

Council of Bishops 11 05 24: 'By Your Spirit, make us one with Christ.' (Mark 6:7-8, Ruth 4:14-16) Dan Schwerin

In the name of the one who is for us, the one who is alongside us, and the one who is within us, grace to you and peace. In the words of Bishop Domingo, I will try to be brief, no matter how long it takes.

Let me open with a story. The older I get the more I see how formative the experience of blended family was for me. When I was a kid, my folks experienced a divorce. My dad met another person who had a family of her own. I was about 12 or 13. He sat me down one day and said, basically, 'Digger, those kids need an experience of family, and we need an experience of family. *I am asking you to make room in your heart for more and new family.*' From his end, it was my brother and I. Two above average and humble kids, plus she had three children. Two of the three were girls. I had no experience of girls. None of my cousins were girls. None of my buddies at school were girls. I could not parse their laughter or tears or their puzzling ways. They looked at me like I was a sheet of long division. In my heart of hearts, I had all the siblings that I needed. I didn't need any more siblings or want any more siblings.

One of her girls, soon to be my step-sister, was young, maybe 3 or 4 years old. This youngest one asked a question what seemed like every 12 seconds. One was, 'Danny, what does it mean when the Beatles sing about, '8 days a week?' I think there are seven. What does it mean? I count seven, Danny. What am I missing? If there is an eighth day, what do you call it? What are they talking about? This was 24-7. Can girls mow the lawn? I only see boys or men mow the lawn? Danny, why are girls not mowing lawns?'

Who needs more siblings?

To complicate things, some of the 5 kids started out by choosing hostility as a baseline emotion. My little brother looked up to me. I respected my father. Would I choose hostility or my father's vision for blended family?

According to the Hebrew language scholar, Robert Alter, the book of Ruth is a post exilic narrative written to challenge Israel to *ble*ss inter-cultural marriage. Though

the narrative is set in the time of the Judges, the text is written to expand Israel's post-exilic proclivity toward in-group behavior, in-group thinking, and in-group marriage. This narrative was written for Israel's survival in a post-exilic world, written to unbind tribal eyes and hearts in order to love.

The characters in the patriarchal narratives are usually flawed enough that you dare not read about Abraham in front of the Sunday School and take questions. In contrast, for the book of Ruth, people act with a predictably good ethos that makes room for building an economics of mutual benefit, even if you dare not review Naomi's plan through a drama in the chancel for a Children's sermon, or quote the Ruth and Boaz chapter in a job interview—not that I'm looking.

One recurrent device of classical biblical narratives is the use of the first piece of dialogue assigned to a character to define the distinctive nature of the entire character. We 'post para. 2553' bishops know that words define character, and character drives the story. In chapter 1:16, we hear the words of Ruth's **first speech drive the whole narrative**: “do not ask me to forsake you, to turn back from you, for wherever you go I will go. Wherever you lodge I will lodge. Your people are my people. Your God is my God.” Fascinating how words define character, how words drive narrative, and how words come from our vision of the world.

There are some key moments in this human drama especially, when we must decide whether we are un-kinning, coming apart, walling up, choosing the self-made way of the west, or whether we will risk partnering, forming new bonds, convening new covenant, or try to 'kin' in new ways.

By kinning I mean to use the root word 'kin,' a term that means a variety of things, sometimes kin is family relationship, sometimes something of the same kind, like the word, 'akin.' We use the root in words like, 'kinship, kin-folk, and kin-dom.' Just as there is a **childhood** in God, there is a **kinship** as siblings in Christ.

Despite having their family ties broken through death, Ruth insists on staying with or kinning with Naomi. It is also an abundance move, that despite the hardships of being a widow and going off to an unknown land, this is a move of trust in abundance. Ruth, and later, Naomi, too, imagines potential. Boaz sees and responds. Perhaps this story can challenge us in the direction of moral imagination.

Friends, I believe what is transformational in the biblical narrative is the move in Ruth from un-kinning to new kinning across tribal lines.

It takes courage to imagine a move from un-kinning to new kinning.

When I was a kid I could see that my family would be better, I would be better, if we were better.

I believe it is a Zulu proverb that, ‘**A person is a person through other persons.**’

It was formative for me to live inside the daily choice of hostility or hospitality, inside the decision of whether their well-being would be my well-being, and whether my well-being would be wrapped up in their well-being. **It takes courage to imagine, courage to turn a cheek when necessary, to move from un-kinning to new kinning.**

Decades later, when diabetes and dialysis and blood cancer was catching up with my dad, and when my dad was actively dying, my brother was on the west coast, and I was busy in ministry and had my own kids, others were spread out, and it was time to shepherd hospice. So I did. But then I got a call from Brooklyn, it was my eight days a week sister on the line. She said, ‘Danny, let me help you help Dad.’ I protested—you live in Brooklyn. You have family there. Danny, she said. ‘You’re family.’ She came.

She helped with her mom, helped with the house, helped me bring in hospice and all of it, while I was holding my dad’s clipboard for hospice, then as he slipped away, *he died peacefully because of who we could be together.*

I did not imagine I needed a sister, but my sister helped us give dad a good passing. She helped me when it was too much for one. **A person is a person through other persons.** My well-being is bound up with your well-being. **Each day is a discovery that we need more siblings.**

In Mark 6:7-8, disciples going into the mission are told, ‘take nothing for your journey, (except a walking stick for protection). No bread, no bag, no money. In Luke 10 Jesus said, ‘carry no wallet, no bag, and no extra sandals.’ Walk in a way that makes your need for others clear. Walk in a way that demonstrates and builds interdependence. **Walk in such a way that you build relationships of mutual**

benefit. Mutual benefit is our path and mutual benefit is our home. Bring your common needfulness and create interdependence. Trust others will bring food. Trust someone will bring teaching. Someone sandals. Someone well-being. The scholar James Scott calls it, ‘**everyday peasant resistance**’ to the domination and extraction system. Each day is a discovery for this resistance and this work, **each day is a discovery we need more siblings.**

In this everyday peasant resistance to domination and extraction —where there is this mutual benefit, the reign of Christ has come near to you.

According to the scholar, James Ogude, **ubuntu** is an animating and restorative principle. Ubuntu is about the relational totality of the universe. You have a shared responsibility to the plants around you. You have a proportional responsibility to the animals. You have a responsibility through the intentions of the ancestors and by extension to our supreme being. Healthy individuality is needed for true Ubuntu to be lived in harmony. **Ubuntu is our path and ubuntu is our home.**

Your well-being is my well-being. Maybe in the mouth of one who comes from a land of colonizers it is a bitter sorrow for me to use the word among you, and risk reducing it because it comes from my mouth. I am the first to acknowledge that we need many perspectives and deep repentance for us to understand and live ubuntu.

So this is our prayer for well-being over broken elements: **By Your Spirit, O God, make us one with Christ.**

It is hard to overstate what is at stake in the election in the US today. One major political party is calling for mass deportation, and claiming that immigrants are eating dogs, calling for one really violent day as a solution, with echoes of Kristallnacht. What will define our Christianity is whether and how we love our neighbors. We must choose between hostility and hospitality.

Sunday evening a week ago, a speaker addressing the rally at Madison Square Garden called the rally he was speaking in, a Nazi rally—that was his self-understanding. I have walked the dank dungeons of Auschwitz, and I know the Ku Klux Klan is alive and well in my episcopal area, so let’s make it clear to this world, that racism is incompatible with Christian teaching and for United

Methodists, Fascism will be resisted while we have breath. Dr. Paul Chilcoate's book *Active Faith* names this moment in this way, we are faced with the choice between hostility or hospitality.

Speech creates character and character drives the narrative!

It takes courage to imagine abundance enough to choose kinning when families in cross-racial appointments are coming apart from White Christian Nationalism. It takes courage to imagine abundance enough to choose kinning when tribal conflicts multiply the bloodshed of ages past. It takes courage to make clear in the words of a recent Council of Bishops statement, that love of God inevitably begets love of neighbor. Oh God, heal us of white supremacy and consecrate what is broken among us. By Your Spirit make us one with Christ!

Siblings in Christ, I am asking you to lead by making room in your heart for more and new family. I believe ubuntu is our path and our home.

The prayer on our hearts and lips today, 'By Your Spirit, make us one with Christ.' The epiclesis implores God to consecrate what is broken. By God's Spirit, make us one with Christ, a oneness in hope of healing the world.

I want to close with a story and a proverb for today and these next days of pilgrimage.

When I was serving First UMC in Waukesha in the Wisconsin Conference, we were blessed to have an elder from the Congo on our staff equipping and offering pastoral care.

Tshishinen Chingej was a preacher's kid. Her daddy had been a pastor. She went to Africa University, and during the ongoing war and sorrow, she had been a worker in an AIDS camp before she had to come to the US.

When my dad was in his last days, I asked Tshishinen to come and serve communion for my dad, me, and my family. Before she got out all the elements and liturgy and accoutrements, she looked us in the eye and said, 'in the Congo we

have a proverb we use. *If you want to go fast. Go alone. If you want to go far, go together.*

And it took my breath away that here and now for this journey with my father crossing over, the Christ was joining us more visibly. I expect that you have heard that proverb and I have used it at my gravesides. The power in a proverb is not that you know it, but when you know it.

For this week, for this moment for facing tribalism in the world, and racism and a growing fascism in the US, for facing war in Europe and new threats in Asia, as we lead the United Methodist Church, I am asking you to make room for more and new family. If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. If you want to take regionalization seriously, we will have to go together.

Insofar as the power and love we know as Christ is in us all, we are one in Christ. Our kinship is not in our opinions but in the power and love we know as Christ. Our kinship is not an othering against stranger and sojourner, not our kinship is in the power and love we know is Christ. Our kinship is a resistance and alternative to hate and harm and our kinship is a solidarity with the world. To go far we will have to go together.

It is no longer I who lives but Christ who liveth in me.

In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, nor slave, nor free, male nor female, all are one in Christ Jesus.

I believe it takes courage to imagine a move from un-kinning to new kinning.

I believe ubuntu is our path and ubuntu is our home.

I believe our kinship is in the power and love we know as Christ.

O God, by Your Spirit, make us one with Christ! Thanks be to God. Amen.

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Now consider your baptism. Accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. Touch the water. Grace is sufficient. Remember your baptism.

