

## **Cowart's Sermon at the July 13 Eucharist**

*"Come and find ubuntu in New Orleans."*

[July 13 2009] The following is the sermon by Dr. Courtney Cowart, Director of Advocacy and Community Affairs, Office of Disaster Response and Episcopal Community Services of the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana, presented at the Monday, July 13 Eucharist at the Episcopal Church's 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention in Anaheim, California. (Video will be available on the Media Hub, <http://gchub.episcopalchurch.org/>)

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In this morning's parable, those of us who deeply yearn to heal a broken world are invited on an instructive journey. The gospel calls us to travel into a notoriously dark and forbidding place known as the Jericho Road. Brigands are crouched in crevices in the rocks. Travelers are beaten and robbed, and the chances of a stranger risking his neck to help you in distress are close to nil.

The norm for people who travel is not to relate at all. Instead they hurry along in fear. They terrorize and exploit. They engage in the sanctioned desertion of victims.

The scene where this journey occurs seems an unlikely one in which to find a neighbor. Perhaps this is why the Jericho Road is known as The Bloody Way. But in the dark crevices of the Jericho Road, where travelers have made such a mess of their human relations, a new reality awaits.

All God needs to quicken its emergence is one catalyst. And so, by God's grace, a Samaritan appears.

A non-chosen person, a Samaritan, comes upon his social enemy - a naked, beaten, half-dead Jewish traveler of the faith that *most detests* the Samaritan's kind.

As they come face-to-face it is as if all the angels hold their breath.

Looking deeply into the victim's eyes, this Samaritan must choose: to transcend the fraught history of their estranged people, to receive the stranger's suffering as his own. To assume upon himself, as the cleansing honor, the burden of the stranger's plight. To bind the stranger's wounds and carry him to safety. Or to collude with the norm of the road, and again pass by.

It is a moment of extreme pressure. Yes or no?

But by grace this Samaritan chooses mercy. It is a revolutionary act.

Flash forward now nearly two thousand years to another Jericho Road. This time the gospel calls us to enter a hurricane-ravaged city and to look and see 100,000 people thrown in a ditch of toxic filth, left by the road to die.

Again the scene is an unlikely one in which to find a neighbor. But this road too, where travelers once again have made a travesty of their human relations, is on the verge of rebirth.

All God needs to quicken the new emergence is one catalyst. One true neighbor to enter the scene and act.

And so, by God's grace, a Samaritan appears.

The descendent of slave owners, a privileged white man in a purple shirt, looks and sees the face of an aged African American woman. The woman, abandoned, starving, and surrounded by rotting corpses, holding a sign that says, "I am an American too." As she stands in front of the television cameras, an army truck loaded with water passes her by.

As the bishop comes face to face with his people's victim, it is as if all the angels hold their breath.

Looking into her eyes, the Samaritan must choose: to transcend the fraught history of their estranged relations, to receive the stranger's suffering as his own. To assume upon himself, as the cleansing honor, the burden of this stranger's plight. To commit to binding the stranger's wounds and all whom she represents. Or to collude with the norm of the road, and like the truck travel pass her by.

It's a moment of extreme pressure. Yes or no? To mobilize the whole Body of Christ for these our neighbors is to risk defection from every southern norm. To offer a new relational beginning between estranged races will certainly confound many.

But in the dark night of the bishop's deep despair, a voice is heard that says, "Your lives are already inter-related. Her fate is your fate, Charles. You share a common fate."

It is a revolutionary breaking. A mysterious moment of salvation is begun.

And so, in the months to come, by the grace of God, *you* begin to appear. *You* come saying, "We have a chance to break through the illusion. To be in solidarity in better ways – not living as most Americans live. We can become expanded compassion."

*You* come saying, "I believe every child is the Christ child and I want to support this bishop. I believe he is sincere."

*You* come saying, “People who are dying. People who are so depressed they cannot even talk. These are *our* people.”

Between us and through us all, a new communion emerges, woven from a zillion Samaritan acts. Together we learn these relational acts are the most powerful acts in the entire world.

We can and must take the whole Jericho Road through the deep relational transubstantiation of the Samaritan. Until we do the Jericho Road of poverty and racism in the U.S. will remain a profoundly evil place.

37.3 million Americans have been thrown in the ditch that lies beneath the poverty line, and left there to languish. 24.5% are black, 21.5% are Hispanic, and the poorest counties in America are predominantly Native American.

Those passed by in the greatest numbers are children. In 2006 the poverty rate for minors in the U.S. was the highest in the industrialized world. Most Americans – 58.5% - will spend at least one year below the poverty line between the age of 25 and 75.

As Archbishop Williams underscored, these ministries that rebuild damaged trust between estranged neighbors may be laying far more important groundwork for the emergence of a new economy for the whole population than we ever previously imagined.

We are gathered here this week to make choices – to make choices about being neighbor and about whom we count as friends. With whom are our lives interrelated?

*Ubuntu* - yes or no?

If all God needs to begin the awakening and transformation of the Jericho Road, is for one neighbor, one true disciple to enter the scene and act, what if we were to commit all our collective heart, soul, and strength to a discipleship of universal bonds, to a discipleship of great pardons, to a discipleship that absolutely renounced any worldly attachment that stood in our way?

What, in particular could such a colossal awakening of ubuntu in action mean for the tens of millions of our neighbors in this country whose lives have been thrown in the ditch and for us?

An absurd question? An impossible dream? Come and find ubuntu in New Orleans.

I admit that my sightline is unusual. But I have seen with my own eyes the empathy of the world give birth. I have seen hoards of strangers from every faith tradition begin to appear, as if some invisible homing device was signaling to their hearts. Standing at the center of such an awakening has changed my view of humanity forever.

On the Gulf Coast 3 million people of you from throughout the U.S. have made a nearly four-year, sustained pilgrimage to our Jericho Road. We have bowed to one another and thanked each of our brothers and sisters for the great privilege of serving side-by-side in bonds of godly love. But this is just the beginning.

As Jesus commands the lawyer, so I suggest this morning -

“Go and do likewise” that the church may glorify God on every Jericho Road.

Amen.