

Randy Herbertson sings in our adult choir, and as he has for number of years, will be one of the adult mentors for the annual Youth Mission trip – an effort in which 35 volunteers from Christ & Holy Trinity shall return to Mississippi in a few weeks in support of rebuilding efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Professionally, Randy is a communications/marketing expert and the designer of CHT's oft-imitated website, one of the more innovative church websites in this country.

A few weeks ago, an intriguing design popped up on our computer screens in the church office—Randy had created a design for submission as the logo for next July's General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Anaheim, California. Designers had been asked to create an image conveying the idea of **“ubuntu”**, a difficult to translate African word. **Ubuntu** is the theme around which lay and clergy delegates, Bishops and many, many Episcopalians from throughout the Episcopal Church will gather for 10 days to pray, deliberate, and plan the future of the Episcopal Church for the next three years. Simply said, **Ubuntu** means: “I cannot be without you”. Desmond Tutu (the one-time Archbishop of Cape Town) in his book, No Future Without Forgiveness, explains **ubuntu** this way:

"Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, 'Yu u nobuntu'; 'Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu.' Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. A person with ubuntu," Tutu continues, "is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has (the) self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole".

The fact that our Episcopal Church has selected this theme of **ubuntu** suggests that our church is passionate about community and passionate that we support deep connections among all believers, pilgrims, and disciples of Jesus Christ. Adopting the African way of **ubuntu**, the Episcopal Church proclaims that until and unless **all** points of view are acknowledged and that unless and until **all** sorts and kinds of people are embraced and honored, this church cannot be the Church God calls us to be. Our Episcopal Church is saying that only as we live into our differences as a very diverse people can we embrace the Kingdom of God. In doing so, we fulfill the hope expressed by Archbishop Tutu when he says: *“we are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation. We need each other. We cannot survive and thrive without one another.”*

Though it took place thousands of years ago far north of the African continent, Abraham, oftentimes referred to as the “father of faith” and one whom we look for the vision of our pilgrim discipleship, practiced **ubuntu**. He modeled this practice for our church when sitting by the door of the tent by the oaks of Mamre (which could be another way of saying that he was sitting on the threshold awaiting God's next invitation), he looks up to see three strangers standing before him. Steeped in the ancient traditions of Middle Eastern hospitality, he greets them, bows to the ground before them, and invites these complete strangers into his life and family. Abraham is a man with **ubuntu**. Opening himself to these unknown guests, he is generous, hospitable, compassionate and caring towards them. Abraham makes sure water is brought that his guests first wash themselves before resting in the shade of the oaks. He calls Sarah, his wife, to ready an ample amount of the family's best flour from which cakes are made, baked and placed before his guests. He goes among his herds selecting the finest calf, (perhaps one that was being saved for a special family celebration) and explains to his herdsman that it should be carefully prepared that his guests be abundantly provided for. Abundant food and drink is carefully prepared and brought to his special guests—anything and everything they might need is provided.

Included in our leaflet and seen on a stand beside our pulpit this morning is an ikon that otherwise hangs on the west wall of the chapel over the communion table. Given to the church by a Westport family who lived for a time in the Ukraine, it is a re-creation copy of one the most famous of Russian ikons. Written (ikons are “written” not painted) by a Ukrainian artist, it re-creates the Rublev ikon, an image Andrei Rublev “wrote” in 1410. Depicting the three guests who visit Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, this ikon is often referred to by the Orthodox church as the “Old Testament trinity”. Many centuries before the Christian church formed the idea of the Trinity (the revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit), these three visitors made welcome as guests of Abraham and Sarah are

recognized as the most comprehensive of revelations of the love of God. This “Old Testament” representation of the Trinity signifies God’s wholeness and God’s desire to be in an intimate relationship with all persons.

As Abraham and Sarah open themselves to these three visitors, they open themselves to the fullest dimension of God’s love. In generously giving of their abundance to these three strangers, God responds in bestowing the most wonderful of blessings upon Abraham and Sarah—the promise of a son who shall be born to them even in their old age. One of the visitors (angels) announces that Sarah shall conceive and bear a son – Yishaq (Isaac) meaning, **he laughs**. Abraham and Sarah are practitioners of **ubuntu**—they welcome and are extraordinarily generous to these three strangers. In this act of hospitality they seem to say; here we are, strangers ourselves in this land of Canaan and we cannot be who we are unless we extend a warm and inviting welcome towards these three strangers. The three strangers – messengers of God – welcomed into the hearts Abraham and Sarah fulfill the relationship in bestowing a blessing upon them.

Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Roman Catholic priest, had a very great influence on Roman Catholic and Protestant churches in the last decades of the 20th century. A renown teacher at both Yale and Harvard Divinity Schools, he surrendered those prestigious appointments finishing his ministry in a community of severely mentally handicapped persons before his untimely death a few years ago. Henri once referred to contemporary Americans as nomads. “We live,” he said, “as if strangers in a foreign country for we are estranged from our past, our culture and our neighbors. Many of us are estranged from friends and family and especially from our deepest selves and from God.”

In recognizing the power of the story of Abraham, Sarah and their visitors, Henri re-introduced the importance of hospitality to the contemporary church, a practice that had been lost through the centuries. Critics of mainline churches had noted that many of us (Episcopalians especially) had become tribal—we welcomed into our churches persons like ourselves, those who looked like us, talked like us, dressed and acted like “other members of the tribe.” Those different were made to feel unwelcome. Henri reminded churches of early Christianity when all were welcomed, and of monasticism – especially St. Benedict – who proclaimed that religious communities were to welcome and shelter the poor, the outcast, and the stranger for in doing so one entertained Jesus himself.

Henri especially reminded us that Christians must welcome strangers since everyone of us has at some time, and is even now being welcomed into God through the generous, abundant love of Jesus Christ. Practicing hospitality – this way of life we have been living into at CHT suggests that our intentions are not to make anyone into “our” image – of who we think you should be. Rather, in this community and on this “threshold” of the Kingdom of God, we welcome all into this community where change can transform us all. In offering hospitality as did Abraham and Sarah, we become **ubuntu** to one another. As sojourners and wayfarers together, we are embraced by the heart of God’s transformative love.

Those of you who have been part of this church for some time will know as I hope those new to the church will discover that upon this “threshold” we shall learn to live into **ubuntu**. Cultivating a life in which we together immerse ourselves in the Holy Spirit and the love of God in Jesus Christ, we shall strive to live as Abraham and Sarah. Though Sarah doubted (reminding us of our timidity and fear), we believe that we can live wisely and well by faith. And so we shall not harp on sin and wrong-doing in this church for we live by a power much larger than ourselves—a wisdom planted in the depths of our souls by God. Though buffeted by disease, unemployment, divorce, alcoholism, disappointment, hate, greed and death, by living **ubuntu** we sense even in these things angels bearing gifts of grace and the promise of a bright, radiant future. As were Abraham and Sara, may we also be blessed with laughter, joy and immense, wonderful love.