

## **“Do not be ashamed: A different kind of conversation and the path to peace”**

Sermon given by Joe Summers on October 7th, 2007

(Proper 22C: Lamentations 1:1-6, Lamentations 3:19-26, 2 Timothy 1:1-14, Luke 17:5-10)

Normally, we do our collective reflection after the sermon time. Today I want to begin with having us do a brief exercise that Katharine Jefferts Schori, our presiding Bishop, did at the clergy conference on Mackinac this week.

First, close your eyes, get comfortable, and listen. (Silence) I AM says: “You are my Beloved and with you I AM well pleased”..... In his baptism Jesus heard God say: “you are my beloved..... with you I AM well pleased....In our baptism God says to us: “You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.” ... In communion, God says to us: “You are my beloved-with you I am well pleased.”...You are God’s beloved... with you God is well pleased. Let that message soak into you like rain upon a hard earth. (Silence)

I’d now like you to turn to one or two people next to you and talk for a couple of minutes about what that message means to you.

(Afterwards) What did you find yourselves talking about? How did the conversation go? It can be hard to talk about faith and God. Was your conversation easy or difficult?. How would things change if we believed this message and lived out of it?

Katharine Schori says that we are being called to believe in this reality and in part through doing this, as a church and as individuals-- to help create a different kind of conversation in our world, the kind of conversation needed if we and the peoples of our world are going to get to where we need to get to.

She points out that the Latin root of the word conversation means “to turn about with” . It is also the same root as the word “convert.” When it began to be used in English for hundreds of years it was not about talking--rather it meant to have dealings with, or to hang out with, as in the term “criminal conversation” which was an early legal term for adultery. This suggests that when the word first came to be applied to talking it suggested a far deeper level of engagement and knowing than what the word has come to mean in our time, something much more like the word “Yadah” which in Hebrew means “to know”, but which in Hebrew also means “to have sex with,” as in two people knew each other and begat a child.

I think Katharine’s instincts that the kind of conversion/transformation we are needing to see happen in this country and around the world --- is deeply linked to an ability to talk on a far deeper level -- is right on target.

What is going to be required for us to have the robust, free flowing, deeper level of conversation that opens up new possibilities-- here, there, and everywhere?

It requires us to be able to talk freely. It starts with creating a space for non-judgmental conversation: conversations that aren't controlled from the beginning by fear and shame, conversations and interactions that aren't predetermined by presumptions, assumptions that control what happens or what comes out of them -- so that what is spontaneous, what is new and unexpected - can emerge.

Katharine suggests that part of our being able to help promote and engage in such conversations begins with an exercise of faith whereby we accept ourselves as beloved and pleasing to God, and strive to see others through those eyes also.

Many objections to this may immediately leap to mind.

This phrase of being pleasing to God calls many of us up short. We don't feel that way. We feel our shortcomings and failings mean we're not pleasing to God. We've been taught that we become pleasing to God by what we do and we relate to God in this way. What about the fact that we're all sinners needing judgment to find our way back to health?

Katharine pointed out that this issue of being pleasing to God doesn't take us away from the question of sin, rather it quickly takes us right into it, but from a different angle. Catching a glimpse of ourselves as really loved, pleasing to God, brings to awareness all the ways we fail to live out of this reality, all the ways we don't believe it and not believing it project onto others the judgment, fear, and shame we feel. So much of our bad behavior is rooted in our inability to accept that we are beloved of God and pleasing to God. Katharine also suggests that when Christians begin with a focus on sin, rather than grace, inevitably they bring that same judgment to bear on others such that real conversation and the transformation that comes out of it can't happen.

Here I want to highlight two barriers to really talking: fear and shame. Fear may happen as a result of feeling threatened that someone may harm us if we speak openly and freely. Shame happens because voices within us seek to censor us.

I feel like I have a whole rat pack of voices within me that are constantly chattering about all the ways I am screwing up, have screwed up, or might screw up. (And by the way I'm so struck by how these voices seem to gain so much more power whenever bad things happen to us. You might think at such times they might back off, but no, just when we're flat on our backs because somebody accidentally hit us with their car, or we get hit with some terrible disease that has nothing to do with anything we did, these voices go crazy saying things like -- "stuff like this only happens to people like you -- you must have really screwed up!". These voices, as much as any external threat, have everything to do with why so many people have no voice, or can't find their voice to speak the creating --creative word: to talk new possibilities into existence, to reach out across the kind of abysses we spoke of last week, the abysses that keep us isolated, alone, and out of real relationship with others. If we are going to have the kind of conversations that allow for real transformation -- of ourselves and of others -- we're going to need to move

this mountain of shame off of us so we can speak freely, and through speaking freely, encourage others (help give others the courage) to do likewise.

Okay, so maybe we can get on board with this idea that God is calling us to move this mountain of shame and self loathing off of our hearts, but there are an awful lot of people out there, who we want to make sure change before we're willing to consider loving them.

What about people like Archbishop Akinola, head of the Anglican church in Nigeria, who in the name of God is pushing for laws that criminalize not only homosexuality, but even talking about it? Gay and lesbian people are being killed through such laws and he's bears a significant responsibility for that. What if he decides he is loved by God and pleasing to God when he's doing all these horrible things? What about all the users whose lives are all about manipulating and controlling and exploiting others? If we love them, where is their incentive to change?

These are hard questions and there are no easy answers, but my instincts say to me that if we can get over our need to inflict pain on others, which is what shunning or attempting to isolate others is generally about, if we can get to the point where we treat everyone as worthy of some basic human dignity---- that all sorts of things become possible. Humanity might indeed be able to say to the mountains of silence, shame, and fear--- "move!" We might begin to find our way towards one another and towards what we need to do to save ourselves and our world. But this is going require that we learn how to extend basic respect to people we often feel in violent disagreement with. Otherwise they are not going to be willing to engage in real conversation with us. Few of us are willing to really talk with people who aren't at least open to the possibility that we're motivated primarily by what seems good, and good for others, how can we imagine others are any different? Do you think they imagine themselves to be motivated by what's bad for others? Many may not be willing to talk to us anyway, but everyone that is willing to is one more span across the abyss.

In our Gospel today I hear Jesus saying it is not about having faith---everyone has enough faith. That's a striking idea when most churches in our culture would say the opposite. Rather, Jesus says, it's about exercising faith--practicing faith. If you have as much faith as the tiniest of seeds ( and I think he meant to imply all of us have at least that much faith) you could say to this mountain "move!", and it would move.

People understood that he was not talking about physical mountains, but realities that appeared every bit as big and as permanent as physical mountains:

like our brother Buddhist monks standing up to the military machine in Myanmar that seems unmovable in its brutality and lack of concern for the views of others.

like the folks who went down to Louisiana last week to confront the way racism still defines the possibilities of life for so much of our youth.

like those saying to governments and businesses, that seem incapable of listening much less changing, "this global warming thing is for real--we can't keep doing business as normal--- either we come together to do things differently, or we're going to perish together as fools."

like those in the Episcopal Church who are saying to the Anglican Communion: “not only are we not going to back away from moving towards full inclusion in our denomination, but we are going to do what we can to make sure that around the world the voices of our lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual sisters and brothers are heard. And if we get treated rudely because of this, if we get disrespected for it, well that’s a price we’re willing to pay.”

In our scriptures today, in his letter to Timothy we hear Paul say: “Do not be ashamed.” It is a command. If we let shame define ourselves and our interactions we’re never going to possess the boldness of spirit needed to move mountains. Instead, Paul says, “rekindle the gift of God that you received through the laying on of my hands.” The laying on of hands in prayer seems like such a basic form of affirmation, and through it, Paul says, we can bring the gift of God to one another.

Our readings from Lamentations talks about abandonment.. The fearful loneliness of cities that have been abandoned, what it means to find yourself abandoned-- homeless. It also speaks about the God of the homeless, the one through whom we find the power to be at home--where ever we are, wherever we find ourselves, the one who gives us the power to be transformed and to transform: hostility into hospitality, the stranger into a friend, the strange into blessing.

Let us hear again what it says about how this happens (3:19-26):

“The thought of my affliction and homelessness is bitter. My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me” (burdened beneath it). “But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning. God blesses those who wait on him, the soul that seeks him. It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of God.

Over the front door of this chapel is written “Be still and know I AM God.” The conversation that needs to happen in our world begins with an internal quieting-- the kind of silence -- that allows a different kind of conversation to happen in us:

the kind of conversation where we become fully present, to ourselves, to others, and to the One who loves us into being.

the kind of conversation that brings to life cold and deadened hearts.

the kind of conversation that transforms the stuff of daily life, including our pains and sorrows and loneliness, into the heavenly bread and drink of communion.

the kind of conversation that transforms simply being human into the most glorious of destinies.

Almost a thousand years ago Francis of Assisi changed the conversation of his time: about wealth, about war, about charity, about love, about the strange and the stranger, about nature, creation and animals, about God and faith and society. Through the same spirit of joyous freedom that motivated Francis, may we change the conversation in ours. And if we are willing, God is able. And if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us.