

**AF sermon 5 July 2009**  
***Ubuntu***

***Later this month (on July 22<sup>nd</sup>) the church will celebrate the feast of Saint Mary Magdalene, the woman who was a constant companion to Jesus. I find this absolutely amazing, fabulous, surprising, and almost unbelievable.***

***When I was learning my faith in the late 50s and early 60s, Mary Magdalene wasn't a woman 'nice people' spoke about - much less admired. I learned she was a prostitute and outcast whom Jesus befriended. We spent a whole lot of time talking about Mary the mother of Christ, and even about Mary and her sister Martha, but not Mary Magdalene. She was a bad woman.***

***And yet in a couple of weeks the church will celebrate her. What happened? Why the change? And why would the Roman Catholics and Protestant faiths and the Anglican Communion want to have anything to do with celebrating a "fallen" woman?***

***First, who was she? Mary was from Magdala, a seaside town near Capernaum. All four gospels concur that she was one of the women who went to the tomb after Jesus' death. She was also the first witness to see the risen Christ. She was the one who was given the command, "Go to my brethren and say to them I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God" according to the Gospel of John.***

***She was one of the women who followed Jesus during his ministry because she had had her life transformed by meeting Jesus. According to the Gospel of Luke she was possessed by seven demons. Jesus cast them out and after she was healed she became one of his most loyal followers.***

***The town of Magdala was known for its prostitutes (and hair dressers), and Mary was known to be rich. Unfortunately for her Luke speaks of her by name immediately after the story of the stoning of the adulterous women, but there is no evidence that he was saying Mary was this woman. And although various movies have indicated she was a prostitute or at least a 'loose***

woman', there is no biblical basis for this interpretation. But some church leaders and scholars interpreted her repentance and consequent faithful service as a sign that she was a terribly sinful woman.

In 1969, the Roman Catholic Church quietly admitted what critics had been saying for centuries: Mary Magdalene's image as a reformed prostitute is not supported by the text of the Bible, and the church beatified her.

So basically, Mary of Magdala has gotten a two-thousand-year-long 'bad rap'. In other words, the church was wrong.

Guess what - this is neither the first nor the last time the church was and will be wrong. Why?

Because we are the church. We gathered here are the church, a group of wounded, healing, complex individuals who come together to worship in freedom the God of our understanding. Rob, Maria and I are also a part of the church - but a very small one. We the clergy are not the church - we are only a part of the church; we are flawed and you are flawed and therefore church is flawed and sometimes the church makes mistakes.

For the next weeks a few hundred members of our church of gathering in Anaheim, California to discuss, argue, disagree, do Bible study together, take communion together, socialize, talk, listen and vote their consciences on issues of great importance to the Anglican Communion and to Episcopalians specifically.

The gathering is called General Convention and is the governing body of the Episcopal Church. General Convention meets every three years to set the Episcopal Church's mission priorities, budget and policies.

I ask you to pray daily for our deputies and for Bishop Porter. He is blogging and you can see it through our Diocesan website. Please go to the Episcopal Church's website for updates- the purple insert has more information. And please do not believe

*everything you read in the NY Times or hear on the radio and television. Go to trusted sources for your information. The truth will be messy enough.*

*The theme of this year's general Convention is **ubuntu**. It is a Bantu word from the South Africa tribe that in essence means: I am because we are.*

*Archbishop Desmond Tutu is known for speaking about this word and the book **Reconciliation** (by Michael Battle) has a number of his sermons and speeches on this topic.*

*Tutu defines **ubuntu**: "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.*

*"**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...We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas we are connected and what we do affects the whole world."*

*We cannot exist as a human without others. Our essence exists only in relationship. Yes. As Christians we know and believe this - but as Christians we are called to actually incarnate this truth. Those of you gathered here last week experienced **ubuntu** listening to the stories about the children of Durgapur and how easy it is for us to support one for year and to become their 'Godparent' on the other side of the world. We felt how connected we are to people whom many of us will never meet but whose well being truly matters to us.*

*The problem is that we are human and all too easily can fall back into our own selves as being the center of the universe.*

*Charles Schultz's Linus once declared, "I love mankind...It's people I can't stand!!"*

*Some days I'm convinced the world would be a much better place without all these ghastly people around me - especially on the road. So how's my ubuntu working for you? Not so well - for me either.*

*Jesus calls us into relation with him **first and foremost**. And to be in relation with the Christ we must be living in love with one another. In Mark today Jesus tells the disciples to go two by two - not individually but together. "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the town or village. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you" - is not ubuntu- "as you leave shake off the dust that is on your feet as testimony against them." Let go of anything that might touch you that will keep you from being joyful and purposeful and in love with Jesus. "So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent."*

*And what is this repentance? Not just saying "I am wrong and I am filled with sorrow and shame for my wrong behaviors or thoughts." It is not just admitting that we acted for ourselves only and not for the good of the entire community or tribe or church. It is all that AND accepting that Christ loves us so much that all our dust, all our wickedness and sinfulness is gone - forgiven - relieved - completely removed by the One who has all power and who takes on our sins so that we may be free.*

*Every Sunday we are offered this freedom through our general confession of sin and the absolution we are offered by the priest on behalf of the one true God. And it is in this newly redeemed state that we offer one another peace and can go to the altar to actively participate in the body and blood of the Christ. He is the lamb who has been slain for our sins. He is the one who has removed our burdens that we may come closer to God through the Eucharist - the Greek word for thanksgiving.*

*Because it is at the altar that we are perfectly ubuntu - that we can realize the full meaning that 'we are because Christ is'. The Christ in me lives to celebrate the Christ in you.*

*So between July 8<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> our church will fight and disagree and do it in public. And it isn't pretty or easy; for the delegates and Bishops or for those of us who are watching. And every day those gathered will be offered the opportunity to participate in the Eucharist together. They will be offered to opportunity to return to Christ and to one another - even those with whom they may disagree.*

*It is possible the Convention will live into ubuntu. And it is possible our church deputies will make mistakes. But have no doubt that Jesus the Christ can redeem all our sinfulness, all our hurts against one another, all our self-centeredness and all our lack of ubuntu. It happened for Mary of Magdala. It has happened for each of us somewhere in our past. And Jesus will continue to work in and through us to redeem others, and through others to redeem us.*

*As we prepare to pray for one another and to confess our sins, let us set new standards for ourselves that we may live ubuntu.*