesus or carved into Jesus or fixed on Jesus or maybe buried under Jesus. But we are not called

any of those things because Christianity is a verb, it is mission, a thing done in the best of times, the worst of times, epochs of belief, epochs of incredulity, in the spring of hope, or the winter of despair.

Day Five: The Half Way Point

We find ourselves in the middle, the half way point of this 76th General Convention. Five days gone, five days to go. We are caught in the tension between what we are doing and what has been accomplished. Our hearts know that there is too much of the former and not enough of the latter. We look at the daunting list of decisions not yet made and we see that they are the most complex. We feel perhaps as if we have strained at gnats and still must swallow camels. It feels as if we have been here forever and we have another forever to go. The faces of our loved ones are becoming difficult to recall while we see Madam President and Mr. Secretary in our sleep.

On the plus side we have settled into a routine. Electronic voting is less daunting; grabbing lunch is more predictable; reports from Dispatch can be read with more, well, dispatch. The arcane language of parliamentary procedure is beginning to make sense. We can use 'ubuntu' and 'public narrative' in a sentence and sometimes even the same sentence. As we shuffle back and forth between legislation and worship we can be aware of the fact that the words 'liturgy' and 'politics' actually mean the same thing: the work of the people. Voting 'Aye' in this hall really means the same as saying 'Amen' in the other. It holds together. We are starting to get the hang of it.

On the minus side it is all too clear that "organized religion" is something of an oxymoron. We have run into the fact that the language of faith is ideally suited to proclamation and pastoral comfort but awkward and clumsy for the give and take of debate. We have sometimes bitten off more than we can chew. And we have sometimes chewed more than we have bitten off. We have proven over and over the wisdom of G K Chesterton who said that original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the church.

Yet, this is precisely where we ought to be. The big decisions are ahead of us because they take longer to perk and be perfected in committees. What we have been doing all this time is an exercise in ubuntu. And every vote we have taken is a brush stroke on the vast canvass of history where the Holy Spirit is working on life's mural. Our uncertainties are among the most familiar themes in scripture. The only time our ancestors in the Exodus were without doubt was when they were making the Golden Calf. The rest of the time they struggled to follow a cloud and draw nearer to a fire.

Let us remember the story of Peter when Jesus invited him to step from the boat and walk with him upon the water. As long as the disciple's eyes were on Jesus he could do it. When he focused on the threatening wind and the water around him, he began to sink. Keeping an eye on Jesus in the middle of a lake or the middle of a convention

has never been easy but by the same token it has never been complex. Eyes on Jesus.
Do the job. We are half way there.

Day Six: The Not Chosen

We have a wonderful slate of nominees before us and a difficult set of choices to make regarding them. We are all blessed by their willingness to stand for election. They will be called upon to serve if chosen and – to the point of today’s meditation – to serve if not chosen. There will be more of the latter than the former when the results are announced for more people are not chosen than chosen. All of us in this House were elected, chosen, to serve as deputies. We know the satisfaction that comes from such an honor and the difficult stewardship this responsibility entails. But the Not Chosen in every election have an important role to play as well. They have as much to say about the life, nature and ministry of our Church as the Chosen do.

The Not Chosen are subject to particular temptations. They have done all of the qualifying stints of service, they have good ideas and important insights, and they stand vulnerable as do all nominees to the harsh light of vote counts made public. Because of this, the Not Chosen are especially subject to resentment, an attitude that Carrie Fisher says is like drinking poison and expecting someone else to die. Resentment is neither reasonable nor good but it is human and hard to resist.

The Not Chosen have been with us for a long time. Have you ever heard of Eleazer of Damascus? Probably not but he was the servant that the Patriarch Abraham expected to inherit his estate --until Isaac was born. The name Isaac means “Laughter” reflecting the joy Abraham and Sarah felt at his birth. There is a good chance that Eleazer had a different name for him, but it is not recorded. Nor do we have a record of the feelings of Hagar, the slave girl who had mothered Ishmael to Abraham at Sarah’s insistence only to be driven out when Sarah finally conceived. And then there was Justus who had been with Jesus from the beginning and through all of Holy Week so that he qualified to replace Judas among the apostles but lost that coveted position in a roll of the dice to Matthias. All took their place among the Not Chosen.

But rather than defining them by their losses and temptations, let us be aware that the Not Chosen have a unique opportunity to be the very heart of the Christian enterprise. Because by the spirit and attitude with which they bear disappointment, resist resentment and continue to serve the Lord, the Not Chosen declare, in ways not available to the Chosen, whether or not this Church actually serves something larger than individual feelings. The Chosen have opportunity to show that we are a wise Church with good stewardship and a vigorous claim on our hopes. But the Not Chosen have the power to show that we really are a servant community and followers of the One whose management style was foot washing.

Let us be grateful for all who stand for elections. Let us be supportive of the Chosen. But let us know that we rely on the Not Chosen to show what kind of Church we really are

Day Seven: Refugees

Refugees, sojourners, immigrants and the homeless are all slightly different by definition but taken together they make a common point for us as we consider the implications of ubuntu.

In Michael Battle's book, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me*, we are reminded that communities teach us to be individuals. The community in which we grow up gives us its lore, customs, principles and priorities as the raw material with which we fashion our individuality. Michael reminds us that we cannot know we are beautiful or gifted or anything else without the reference point of community in which such attributes are intelligible (p.8). As I considered the truth of that I became aware that when I think of community I picture a gathered thing, a homogeneity, some kind of a consistency that I bounced off of as a child and draw from as an adult.

But refugees, sojourners immigrants and the homeless remind us that communities do not always hold together, they leak sometimes, pieces break off, sometimes they rupture spewing their parts across disparate and unknown domains. Those pieces of community also teach us, they form us and give shape to our individual selves just as much as gathered communities do. Specifically, the mere fact of them requires us to define ourselves as moral creatures. The homeless person who asks for some spare change or the refugee who appears on my TV screen is going to get some of my money or some of my soul. The very fact of that person will diminish my pocket book if I respond or diminish my spiritual status if I pretend the person is not there. The prophet Amos warned people who live well, like you and me, of the danger in which we stand before God. The danger is not for enjoying a drink or a song but for failing to be grieved over the ruin of others. Jesus told the story we call Dives and Lazarus in which the wealthy Dives is punished, not for being prosperous but for failing to see the hurting person at his doorstep. In every case, it is nothing the broken pieces of community do but the very fact of them that requires us to say who we are as human beings, as servants of God.

The gathered, consistent, homogenous community we can all recognize let us know how to behave. The broken pieces of communities require us to actually behave one way or another. There is no formula, no recommended response; no Biblical quota to which Congress or coyotes, congregations or conventions must conform; no guidelines except an expectation of God that our graced humanity will continually emerge as we confront the broken pieces of life.

Hospitality is one lesson for us to apply. Giving that reflects God's preoccupation with the lame, the least and the lost is another. But all of our responses begin with the simple, uneasy, difficult and powerful requirement that we actually see them - the

refugee, the sojourner, the immigrant and the homeless. No good is possible until we do. Every good is possible when we do.

Day Eight: The Hezekiah Syndrome

Hezekiah is not exactly a familiar biblical name. Very few children are named for him but he was a reasonably successful King of Judah from 716 – 687 BC. He won a few battles and is best known for cutting a conduit into Jerusalem, guaranteeing a supply of fresh water during sieges. Hezekiah's Tunnel, produced the water which made the Pool of Siloam where Jesus famously healed a lame man. Hezekiah got along tolerably well with the prophet Isaiah, which is no mean feat. There would be nothing to bring him to our attention except for a remarkable act of selfishness near the end of his life. Isaiah told him that after his death the kingdom and city would fall to Babylon and that all, including his sons, would be carried away into captivity. II Kings 20:19 tells us that Hezekiah responded, "'The word of the Lord is good.' For he thought, 'Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days?'"

Did you hear that? Did he really admit to thinking that way? It was OK if disaster fell on his family and his community after his death as long as he enjoyed peace and security! A person that selfish would be capable of almost anything. Polluting the rivers and streams, endangering species, dissolving the ozone layer or contaminating the skies would not be beneath him as long as he had a nice life. Debt beyond imagination would not phase him as long as he got his perks and his grandchildren got the bill. His church could avoid relevance to a younger generation as long as the customs of his generation were continued. He could let the education system rot, knowing that the bad fruit would not fall until after he was gone. A person as selfish as Hezekiah is almost beyond imagining. Almost.

Unfortunately, what sets Hezekiah apart is his candor rather than his ethics. Modern Christians would be reluctant to admit to living by Hezekiah's abysmal standard, but the fact is that many of us are living just that way. I will not ask for a show of hands but I would guess that Hezekiah's assumptions are well represented among us even if his words are not.

Is it just too tedious to point out that ubuntu links us to those who come after us as well as those with whom we share this slice of history? Are we so steeped in environmental rhetoric that we merely roll our eyes when we hear it? Are we so trapped by Hezekiah's life style that we don't know how to look critically at our own behavior? Are we so tied to the myths of a church that probably never was that we cannot endow the church that just might be?

Ubuntu says that I am because you are. What will be our children's 'I am' be like after we are through being who 'we are'?

Day Nine: It Goes Without Saying

It is wisely noted that when something goes without saying it is likely to go – without saying. In other words, the things we do not talk about, even if they are obvious things, have a tendency to slip away from us so quietly we do not know exactly when they were lost. It happens in relationships when people stop saying that they love one another. It happens in faith without what Desmond Tutu calls the “habitual recollection” of corporate worship. It happens in nations and churches where the founding story is not told and retold. It underlines for us the importance of saying our Truth as a way of keeping our Truth. That may be part of the reason St. Paul said “Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16). If he did not speak it, he would lose it.

It also gives us a slightly different look at the importance of evangelism. That word has been stolen and much abused by its captors. The word literally means “story telling” but it has been corrupted to imply “sales pitch”. Evangelism is not me talking you into seeing as I do. Evangelism is me sharing my story as faithfully as I can. What you do in response becomes your story and yours to tell. An evangelist, in T. S. Eliot’s words, must “Take no thought for the harvest, but only of proper sowing” (*The Rock*). Evangelism is important not just because you need to hear my story but because I need to tell it. If I do not tell my story, I am in more than a little danger of losing my story, because that which goes without saying tends to go, without saying.

As a church, we are not very good at telling our story. We are woefully inarticulate, often mute, when it comes to reflecting upon and sharing our ongoing experience of the living God. If you can hear the truth in that statement, pause and be frightened with me for a moment.

Suppose we, as a church, have assumed that our ongoing experience of the living God is something that goes without saying. And suppose for want of saying our story, we, as a church, at some point lost the story. If the experience of the living God is only the remembered story of our spiritual ancestors, then let us be frightened together. For if that is true, it does not matter what else we might say. It does not matter what our conventions legislate, our leaders pontificate or our chaplains meditate for we will be adrift. Cut off from the ongoing story that gives us life and validity. If that were true, the budget we consider today is not too little but way too much. Without the experience of God story to tell The Episcopal Church would be an ancient service organization that meets weekly for a meal, a speaker and to hear about funds dispersed to support the good work of others.

If that scary scenario is true then all tasks must be set aside while we seek first the Kingdom of God, seek to live into the Gospel truth, so that we have a story that we can

tell. But if that scary scenario is not yet true and if it is to be kept from becoming true, then we must begin to consider the importance of evangelism in a whole new light

Day Ten: William White

Isn't it remarkable that the last day of this General Convention should fall on the day we remember William White, the architect and first presiding officer of this system of church governance. I hope you think it is remarkable because I intend to remark on it. In 1782 William White, then Rector of Christ Church, Philadelphia, anticipating the end of the Revolutionary War and the need to re-organize what had been the Church of England, wrote a treatise titled *The Case of the Episcopal Church in the United States Considered*. That paper held the seeds of what we now call the Anglican Communion, our current constitution and this General Convention. All have, of course, grown well beyond White's proposals and even his imagination but every basic element of our church polity was articulated by William White. Consider for a moment the connection between the Kingdom of God and the work begun in the convention of 1785, continued through two centuries and, for the 76th time, adjourns today.

We can do so by looking at the Creation Story in Genesis. In the first six days the natural order is established. That is everything that runs solely on God's energy: seasons, vegetation, instinctive animals, planets and so on. After the Sabbath rest, the story turns to the development of the moral universe where everything runs on hybrid energy, a combination of divine action and human reaction. The rest of the story is the struggle to make God's energy and human energy compatible. As you know it has not always worked well.

All churches are hybrid engines, trying to connect the vitality of the Spirit with the potential God has given to humankind. That old revolutionary William White held the notion that God's energy passes through laity, priests and deacons – aka The House of Deputies - as well as bishops. To this day that is not a universal view in the Anglican Communion.

So what we have been doing these last ten days is trying to prove White's thesis to be correct. We laity, priests and deacons have been trying to touch the energy of God and connect it to our own. We have been dancing with the Spirit, feeling for its lead and adjusting our steps accordingly. In more common terms, we have been trying to follow Jesus. Our task has been to make the hybrid engine work, to combine our energy with God's in a morally satisfying way.

So, did we do it? That question applies to what we have done and to the manner in which we have done it. It applies to what we have not done and the reasons we did not do it. It applies to the way we spent time and money, our own and the Church's. It will apply to what we do when we leave, how we tell the story and how we make our resolutions real.

Did we do it? Did we get our energy in sync with God's? How would William White answer that question? How do you answer that question? How would God answer it?

Yes!.....Yes!.....Yes!