

Colorado Diocesan Convention – *Engaging the World in Love*
Opening Eucharist, Proper 24A
12 October 2017
Grand Junction, CO, 7 pm

I've met some fascinating people recently – on Uber rides. On the way to the funeral of a retired bishop I learned that the driver had served on a Standing Committee with him decades before. When I went to the airport to come here, the driver told me about his Navy service and how he's continued working as a dental technician with the same dentist after both of them left the service. He had good things to say about his Navy experience and I shared about meeting a Navy chaplain the day before. I've been amazed at the connections that can emerge during a 10 minute drive if we're willing to be curious and even a little bit open.

Conversation is an essential and underutilized way of loving the world. Most essentially it's about spending time together, listening with mind and heart, and seeking the image of God in the other. When English speakers first started using the word 'conversation,' they meant living together in community, making the daily rounds, paying attention to who was there and what was happening; they weren't focused on using words. There's a legal term in English Common Law, "criminal conversation," that means spending too much time with the wrong person, and most likely not using many words at all. It means adultery, which should point out that conversation is about intimate community, including not only how Adam knew his wife, but how God knows us and we know God. Prayer is ultimately that kind of conversation and congress, and even if no words are spoken, the Word is active within the relationship. When we are living into the image of God we bear, the active and effective Word is at work in our conversation.

That's what's going on in Moses' conversation. He wants help, he complains, he pokes at God: 'you've told me to lead these people, but you haven't sent anybody to help me!' 'You say you know me, but remember these are YOUR people!' 'You say you're going with us. Well, make sure you do!' If it sounds like whining, I think it is. But Moses also knows, deep down, that the conversation isn't futile and he isn't going to be put off. Finally God tells Moses that he's going to be gracious and merciful as he pleases, and he's not Moses' co-dependent, but if Moses hides in the rock, he'll see God's glory passing by. There's humor as well as deep tenderness here – Moses is getting a dose of courage in a glimpse of God's backside. Don't we mostly see the hand of God at work only in retrospect, and aren't we often surprised by grace? It's rare for that to happen without some shred of relationship that is the fruit of long conversation.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is fundamentally about the same kind of conversation. The people there have learned about life in God through experiencing it in human vessels. "For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it." Living together, and coming to know another deeply, is a profound way of sharing the good news about God's transformative love.

You know how words seem completely inadequate when we try to console a grieving person? It's being there and listening that counts.

Jesus' encounter with the official trappers is another kind of loving conversation. These folks come loaded for bear, and he engages them with clarity and creativity. He doesn't refuse or ignore them. He takes their scheming question and returns it to them with interest. 'Give the

emperor's things back to him, and give God what is God's.' They've been invited to look again, to see anew.

Engaging the world in love is mostly about going out into less comfortable or unfamiliar territory with openness. Jesus tells the disciples just to go as they are, without a load of protective baggage – check all your bags, including the carry-on. Go with an open heart, and receive what you're offered. I don't know about you, but I grew up hearing "it is better to give than receive" every Sunday. It's hard for many of us to be vulnerable enough to receive what is offered – 'oh, I don't need anything,' or 'no, please don't trouble yourself.' We may be refusing an encounter with the living and life-changing Word.

The world around us yearns for conversation, particularly the kind that can reach across what divides us. How can we begin to talk about the violence that infests our culture? How about the political divisions, that are as evident in Colorado as anywhere? What about responding to the devastation of wildfires and hurricanes? I think we're all amazed at what happens in the face of natural disasters – people come together to help, often in deeply sacrificial ways. Americans respond with donations of cash, time, and labor, both to disasters here and across the world. Our startle responses are pretty robust in the face of physical danger, but they often work differently when the threat is below the level of consciousness. We know what to do when there's a fire, or a firing gun, but we don't know how to respond to the hidden pain of people who feel cast aside, unimportant, or unloved.

God sends us out into that confusing world to search for the unloved and the broken – and to search for the same in our own hearts. We do know something about how the wounds are healed, yet we're often hesitant to inquire about wounds we may or may not see. Jesus noticed the anxiety in the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to trap him, and offered them something creative enough to move them beyond fear. He asked people what they needed or wanted before offering to heal. He spent time to listen and observe. He befriended the broken, rather than rebuffing the pushy, or ignoring the silent.

God sends us into the neighborhood to look and listen and receive, and to BE neighbors. Where should we look for Jesus among the least and lost and left behind in our neighborhoods? We can go in twos or threes, and there are ways other than standing on the street corner – though I've had a couple of amazing encounters on the street recently. I met one man with a small backpack, who urgently wanted to communicate something joyous. He had an amazing vocabulary, but the words weren't strung together in a way that made any sense at all. He was happy, not anxious, but obviously disconnected. I stood and listened for a while, and tried to communicate, and finally realized that all I could do was listen, offer a smile, and pray for his safety and healing.

How do we discover or recognize the bad news the world has delivered to our neighborhoods? Spending time in conversation is key. There are tools to help: community organizing efforts – and many are being trained in those methods today. Living Room Conversations¹ are designed to promote civil discourse (and build community in the process). The World Café fosters conversation for community building; and Community Cafés² use similar methods to strengthen families. Each reaches beyond coffee hour or congregational dinner groups to join others in the neighborhood and hear their joys and laments.

This people of Colorado are doing this work – the Community Meal in Leadville; Laundry Love in the Sangre de Cristos; community gardens and Messy Church; the

¹ <http://www.livingroomconversations.org/>

² http://www.ctfalliance.org/initiative_parents-2.htm

congregations building community with St. Christopher's in Navajoland. The world is waiting, and groaning, and yearning for neighborhood conversation – for witnesses to good news in word and deed.

In the early years of this prayer book, when we had almost no real deacons, the Bishop of New York used to dismiss people with these words, “Get up, get out, and get lost!” At the end of this convention, I invite you to get up, get out there in the world, and get lost in conversation. You will find Jesus already there, at work. Go join him, and love the neighbors.