

State of the Diocese Report
Special Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh
The Rev. Dr. James B. Simons
December 13, 2008

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven"

These familiar words, from the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, are often read at funerals and were turned into a popular song in the 1960's. The preacher, Koheloth, begins to pair opposites such as in "a time to be born and time to die, a time to weep and a time to laugh." Of the fourteen pairings, one has always troubled me, or, I should say, didn't make a lot of sense to me and seemed to be out of place with the others. It occurs in the fifth verse: "A time to cast stones and a time to gather stones together". As I reflect on the events of the past several years, and more specifically in the Diocese of Pittsburgh over the past several months, I now think I understand this verse, and in many ways it has become the most poignant of them all.

As we move forward as the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, we need to make a decision about which season we are in: the season where we cast stones or the season where we gather them. I would like to suggest that we end the season of stone throwing

and enter into a new season -- one in which stones are gathered, gathered so that we might rebuild what has been torn down.

Casting stones:

As we seek to rebuild the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, we are not starting with a clean slate. As we move forward we carry the burden and scars of our recent past history. In short, we have developed a culture over the past several years that has not been one of grace and charity. We bring with us patterns of behavior which sought to categorize and judge others by what were in many cases arbitrary measures. We have not thought the best of each other and we have assigned motives for others' actions, often without speaking to that person or seeking to obtain accurate information. It was a culture of fear and control, and many in this room, including myself, cooperated in the creation of that culture. It was a culture of throwing stones, and I stand before you now to say, "Today that culture ends."

In the eighth chapter of The Gospel According to St. John, Jesus is confronted by a group of religious leaders who bring to him, as John describes it, "a woman who had been caught in adultery." It is quite possible that this woman had been dragged from her bed, disheveled and partially clothed and forcibly driven through the streets of Jerusalem to the temple itself where Jesus was teaching. A woman found to be in grievous sin dragged to the holiest site of her faith. She is to be an object lesson, and Jesus is asked if she should be stoned, as the law permits. You all know his response, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." And John tells us that one by one, starting with the eldest, the religious leaders turned and walked away. At the clergy renewal of vows two

years ago, the preacher recalled this story and asked us to imagine something I am going to ask you to imagine also, namely, that as each man turned to leave he dropped the stone he was holding so the departure was not silent but rather punctuated by the staccato dropping of perhaps hundreds of stones on the pavement of the temple court.

It is time to stop casting stones: it is time to realize with humility that we are all sinners saved by the grace of God, that judgment is not ours to render, and that we would do well to drop the stones we now hold and instead open our hands to each other.

This will be no easy task. The hurts and wounds are very real, and healing will come only when we are willing to let go of the pain. We need to ask for forgiveness *and* we need to forgive as we have been forgiven by God, and move forward in grace.

Patterns of behavior have been established, many unconsciously, and we need to give each other permission to stop and say, "No, that's the way we used to treat each other. We're not doing that anymore." We'll need to re-evaluate every aspect of our lives and ask the question, "Is this the way that Jesus would have us behave and treat each other?" We will make mistakes, and there will be false starts. There will be more hurt, but if we are willing to be vulnerable to one another and believe the best of each other, the old patterns will begin to melt away and we can move ahead with grace and charity.

Picking up Stones:

But it will not be enough simply to let go of the stones, the old patterns of behavior, and the hurts we have accumulated. We need to start gathering a different kind of stones. Stones that will enable us to rebuild what is in disrepair.

Nehemiah served in perhaps the most trusted position in the Persian Empire. He was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. It was his job, among other things, to taste the King's food before the king ate it, so as to insure the king's safety. Over a hundred years beforehand, the first wave of exiles had returned to Jerusalem, among them Ezra whose task was to begin the rebuilding of the temple itself. Nehemiah, having never been to Jerusalem, receives word that the city is in tatters, that the walls which protect the great city have fallen, and that people are vulnerable to outside attacks. After a long period of prayer, Nehemiah petitions the king for leave to go and rebuild the walls. Permission is granted. Nehemiah makes the journey and completes the task in record time.

I have often described the task before us as "Herculean," an adjective which evokes the Roman myth of Hercules and his twelve labors. But our task here is not Herculean, achieved by virtue of our own strength. Rather, our task is "Nehemian" – to be accomplished in faith, with prayer, and through obedience to the Lord.

The people of Nehemiah's time gathered stones in order to build, knowing that their faithfulness would be blessed by God. These are the stone we need to gather, stones of rebuilding, stones of construction, stones that allow us to create, and in that creation to rejoice with the Creator. It is time to gather stones. It is time to rebuild. It is time for us to focus on what unites us, not what divides us. For what unites us is far deeper and more powerful than that which separates.

"What does this look like?" you may ask. I would like to suggest that there are at least three aspects to this rebuilding.

First and foremost, we acknowledge that the foundation stone on which we build is the person of Jesus Christ. We are, and continue to be, a Diocese which upholds the

classic formularies of the church -- the Nicene and Apostle Creeds -- affirming the Deity of Christ, his sonship with the father, his redeeming work on the cross, and his offer of salvation to the world. We believe scripture to be the Word of God and that it contains all things necessary for salvation. It is from this that all else flows, it is on this foundation that we build. All of our outreach, all of our social service, all of our mission work is predicated on these facts and driven by the sure and certain knowledge that we are redeemed people who wish to make Christ's redemption known to the world. Everything begins from here.

Second is incarnational ministry. In his book The Rise of Christianity, University of Washington sociologist Rodney Stark set out to test the commonly held story that the church, during its first three hundred years, grew exponentially in the Roman Empire. He was asking the question, "Is it really possible that such a movement could grow so much so fast?" His conclusion was "yes" but the reasons were a bit surprising.

What led to the rapid growth of the early church was not a commitment to purity of doctrine. In fact, there were huge theological debates (which make much of what we struggle with today seem paltry), and the first Council of Nice, which began to bring some uniformity of belief, wouldn't occur until 325. What Stark discovered was that the church grew because of what I would call "incarnational" ministry. That is, the early Christians "became Christ" to the world.

In the mid third century the plague came to Alexandria, Egypt, and in the course of several months two-thirds of the city's population died. Those of means abandoned the city, often leaving sick family and friends behind to die. But the Christians stayed. They stayed and ministered not only to their own but also to everyone regardless of their

religion. The testimony of this incarnated love was what caused people to be attracted from paganism to a faith in Jesus Christ.

All around the empire this sort of behavior was seen. Christians visited the garbage dumps and collected the infants left to die, they took in the widowed and orphaned, they treated women better than even the official law of Rome would have them treated. They engaged the world with a self-sacrificing love which, like the plague itself, became infectious. It changed the world.

This is the way we need to be. We will build this diocese with the stones of the incarnation. We will show the world what it means to love one another and what it means to love a world which is broken and hostile. To lay down our very lives because of the life which was laid down for us and for the world. The world cannot help but be attracted to that.

Lastly, and I hesitate to use this word because it is so misused, diversity needs to be a hallmark of our common life together. But this is not easy to achieve and will not be brought to fruition simply by our trying to be more diverse.

My undergraduate degree is in stream and lake ecology. My thesis was developing a baseline study establishing the water quality of a large stream in Allegheny County. There is an inherent problem with assessing the water quality of a stream: the water is always moving. If someone is emitting an effluent at intervals, that substance may or not be present when chemical testing is done. What environmentalists have discovered is that the quality of the water can be established by assessing the diversity of the biological life forms found in it. In other words, the better the water quality, the more diverse the community. The healthier the environment, the more diverse the community

is. One does not improve the quality of the water by introducing diversity; one increases the diversity of the community by improving the quality of the environment.

I believe the same is true of every community, including the church. If we want to enjoy the diversity which has been one of the characteristics of the Episcopal Church, we must work to create an environment that fosters such a community.

This brings me back to where I started: we can only do this when we abandon the patterns of behavior to which have become accustomed. We must be in conversation, seeking to understand each other and when possible to rejoice and embrace the diversity God has blessed us with.

This is not to say that there are no boundaries and that everything is necessarily acceptable. But the church is broader than we have allowed it to be here and we need to work at creating a healthy environment that fosters appropriate diversity.

And now we come to the first test in seeing if we can lay aside the old patterns of behavior and move forward, trusting that the leadership which has been raised up is prayerfully seeking what is best for the Diocese and every member in it.

Your Standing Committee has been meeting with representatives of the Presiding Bishop's office in order to ascertain the best way forward in establishing an Episcopal presence in the diocese at this time, that is to say the presence of a bishop.

There were two possible ways to do this. The first is termed a "Provisional Bishop". This individual would be elected by the convention and would assume full ecclesiastical authority in the diocese.

The second option is termed an "Assisting Bishop". This individual would be selected by the Standing Committee to assist the Diocese, while the Standing Committee

would continue to be the ecclesiastical authority. However, certain aspects of that ecclesiastical authority would be delegated to the assisting bishop by agreement of the Standing Committee. This is the route we have chosen to take. We believe that it gives the diocese more autonomy in making decisions as we move forward in what is certainly a time of fragility. There is also the reality that the universe of candidates available to be Assisting Bishop is larger, as the role is part-time and would not be for the entire time between now and the election of a diocesan Bishop.

I am pleased to announce that, subject to a letter of agreement being signed, your Standing Committee has asked Bishop Robert H. Johnson, retired bishop of Western North Carolina, to act as Assisting Bishop of the Diocese of Pittsburgh. I need to make sure that there is no confusion here. The State of North Carolina has several dioceses and at one time there were two Bishop Robert Johnsons in the state. The Standing Committee has chosen Robert *H.* Johnson of Western North Carolina, who currently resides in Asheville.

Bishop Johnson is a Jacksonville, Florida native and was ordained in 1963. He served parishes in Jacksonville and Atlanta before being elected Bishop in 1988. He has been active in CREDO and serves on the board of the Church Pension Fund. He has been married for 46 years and has two grown children. Bishop Johnson most recently served in a similar capacity to what we are asking in The Diocese of Southern Virginia and did a wonderful job. We are thrilled that Bishop Johnson will join us in this capacity. He will be with us approximately two weeks a month and his commitment is until the end of July 2009.

Bishop Johnson's task will be threefold. First, he will help us to rebuild the infrastructure of the Diocese and be responsible for the day-to-day administrative tasks. Second, he will be available for parish visitations to do confirmations and other sacramental ministries. Third, and most importantly, he will be a pastor to us. Bishop Johnson will help us begin the healing we so badly need. He is, we believe, the right person at the right time.

Our old culture would now start to throw stones. It would “Google” the Bishop's name and begin to collect writings and voting records, it would be mistrustful and suspicious. It would dwell on the deficits and not the benefits. Perhaps some from whom we are separated will do this.

We need to not do that. Rather, we need to trust that those who have been raised up to leadership have everyone's best interest in mind and that this is not just a human answer to a situation but a godly one as well. We need to see this appointment as God's way of moving us forward, to recognize it as another stone we gather in the rebuilding of our common life.

At the end of the book that bears his name, Joshua confronts the people of Israel and asks them to choose this day who they will serve. He is honest with them about the difficulties this choice will bring, that serving YHWH is not an easy task. It is in this context that he utters perhaps his most well-known line, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

And so a similar choice lies before us today. Will we choose the old way, the way of throwing stones and serving the past, or will we choose to serve the Lord, to serve him by picking up stones to rebuild for the future? Serving the Lord by gathering

the stones of creating will not be easy, but I believe that we are equal to the task. That to which God has called us He will empower us to complete.

I want to close by making a personal declaration to all you here today. It is simply this: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."