

UBUNTU – A WAY OF BEING:

The theology of the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Authored by: The Rev. Clelia Pinza-Garrity, Oct. 2022

The Episcopal Church is at a critical crossroad. How do we proceed as the voice of God – God’s mission in the world - in the context of a globalized society that is filled with countless economic, political, and divisive spiritual challenges? A society far different from that of our founding fathers. One in which Protestant Christianity was the central religion of the country and the unifying voice of our democracy, “One Nation Under God.” One in which the Episcopal Church and its dioceses flourished as vibrant communities engaged in myriad and vitally important ministries. One in which God’s presence was the guidepost to millions of lives.

While it is hard to hear, it should come as no surprise to you when I write, “Those days are long gone.” The decline of the church, the fading of God’s presence in the world, is a harsh reality. It is a reality that we struggle against. One that we find difficult to believe.

Our church has struggled mightily over the past several years in its various attempts to both acknowledge the church’s decline and at the same time identify new and innovative ways of bringing God and his message of love and peace into the world. A challenging task. Unfortunately, many of us have not helped as we continue to hold onto the past and the deeply embedded traditions established long ago under the Emperor Constantine in the year 381.

This tug-of-war approach, of course, has not and will not work. A more realistic way forward most urgently must be identified. God calls us to bravely cross the threshold of taking Christ’s cross into the world in new ways that are relevant to the context of our global society and its multiple challenges. Ways in which God once again becomes the guidepost for our nation and for the world.

Naturally, the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question is, “What is this new way; what will work?” There is no quick answer to these and so many other questions. Issues surrounding the violence, terrorism, political divisiveness, incredible economic disparity, and the lasting effects of colonialism throughout the Christian Empire, both here, and abroad, have left a world spinning in confusion and chaos. A world in which God is no longer our guidepost. Amidst this confusion and chaos, a way forward, carrying our cross and following Jesus in efforts that move our community and the world toward solidarity and peace is hard to imagine.

We are now faced with a tough but urgently necessary choice. Let go of the past and joyfully move forward; or keep our heads in the sand and continue to pretend that we can “go back to the way it used to be.”

I use the word “joyfully” with great intention. To move forward into the unknown entails taking a leap of faith, a joyful leap of faith that is based in the firm knowledge that God intends for us to be the *missio dei*, the mission of God in the world. Joyful in the knowledge that God is with us every step of the way as we emerge, essential participants in this *missio*

dei, renewing our churches and strengthening God's voice throughout our communities and the world. Joyful as we witness the *missio dei*, the image of God in ways that resonate powerfully within the context of our current society. Voices that bring the joy of God's love for his beloved children to all – all the world. Voices that place God as our guidepost in all that we see and do.

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu summarized the importance of our leap of faith saying, *"Go forth to make the world a better place for you can make a difference. The task is daunting – of course, but it is a necessary struggle."*

Paul wrote at the conclusion of his first letter to Timothy, *"But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called..."*

Are these not words for us as well. "Fight the good fight of faith." What guidance could be more relevant in these times when the church, God as our guidepost is slipping away, engulfed by political, economic, and environmental chaos. Paul's direction from the earliest of Christian times is no less relevant today. In solidarity we must fight the good fight of faith if our church is to survive.

"Go forth to make the world a better place for you can make a difference. The task is daunting – of course, but it is a necessary struggle."

So, just how might we "fight the good fight of faith?" What might that look like at this point in time? What tools do we have to help us in the "good fight?"

One recommendation that has been promoted continually by both the national church and churches throughout our many dioceses has called us to "get outside the four walls of the church" in order to bring the church to the community. Simply put to be the *missio dei*.

Archbishop Tutu's theology of Ubuntu endorses an essential practice in answer to our question, "How do we do this." How do we place ourselves outside the four walls of the church and join in and with the community in our struggle to live in peace and unity amid the confusion and chaos of today's world. How do we move from "going to church," in our sacred buildings on Sunday mornings, to "becoming the church" in every moment of our lives, wherever we are.

Tutu's theology of Ubuntu offers a powerful response to these questions. Ubuntu speaks of the very essence of what it means to be human. Ubuntu is a way of being that is generous, hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate; a way of sharing who we are and what we have. Ubuntu is to say, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours. Ubuntu means that we fulfill God's dream of realizing that you and I and all of us are a family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion.

Ubuntu is a way of being in which we realize that a person is a person only through their interrelationships with other persons. I learn how to be human through association you and with other human beings. My humanity is bound up in yours. We can only be human together. Human life is not meant to be lived in isolated individualism. Human life is meant to be shared.

Ubuntu resonates with our biblical faith that identifies us all as God's children, all made in the image of God, all called to be in relationship with each other no matter skin color or country of origin. All equal, while at the same time all blessedly different. All God's gift to the world.

Tutu believed and taught, *"We are each a God carrier, a tabernacle of the Holy Spirit, indwelt by God the holy and most blessed Trinity. To treat one such as less than this is not just wrong...It is veritably blasphemous and sacrilegious. It is to spit in the face of God."*

In other words, Ubuntu is a way of being in which we see ourselves as no different, no better or worse, than anyone else. A way of being that is based in the understanding that I cannot be a person if I am not in relationship with other people, regardless of their difference from me. A way of being in which being in relationship with difference, being in community in every sense of the word, leads to a deeper understanding of self and allows the same to occur in the "other." A way of being that acknowledges God as being always present, in all peoples. A way of being that is truly *missio dei*. A way that leads to unity and peace.

"Go forth to make the world a better place for you can make a difference. The task is daunting – of course, but it is a necessary struggle."

How do we get there? How do each of us in our own way move from going to church to being church in the world? How do we fight the good fight of faith that brings the world into a unified community that has as its guidepost God?

These are the tough questions, decisions, and actions that the church is called to face, full-on, as its declines in attendance and God as our guidepost fades from its place of centrality in our corporate lives. Where do we fit into that call, as distinctive congregations and as individuals.

Once again, the archbishop set an example for us as we ponder these questions through his commitment to a life of prayer and reflection. Tutu prayed faithfully seven times a day and celebrated the Eucharist at noon each day wherever he might be – even in the midst of a busy airport or meeting hall. Tutu maintained a solid vertical relationship with God. In all matters his conversation with God trumped the challenges of the day. Tutu saw himself as God's partner.

The archbishop claimed that without silence and prayer he would disintegrate. That claim is without doubt true for all of us when it comes to our vertical relationship with God and our ability to be God's partner in this confusing and complex world. Silence, reflection, and prayer bring us closer to God and our ability to fight the good fight of faith. The fight through which our Christian spirituality articulates the image of God in the world. The image of God as diverse persons in a unified world.

In an address to the 100th Anniversary to the Methodist Conference in South Africa, Tutu began, *"Jesus was forever a man of prayer, who sat the spiritual unequivocally at the center of His life, and it is from this vertical relationship with the Father that He drew the resources for His ministry of healing, feeding, preaching, and forgiving. We could well say that Jesus was a man for others precisely and only because He was first and foremost a man of God, a man of prayer. If it was so for the Son of God Himself how should it be otherwise for us? He is our paradigm."*