

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, 5 July 2009
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Ubuntu. If you are not already familiar with this word, you probably will be over the course of the next few weeks, because it has been chosen as the theme for the 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, which begins on Wednesday. Convention in a time of contention and economic instability and cultural upheaval has the potential to be either an occasion of healing and growing together or an occasion of division and recrimination. Because the leaders of our Church are deeply committed to unity, to moving together into God's future, this African concept seemed to be a good choice.

Most of us first heard this concept from Archbishop Desmond Tutu who invoked it in the context of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process. In 1999 he said, "A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed." In 2008 he wrote, "One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu - the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality - Ubuntu - you are known for your generosity."

The term has also been heard from Nelson Mandela: "A traveller through a country would stop at a village and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. "That is one aspect of Ubuntu but it will have various aspects. Ubuntu does not mean that people should not address themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve."

Ubuntu in various related linguistic forms appears in the languages and philosophies of many traditional African cultures, but it speaks to the hearts of people all over the world, partly because of parallel concepts in other cultures. Ubuntu resonates with the Hindu concept of Ahimsa, non-harming, that was at the core of Gandhi's teaching and work, as well as Dr Martin Luther King's. These two both saw this ancient Hindu idea lived out in the life and ministry of Jesus. This is not surprising because Ubuntu and Ahimsa echo that core Hebrew concept of hesedh, the loving-kindness of God which we are meant to emulate, a kind of generous spirit which embraces everyone and seeks each one's good.

A community living in the spirit of Ubuntu has no orphans because all adults acknowledge responsibility for any children in need. The role of parent is not limited to specific individuals. This

concept is lived out today in Ubuntu Education Fund which works with orphans in Port Elizabeth in South Africa.

That appearance of the word and the underlying concept seems quite predictable, but the word has spread in other, perhaps more surprising ways. The Boston Celtics have chanted "ubuntu" when breaking a huddle since the start of the 2007-2008 season to express a team solidarity and concern. Ubuntu Cola is a soft drink made with Fairtrade sugar from Malawi and Zambia.

The Ubuntu Restaurant in Napa, California strives to live out this philosophy in their service, their food, and their relationship with the surrounding community.

Perhaps the most surprising appearance of Ubuntu in our common culture is in the world of computers. The British company Canonical developed an open source Linux-based operating system which explicitly intends to be always community developed, free to everyone, open to innovation and sharing of all sorts – and called it ‘Ubuntu’. The Linux world in general has much of the spirit of Ubuntu native to it, but this particular system, available to everyone, and useful at all sorts of levels, proclaims its allegiance to this philosophical construct and way of living for the benefit of everyone.

The developers of Ubuntu say, “We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity. Ubuntu is a community developed, Linux-based operating system that is perfect for laptops, desktops and servers. Ubuntu is composed of multiple software packages distributed under either a free software or an open source license. The main license used is the GNU General Public License (GNU GPL) which explicitly declares that users are free to run, copy, distribute, study, change, develop and improve the software.”

Think of it, a clever idea which makes it possible to do more things better in a whole variety of computer environments – and the people who came up with it did not think, “Oh, goody, how much money can we make?”

Rather, they thought, how can we make this available and useful to as many people as possible – and how can we encourage as many people as possible to contribute to its growing and changing in the best possible way for everyone. Ubuntu – the Kingdom of God, where all people live in love for one another and seek the other’s benefit.

Anthropologists and historians investigate and theorize about the development and spread of human ideas and ways of living, but ideas like this which occur all over the world in various forms suggest that they represent the realization of basic truths about human existence. If this is how we were created to live, if this is an expression of our basic best nature, then of course it will show up in more than one place – and of course it will be central to the teaching of Jesus.

Look at today's propers in terms of Ubuntu:

Ezekiel has the interests of his community at heart, shares God's concern for them. So it does not matter whether he will be successful in changing their thinking and behavior. He does not calculate before he preaches. He says what must be said for their good, whatever the cost to himself. This is essential to Ubuntu, putting the welfare of the community first, knowing that our individual identity does not exist apart from community.

Paul shows the normal human temptation to brag – brag because of his special visions from God, brag because of his education and intelligence, brag because of his successes – but he reminds himself not to brag, because that will differentiate him from others in the community, which detracts from building up the Body of Christ, from the spirit of ubuntu.

His physical afflictions and struggles and suffering make him more available to the community, open him to their ministrations. When he wants to be well and strong, God tells him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, [Paul] will boast all the more gladly of [his] weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in [him]. Therefore [he is] content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever [he is] weak, then [he is] strong.” Paul's afflictions and challenges highlight and reinforce the interdependence which is essential to Christian living, and to Ubuntu.

When Jesus sends the disciples out to preach and heal people, he sends them out not singly, but in pairs, reminding us that the kingdom is not made up of self-sufficient individuals. And he tells them to take nothing with them but to rely on the hospitality of the people among whom they minister. Descriptions of African communities living in Ubuntu shed an interesting light on this practice. One writer says, “...visitors do not need to burden themselves with carrying provisions — all they need is to dress properly and be on the road. All visitors are provided for and protected in every home they pass through without payment being expected. In fact, every individual should try their best to make visitors comfortable — and this applies to everyone who is aware of the presence of a visitor within a locality. This explains how David Livingstone (of the famous, “Dr. Livingstone, I presume”) survived on his journeys in Southern Africa especially among ubuntu-oriented societies of the time.”

What is described in the Gospel is exactly the traditional African Ubuntu: any visitor is provided for by everyone as a matter of course. The disciples' missionary expeditions are tests of ubuntu. Those who do not welcome and care for them, who refuse the expectations of Ubuntu, are not living the Kingdom life and therefore it will be a judgement on them in that they have cut themselves off from the community of healing and wholeness within which they would be able to find God and their own true selves.

One popular statement of the core idea of ubuntu is, “I Am Because We Are” – a central affirmation of Christian community. It seems to me a very hopeful thing that Ubuntu is the theme of our General Convention and I hope that we will all pray for the gathered delegates and Bishops that they may truly live and lead us in that spirit closer to the Kingdom of God envisioned by the Prince of Peace, and farther from the factionalism, discord, and self-interest that characterizes so much of our common life these days. The logo for the convention is beautiful and evocative, including Jesus’ words from the Gospel of John, “I in you and you in me.” below what at first appears to be a flower, but is really a circle of dancing people. The group alternates men and women, all with heads touching and arms about one another’s shoulders, with bodies and legs extending outward in harmonious movement. A circle of blessing to include everyone – that is our calling and our hope. Amen.

Thanks to Canonical UK and to Wikipedia for the quotations.