



ALL SAINTS CHURCH  
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

### **Growing A God-Shaped Heart**

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.  
September 20, 2009 - Homecoming Sunday

Before I begin the formal part of my sermon I just have to say one other word of reflection about Mike Leum. (Mr. Leum accompanied the rector in the procession and then was introduced as the head of the Montrose Search and Rescue Team that during the southern California fires during August rescued the 50 firefighters encircled by fire at one point and then brought out of the fire area the two firefighters who were killed during their work.)

I think spiritually if you let God lead you where God wants to lead you then you get connected with all sorts of surprising people and surprising relationships. The way I met Mike Leum was last year when we had that window of opportunity in California to legally marry gay and lesbian folks, I married Mike's little brother, Matt, to my first organist choirmaster from Georgia. The couple resides in Paris. Mike and his wife attended the wedding in San Francisco where I met them. Matt is now doing some work here and you see how it all works together. So, the lesson for me is: let God lead you and you will find great and surprising relationships developing that enrich your own life and the life of all.

Now to my sermon for this morning.

When Katharine Jefferts Schori was a candidate for Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, a position to which she was later elected as the first woman primate in modern Christian history, she told a story about whales. It's one of my favorite stories.

Prior to entering the ordained ministry of our church, Katherine, now Presiding Bishop, spent her professional life as a scientist, specializing in the field of oceanography. A firm believer in seeing science and religion as having a cooperative relationship rather than a competitive relationship, the presiding bishop loves to find analogies for spiritual truths in the truths of science.

The story she tells that I love is that humpback whales periodically leave home to gather with other humpbacks who are not from their home area in the ocean. They gather together in other far reaches of the ocean and while in this meeting away from home the whales learn to sing a new song together. Then after their sojourn in those far corners of the watery depths they come back home to teach the new song they learned while away to those at home.

Now for me that is a powerful image about what this day in the annual life of All Saints Church is all about. It is Homecoming Sunday. All of us have had impactful experiences since the end of the program year last June. Although some of us are still away on trips this morning, the principle and the spirit is the same. Today is the symbolic day of coming home from our summertime scatterings, from our summer Diaspora, to begin a new program year of the mission of All Saints Church. That mission is to make love tangible. Each of us has been changed. Each of us has a slightly new song or a very new song to sing. As we all pray, sing, work, and give ourselves as a community together we will learn from one another something deeper about the new songs each of us learned during the summer.

It will all be good, because the human experience at its heart is good and the human experience is all moving in a direction which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds us is the arc of the universe bending toward inclusion and justice and Archbishop Tutu reminds us that the journey of history is taking place in a universe that is fundamentally moral.

We saw that triumph of the moral when the Episcopal Church voted overwhelmingly to put an official end to its discrimination against Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender persons both in having partnerships blessed, and in states where it is legal, marriages blessed, and that those people can certainly now be considered for ordination to be bishop in the Episcopal church. The Lutherans this summer followed along the same arc. This new song of radical inclusion is permeating the church and the world giving courage to all of us to the ongoing work of justice and inclusion and equality for all throughout the globe.

We have to realize that part of the new songs we will be singing this year also carry refrains of sadness and poignancy. After the 9:00 a.m. service three different families came up to me amongst the several of our members who lost their homes in the fires which erupted this last month. Several of our other members have suffered personal loss during the summer.

The Station Fire was the worst fire in the history of Los Angeles County, now, today I heard on the radio, 93% contained on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of the fire. On the morning after speaking with someone from our parish who had lost everything—I heard about his losing not only his house, records, precious keepsakes – I stepped outside our house and smelled the rancid smoke in the air and observed ashes falling on my car. It came to me that that those ashes were probably a mixture of burned trees and brush as well as houses, as well as the documents and beloved mementoes of our loved ones as well as of those who are unknown to us. It was a sacred reminder that we are both all interconnected and that part of our interconnectedness is that we are all impermanent. Our opening prayer this morning prays that we not be anxious about earthly things that are passing away. This is a holy truth central to all world religions and this truth is summarized in the words from our Ash Wednesday service of our own Prayer Book: Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

Our financial crisis, though easing for those on Wall Street, still plagues those who have lost their homes and jobs on Main Street. There is a sense of dryness in parts of the soul of this country brought about by loss and fear of change.

That sense of dryness or absence of freshness has been crackling like brushfire throughout the national debate on Health Care Reform. I was stirred deeply by an interchange between two leaders of Congress last week. House of Representatives Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, expressed concern that the tone of the debate in our country be dialed down lest we spread a climate of personal attacks and violent speech that will fall on the ears of those who are unbalanced, or who would insanely turn hate-filled speech into physical acts of violence.

In response, House Minority Leader John Boehner from Ohio denied that the rhetoric feeding the health care debate contained an undercurrent of violence. Then he said something that struck me in my core. He said, "Americans are saying 'stop.' They're scared to death that the country that they grew up in is not going to be the country that their kids and grandkids get to grow up in,"

And therein lies an important issue for those of us who have found or intuit that we can find a new way of living when we follow this 1<sup>st</sup> century peasant, Jesus. At the heart of Jesus's life and message was a life of change, a life of transformation and he called it "The Kingdom of God." A way of life that IS different for our kids and grandkids than it was for us. A way of life that is what life would be like if God were reigning instead of the powers and principalities of discrimination, injustice, and violence that reign.

This morning's lesson tells us that "where there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you kill for it. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you fight to get your way by force. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, because you are asking to indulge your own selfish interests." Then Jesus illustrates what he thinks comprises asking wrongly or praying wrongly is—this wrong hearted prayer that leads to disputes and conflicts.

Jesus and his followers were on their way back to Capernaum to their headquarters and he had sensed some kind of energetic conversation between them while walking along the journey. He calls them together around him in the house and they reveal that they had been arguing with one another. Over what? Over which one of us is the greatest. Jesus sat down and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all. Whoever wants to be the greatest has to be the servant of all."

The American life has been very good for a substantial group of citizens but in the spirit of our interconnectedness we must admit that those ashes from the fires this summer illustrated for us, that not only in fires but in other ways we are all interconnected.

Thank God we have a system in this country where firefighters and search and rescue workers work hard to put out fires for ALL people. Thank God we don't have some kind of system where you pay firefighters insurance and only the people with firefighters insurance get help from the firefighters. It is in the enlightened self-interest of all of us to have all fires fought with the expenses are paid for out of a common purse. You can call that socialism if you want, but I'm glad that is our system. [applause]

Do not seek to know whether those ashes were from your house or someone else's house, seek not to know where those ashes came from—those ashes represented us **all**. There is that favorite word of Jesus's. A-L-L. All. What is it about that word do we not yet get?

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and whoever wants to be the greatest must be the servant of **all**.

Part of the new song I will be singing with you this year will be as a result of my wife Hope and me spending some time with our children and grandchildren this past summer. Time in this sermon will not permit me to tell you in detail about how beautiful and handsome and lovely and intelligent these grandchildren are. [laughter] But I can tell you about holding them in my lap during church and going to communion with them and knowing that the church they are going to be growing up in will not have the kind of prejudice against people of color and women and gay and lesbian sisters and brothers that I grew up in. Congressman Boehner I **want** my children and grandchildren to grow up in a country that is different than the one I grew up in. [applause]

I don't want them to grow up in a country where nearly 45,000 Americans die every year due to lack of health insurance. That's 122 deaths a day. By the end of this Homecoming Sunday 122 Americans will have died due to lack of health insurance. That's the startling finding in a new study that appeared last week in the current issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*. (Andrew P. Wilper, Steffie Woolhandler, Karen E. Lasser, Danny McCormick, David H. Bor, David U. Himmelstein, "Health Insurance and Mortality in US Adults," *American Journal of Public Health*, September, 2009)

That figure is two-and-a-half times higher than it was in 2002. The Harvard-based researchers found that uninsured, working-age Americans have a 40 percent higher risk of death than their privately insured counterparts, which is up from a 25 percent excess death rate found in 1993. Deaths now associated with lack of health insurance now exceed those caused by many common killers such as kidney disease. (democracynow.org.)

We will never be the first country, the greatest country we claim to be unless and until all citizens have equal access to health care.

I don't want my children and grandchildren to grow up in a country bankrupt by wars that make no sense, fanning the flames of terrorism rather than decreasing it.

I don't want my children and grandchildren to grow up in a country that stockpiles nuclear weapons.

I don't want my children and grandchildren to grow up in a country that doesn't respect everyone: A-L-L.

Another part of the new song I will be singing this year with you will be a result of my reading, which ranged from Shakespeare to Buddhism.

You all know that I believe that you can't be religious in the 21<sup>st</sup> century without being interreligious. I finished a fast that I unevenly kept during Ramadan this past 30 days. Ramadan moves around the calendar so it was in August and September this year and that's not so easy. Today Ramadan ends and all Muslims are celebrating. "Eid Mubarak," to all our Muslim friends. And I worshipped with Rabbi Joshua Levine-Grater two nights ago as the global Jewish community began Rosh Hashanah. Happy New Year. Shana Tova," to all our Jewish friends.

I am amazed at this particular interreligious moment in history how many people are joining in the enterprise of digging beneath the encrusted dogma and doctrines of the founders of their religions to unearth what those founders were really about. This has been going on with Jesus for some time. The most famous of those scholars have been Dominic Crossan and our friend, Marcus Borg. This past summer I met and interviewed and read from a young scholar of Buddhism in Chicago named Steven Asma, who is doing that work about the life of the Buddha.

Another interesting book I read this summer is by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hahn, named *Going Home, Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*. Thich Nhat Hahn likes to quote the French Christian poet, Andre Gide, who says, "God is available to us 24 hours a day." "God is your happiness." Thich Nhat Hahn repeats that truth "God is available to us 24 hours a day." And then adds, "The question is whether you are available to God twenty-four hours a day. Whether you are touching God 24 hours a day." (Thich Nhat Hahn, *Going Home, Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, p.8)

I reason I come to church, the reason I don't miss church even when I don't have to preach, the reason I get a little sick if I'm not in church is because I need to have my heart changed. I need to grow a God-shaped heart. I need to have it changed from a me-shaped heart to a we-shaped heart, from an ego and fear-driven heart to a God-shaped heart, a love-shaped heart. To clear away all the underbrush and dead wood that would contribute to a conflagration in my life and the life of others. To have newness and freshness in this life of mine that is not dry and given to spreading fires.

We are going through a process in this world, in this moral universe of God's, to come to a God-shaped heart. And people who are scared and polarized are going through the birth pangs of coming to a new order, singing a new song that includes A-L-L.

The epistle writer, James, says resist the devil and he will flee from you. The more I think and write about living in the house of love versus the house of fear, the more I think that FEAR is the devil. Resist fear, draw near to God, draw near to love and love will draw near to you and give you a new song to sing.

Amen.