

July 8, 2009

The following is the opening sermon of Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, preached at the July 8 opening Eucharist at the Church's 76th General Convention.

**General Convention opening Eucharist
Ubuntu and the Body of Christ
8 July, 9:15 am
Gift of the Episcopal Church of the Philippines**

**The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori
Presiding Bishop and Primate**

Four and one-half years ago, I had the great privilege to join in the consecration of a new bishop, one who told an amazing story about the journey that had brought us all to that place on a cold night in Seattle. At the end of the service, Victor Rivera father, the retired bishop of San Joaquin, wrapped the new bishop his daughter Nedi, in his cope. Some of you may not know that while Victor Rivera was bishop in San Joaquin, and for many years afterward, he insisted that women should not be ordained. He didn't go to Nedi's ordination as a priest, and he had never taken communion from her, over the more than 25 years that she served as priest. I asked Nedi later how he had come to change his mind. She said to me, "He didn't change his mind; he changed his heart."

Ezekiel is talking about a changed heart, but in an even more radical sense he means a heart transplant. Ezekiel is speaking to a disheartened body, yearning for home, aching to be reconciled, impatient to end their depressed and heartsick state. Any parallels?

Heart transplants are at least possible in this era of history – brain transplants aren't yet – but Ezekiel is also talking about a brain transplant. His people understood the heart not as the seat of emotion, but the seat of decision-making, the critical faculty of judgment that we talked about yesterday.

Look at the passage and listen again. Ezekiel says the body will be disinfected (I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean), and then comes the surgery (a new heart I will give you, and a new spirit). This is about a new way of understanding and acting, new life that comes from living in a new way.

We didn't get to hear it this morning, but if you were to keep on reading Ezekiel goes on to report God's word about the consequences of this new heart: God says, "I will summon the grain and make it abundant, and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations."

He also notes that this abundance will prompt the people to repentance for their misdeeds, and he promises that the towns will be repopulated, and the desolate land brought into production again. God's garden will be recreated (Ezek 36:29-35).

A new heart results in renewed creation – that reconciling mission we're so fond of talking about. We receive this new heart from an organ donor who has given his life so that all might indeed have more abundant life.

Hearts renewed stay that way, living flesh not hardening into stone, when they continue to share that new life – the exercise of pumping keeps a heart healthy. Ezekiel's hearers need a heart transplant because they have forgotten the source of their life and blessing, they have turned inward, they have become small and fearful. Their new life, like that of the dry bones he speaks about in the next chapter, will come as they receive the moist breath of a life-giving God, as they take in hope and possibility and the creative spirit of God, even in the face of crisis.

The Episcopal Church in the Philippines is offering us a remarkable example of what a healthy and life-sustaining heart looks like. The heart transplant began in 1898, with services held by chaplains of the occupying U.S. Army. Though we would probably prefer a different avenue, the miracle of new life happens even in war, and it happens even despite colonial structures. In 1901, General Convention established the Missionary District of the Philippines and elected Charles Henry Brent as missionary bishop. The first Filipino clergy were ordained, and the missionary district became a diocese, in 1937. By 1971, there were three dioceses and indigenous bishops in each one. In 1990, the Episcopal Church in the Philippines became an autonomous province of the Anglican Communion. A covenant relationship with this Episcopal Church continues up until this day, and the Episcopal Church in the Philippines achieved self-sufficiency financial independence in 2008. At the offertory this morning, Prime Bishop Edward Malecndan will present a gift to our church in gratitude for our continuing covenant relationship, as a sign of the strong and growing heart in that Church, eager to reach out to others in love. It is a sacrificial gift, and it will bring more abundant life to both donor and recipient.

The heart of the Episcopal Church in the Philippines began in the missionary heart of this church, as the heart of this church has its origins in missionary hearts farther east, going back over many centuries to the sacred heart in whom we all find our home.

That transplanted or expanded heart has much to do with *ubuntu*. It is a recognition that the one Body of Christ has many parts, each essential to the functioning and flourishing of the whole, and that no one part can be the whole. It is a deep and abiding acknowledgement that together we are whole, and he cannot be whole otherwise. When the parts of the body are working together, they discover both their gifts and their limitations. The little toe plays an important role in balance, but it can't smell, even if it is occasionally odorous. The elbow can't run, even though the energy it gives to a pumping arm can add stability and power to the whole body in a sprint.

The Episcopal Church in the Philippines cannot serve as the primary church in Haiti, even though it has important connections in other parts of this Church, like Los Angeles. Nor can this Episcopal Church still be the primary gospeller in the Philippines, yet the full communion partnership between the Episcopal Church in the Philippines, the Philippine Independent Church, and this Church enriches us all.

The first missionary bishop in the Philippines evidently understood this. He insisted that he wouldn't "found an altar against an altar." He wouldn't go starting Episcopal churches with the goal of converting Roman Catholics. He saw the mission of that nascent church as evangelical responsibility for English-speaking expatriates, and for the urban Chinese population, but more especially for the unevangelized peoples of the Philippine Islands. The strength of the Episcopal Church in the Philippines today largely comes from the indigenous people of the mountains and the lowlands, where the Episcopal missionaries first took the gospel. Brent wouldn't let them stay in the cities; he believed that the cities already had most of the altars they needed. He went looking for people who were open to being born again, from above, open to receiving a new heart and a new spirit.

That is still our mission work – taking good news and rebirth and offering heart transplants to the languishing. The heart of this church *will* slowly turn to stone if we think that our primary mission work is to those already in the pews inside our beautiful churches, or to those at other altars. We are in cardiac crisis if we think we can close the doors, and swing our incense and sing our hymns, and all will be right with the world. The heart of this body is mission – domestic and foreign mission, in partnership with anyone who shares that passion.

Jesus has already given this body a new heart. Every time we gather, the Spirit offers a pacemaker jolt to tweak the rhythm of this heart. The challenge is whether or not we'll recognize and receive that renewed life, whether the muscle will respond with a strengthened beat, sending more life out into the world.

If you read Ezekiel a bit more closely, you discover that the delivered promise of full larders and planted fields and repopulated cities is followed by repentance, by *metanoia*, getting a new mind – and a new heart. Once abundance is recognized, people begin to feel their hardened hearts. Abundant life is not only promised, but realized, and when we notice, we begin to accept the transplant. We will find more abundant life only in being poured out in giving life to the world. So, how will this heart push more lifeblood out into a languishing world? Can hear the heartbeat? Mission, Mission, Mission...