

**Celebration of Ecumenical Ministry
St. Christopher's Episcopal Church
Grand Blanc, Michigan
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
July 28, 2012**

Romans 10:9-17
Luke 24:44-57

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

In our conversations that follow our worship, I have been asked to share 3 questions that arise from the sermon. I am more curious what questions you might be asking. But I will tell you three now and frame the sermon around these questions. They are not unique to the ecumenical movement nor in our commitment to making visible the unity that is God's gift to us in Christ, but I believe we, in that movement need to be wrestling with those questions.

The first: how do you see the future?

Some, perhaps many, maybe even most in our 3 churches, look at what they are witnessing in cultures, communities and congregations these past few years, and see inevitable decline leading toward a closed future. In these communities in Michigan, you have witnessed an economic and social decline and the injustices that result – poverty, depression, stress in families, violence, abandonment of homes and entire communities. Many congregations are witnessing aging memberships, declining worship attendance, decreased financial resources to maintain clergy leadership, the inability to support mission beyond the congregation, and even the challenge of maintaining their buildings.

When diminishment becomes the way we see the future, we become susceptible to a virus that is very contagious in churches. It is called nostalgia. Nostalgia is quite different than memory. Memory is what we draw upon in order to live in God's present and be open to God's future. Nostalgia becomes a way we try to fortify ourselves against the changing realities of the present.

You know its symptoms. Whoever is your pastor now, his/her ministry is compared to previous pastors and doesn't quite measure up. Members longingly remember days of filled Sunday School classrooms, ample numbers of volunteers, budgets met and even surpassed and choirs that didn't have to beg for members. Nostalgia closes us off to God's promised future, making us long for a past that probably never really existed as we recall it.

I suspect the ecumenical movement may be trending toward such a closed view of the future. In fact, phrases such as "ecumenical winter" are used to describe our current era. We made great progress in the past 50 years. Theologians led us to discussion of issues we had said were church dividing, yet they no longer are. So Lutherans, Catholics and later Methodists signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. The ELCA and The Episcopal Church are just two of a significant number of churches in full communion. Yet now it seems the ecumenical landscape is being redefined again so that issues of personal morality and biblical interpretation determine how close or distant we are from one another.

So, how do you see the future?

As Jesus prepares his disciples for a major transition – the end of his earthly ministry and his ascension, he gives them a perspective that opens the future. Jesus does that by opening their

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minds to understand the scriptures. He gives them a way to understand the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms. And what is that way? Through Jesus' death and resurrection.

I think we need to ask one another – our sisters and brothers in Christ – what is happening that we are now using varied interpretations of certain passages in scripture to divide us? These passages have even become cause for harsh judgments of one another when Jesus is clear that we need scripture first to hear what shows forth Christ. For Jesus is the way God chooses to be with us, to reconcile us, to reveal the depth of God's love and the breadth of God's mercy for us and the whole creation.

God opens the future not by overpowering us but by becoming vulnerable – taking on the worst of humanity, our suffering. God went so far as to die on a cross rather than abandoning us and leaving us with our brokenness, our sinfulness, our illusion that we can save ourselves, or even worse, without salvation.

Earlier this year I was invited to participate in the Coexist Foundation awards night held at New York University. The Coexist Foundation's purpose is to deepen understanding of and respect for our religious differences. This was their first award ceremony - \$100,000 to the person or organization that brought about such deeper understanding, reconciliation.

The prize went to a woman from Indonesia who returned to her village where Christians and Muslims were killing each other. She began to organize women and children as a model for peace, nonviolence and reconciliation.

The program that night featured the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Rabbi David Saperstein and me engaging in inter-religious dialogue by responding to questions posed by a British religion broadcaster. We were each given two minutes to answer his last question, "What is at the heart of your faith tradition that you would never give away, even for greater harmony between religions?"

I said, "We believe God is always creating many pathways to us in order to show the endless love and the breadth of God's mercy for all that God has created. God is constantly improvising in order to reveal the depth of God's love, even choosing a couple way beyond child-bearing years. He chose Abraham and Sarah and said, 'Through you, I will bless all the generations.' God stopped Moses, a murderer, in his tracks, 'Wait a minute. Go to Pharaoh and demand that Pharaoh let my people go.' And as God's people began to experience the infancy of their liberation and then began to become rebellious and long for the security of bondage, God improvised again. He called Moses up on to the mountain and said, 'Here are ten words on a tablet. Give them to my people and if they follow them, then they will worship only me and they will live responsibly and respectfully with each other.' Yet the people kept rebelling and sinning and God said, 'What do I do now?' And God said, 'If you can't overpower them, then bend down humbly and meet them in who they are and where they are.' God became one of us in Jesus the Christ. Jesus began to walk the earth, showing the expanse of God's love and mercy by sitting at tables with sinners, by touching and healing the untouchables, by casting out demons, by gathering the greatest riff-raff of disciples you could ever imagine. We nailed Jesus to a cross for that. God said, 'How do I keep improvising now?' And God had one more move. God raised Jesus from the dead. We believe God meets us in Jesus in words and baptismal waters and says, 'You are my child. I will love you steadfastly for Jesus' sake. I'll forgive you mercifully and on the last day I will raise you up to new life. But I'm not going to send you into the world on your own. I'm going to gather you into this living body of the Christ called the church. I'm going to

infuse you with the power of the Holy Spirit. I'm going to send you with the mark of the cross of Christ on your forehead and the promise of his resurrection on the lips. And now I'm going to be present for and through you." I think I did it in two minutes.

I realized when I was done that for us who are Christians, the heart of our faith is a God who is always giving God's love away to fulfill and be faithful to God's promise of constant love. Therefore, the figural narrative that is at the heart of our worship and proclamation, the ministry of congregations and our life and witness in the world is Good Friday's aching loss, Holy Saturday's forsaken absence and Easter Sunday's astonishing newness of resurrection in Christ.¹

The cross was humanity's attempt to close off God's promised future by closing the book on Jesus' life – they sealed his grave with a stone. But when God re-opened Jesus' grave, re-opened his life, the disciples must have thought they had seen it all. But not quite. Now Jesus opens their minds – their lives – our lives to God's promised future by opening our minds to the scriptures, to see that it was necessary for this Messiah to suffer and die so that God's mercy in Jesus could open every life to the future God shares with us, a future not closed by sin, death or injustice, by violence, greed or corruption.

In Jesus God has opened the future to the work God is doing in the world. It is the work of repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, the work of God's own mercy. It is into Christ's death and resurrection we have been baptized. And in our baptism, our lives have been opened to God's promised future. Yes, Jesus' death and resurrection gives the perspective from which we receive God's gift or that future through faith.

A second question: What do you expect of the Holy Spirit? If our orientation toward the future is shaped by decline, diminishment, loss and nostalgia, we will have very low expectations of the Holy Spirit. In addition, we will have high anxiety from all the conflicts, distrust and discouragement that occurs when anxiety takes over our lives and families, our ministry and our congregations.

I often ask pastors and laity what they expect the Holy Spirit to do when the worship begins and when the sermon is given? Do you expect the dead will be raised? The blind will see? Those in despair will hear the good news? The oppressed will go free? Do you expect 3,000 will be added this day to the number of those being saved?

Jesus said you can expect to receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And what is the evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence and power at work through the gospel? Faith. Through the good news of Jesus Christ the Holy Spirit brings us to faith. "Faith is a living daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that believers would stake their lives on it a thousand times. Because of it [faith], without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to receive everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God."²

Thirty-five thousand youth and adults went to New Orleans to serve, to learn and to do justice. On the backs of their t-shirts was this quote from Luther, "Faith is a busy, active, mighty thing." The power of the Holy Spirit is evident in faith's confession, "Jesus is Lord." The Holy

¹ Edwin Searcy, "Seven Working Assumptions for Preaching in a Missional Church," *The Gospel and Our Culture*, vol. 15, nos. 1 and 2 [March and June, 2003], p. 3.

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works Volume 35, Word and Sacrament I*, E. Theodore Bachman and Helmut T. Lehmann eds. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960) 370-371.

Spirit gives our lives purpose. What is that purpose? Jesus made it clear, “You are witnesses of these things.”

Have you ever been a witness in a courtroom? Have you ever been on trial? What were you asked to do? Speak the truth of what you saw, what you heard and what you know. For on your testimony, the guilt or innocence and the future of another person might rest.

Paul is very clear writing to the Romans. If your neighbor, your classmate, colleague, grandchild does not hear the good news of Jesus Christ from you, from whom will they hear it? If they do not hear it, how will they believe it? How will they come to faith—because our ears are the birth canal of faith? So faith comes from what is heard and what is heard is spoken through the word of Christ.

Does such evangelical passion in the power of the Holy Spirit mark the ecumenical movement today? I pray so.

One last question: How beautiful are your feet?

Yes, I believe we must continue to engage our theological differences with our minds. We are called to love God with our whole hearts and minds and love our neighbors as ourselves. But we also need to check out our and each other’s feet. Paul, quoting Isaiah, reminded the Roman’s “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (NRSV, Romans 10:15)

In my office I have a large plaster foot on the floor. It was given to me by staff colleagues after my installation as presiding bishop. They wanted me to be reminded every day of Pastor Heidi Neumark’s sermon at my installation. There had been considerable controversy in our church over our adoption of the historic episcopate. Now with my installation there would be three bishops in historic succession laying hands on my head in prayer.

Pastor Neumark looked down from the high pulpit in Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago shaking her finger at me and said, “Bishop Hanson, there is a lot of fussing going on about who is going to put hands on your head in this service. Frankly, I am not concerned because for me the question is when we will we see your feet tomorrow? When will you lead this church?”

This was less than a month after 9-11. She was a pastor in South Bronx. She continued, “Will we see your feet lead us to stand with all who are in deep mourning in New York? Will you stand with those living in poverty? With those living with HIV/AIDS? With undocumented migrants in our communities? Will you bring the good news of Jesus Christ? Will you hear it from them we so often shun and shame? Look down at your feet. Look at the feet of those around you. Compliment them on their feet. What beautiful feet you have! Then ask to whom will you bring the good news of Jesus Christ on Monday?”

Oh yes, this is a day for joy and thanking because God’s promised future is open in Christ, coming toward us. The power of the Holy Sprit is at work in us and through us through faith. God giving us purpose to be witnesses of these things. God’s promise of salvation. Oh what beautiful feet you have.

Thanks be to God.