

Pentecost - Year B

Acts 2:1-21

Romans 8:22-27

John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

St. Margaret's, Annapolis

May 31, 2009

Singing a Common Song

It's beginning to look a lot like Pentecost! And I just *love* Pentecost! The scripture lessons are full of the Holy Spirit and everything that the Spirit brings: earth, wind, fire, water, divided tongues, united peoples, both speaking and hearing in our own language, sons and daughters prophesying, and everyone declaring God's deeds of power. Paul tells the Church in Rome that *the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now*, and Jesus teaches his disciples about the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, Jesus' Spirit.

My dear friends of St. Margaret's, *you are growing!* And I don't just mean in terms of numbers - which is certainly true. But you are learning different languages, declaring God's deeds of power in a greater variety of ways, and giving birth to so many new and creative ways of serving Christ Jesus in the world. There's so much going on here now, I just want to ask you, *How do you keep it all together?* The Music Program alone has grown *exponentially*, as the web site says, with the Chancel Choir, the Spirit Singers, the Third Sunday Band, the Motet Ensemble, Cantors, and the whole congregation giving praise to God through music ranging from Anglican anthems to Bluegrass. So let me ask the question musically: *How do you sing a common song?* The meaning of Pentecost has something to do with unity in diversity - so amidst all of our differences, with the incredible variety of ways in which we minister, given the increasingly pluralistic nature of the very country in which we live, *How do we sing a common song?*

I was actually given this metaphor by someone of whom you may know. On June 29, 2006, the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church was interviewed by Diane Rehm on National Public Radio's popular "Diane Rehm Show". During the course of the interview, Diane Rehm asked Bishop Katharine Jefforts Schori to tell listeners about a comparison she had made that drew on her background as an Oceanographer. Bishop Katharine said this:

The House of Bishops, and by extension, the General Convention, is not unlike humpback whales in the Pacific Ocean. Humpback whales sing songs, as you may know. They come together a couple of times a year, and one of those places is off the Hawaiian Islands. While they are together they learn a new song. Each of their individual songs changes and they begin to sing a common tune. When they go home again they teach that song to their neighbors in their home localities and over the coming months that song changes again and the next time they come back together they learn a new song together. (So the question for us is) "How can we come to sing a common song?"

As a veteran whale-watcher (although in the Atlantic, rather than the Pacific) and fan of the movie "Whale Rider", I thought Bishop Katharine's simile was refreshingly apt. She had

originally articulated it at a meeting of the House of Bishops, before the last General Convention. But having heard it for the first time myself on the “Diane Rehm Show”, I decided to adopt it personally. What song do I learn each week, as I visit the 117 separate congregations in the Diocese of Maryland that was not my own song, but rather, a common song? Could I accurately teach that song to my neighbors and friends elsewhere? And then, as a result of our singing together, how would that song change, and what new song would we be singing?

Quite recently I learned about a tool that can be used by any of us to help us in our efforts to sing a common song, to add our voices to millions of others and become a choir, as distinct from a cacophony, and the tool has to do with *evangelism*. Evangelism - the sharing of the good news of Jesus, the Christ, is the life blood of the Church. And at the 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, to be held in Anaheim, California from July 8 to the 17th, evangelism will take the form of an exciting project called Public Narrative. Public Narrative is a leadership tool that encourages participants to get in touch with their own, authentic passions and motivations for mission. What is it about my own vocation that blows my hair back, that makes me want to engage with others, that sets my own heart on fire? This is called: the story of *self*. In telling my own story, I might bear witness to a huge part of my life by saying: “Let me tell you about the nine-and-one-half years I had the honor and privilege of serving as Rector of St. Margaret’s Church, Annapolis. The loving, nurturing community there helped me to grow in relationship to Jesus and encouraged me to offer my gifts and skills for the building up of the Body of Christ.”

The second part of Public Narrative is the story of *us*. Who are we as a community? How do we work together? What are our core values? That’s pretty much the nature and essence of what you all are doing as you explore the nature and essence of life at St. Margaret’s for the parish profile. What is our story and how do we tell it? As I learn to tell my own story, I need to be able to connect it to the story of *us*, to my community, to St. Margaret’s Church and the Diocese of Maryland. What is the vocation, the call from God, that I and this community share, that we have in common?

The third part of Public Narrative is the story of *now*. The story of *now* is, perhaps obviously, not the story of *later*. There is urgency in the *now*, as well as a challenge and a choice. A practitioner of Public Narrative needs to be able to express the hope of a better future in such a way as to motivate others to take sometimes risky action. We need to be able to articulate why the action *matters*, and the outcome we hope to achieve.

When we tie it all together, when we link the story of self with the story of us and the story of now, an entire community can have a powerful tool for telling our public story, and moving the mission of the Church forward. And what is the mission of the Church? *The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.* (BCP, p.855)

I share all of this with you because Public Narrative can be a way to articulate *Ubuntu* - an African concept made popular by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the theme of the upcoming General Convention. In Archbishop Tutu’s words, *a person is a person through other people*, or, *I am what I am because of who we all are*, or, *me/we*. In John’s Gospel, Jesus says *I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.* (John 14:18-20) Ubuntu is a wonderful way of expressing our common humanity, of singing a common song.

Like our friends, the humpback whales, we may need to do a lot more swimming around

before we allow our individual songs to blend into a new common song. *There is that Leviathan, which you have made for the sport of it!* (Psalm 104:27b) This involves listening to one another and learning from each other and honoring all of God's great and gracious creation. We may also need to engage with one another for the explicit purpose of praying together, listening to one another's stories and sharing one another's burdens. As for the story of *now*, let our common song be that of today's lesson from the Book of Acts: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house in where they were sitting. ... All of them were filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. And each heard them speaking in their own language, giving powerful and awesome witness to the life-changing love of God."

In the Name of God, Amen.

The Rev. Canon Mary D. Glasspool