

DIVING INTO THE DEEP

Sacred conversation: speaking the truth in love, in joy

By Mary Susan Gast

"Here's My offer," God said, inaugurating a sacred conversation recorded in the 65th chapter of the book of Isaiah. "I'm willing to forget all our old troubles; gone; they 'are [as of this moment] hidden from My sight.' [65: 16]

"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. Instead be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating, for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight." [65: 17-18]

And here's what I have in mind: This joy of a city, this delight of a people will spring up and "no more shall the sound of weeping be heard, nor the cry of distress" [v.19] the people "shall not...bear children for calamity," [v.23] but "shall long enjoy the work of their hands..." [v. 22]

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"Before they call, I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together...They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain." [vv. 24-25]

This is justice in the fullest, widest, most intimate of manifestations. No want, no exploitation. Plenty. Joy.

This May we were called as a church to sacred conversations on race and racism. At our Annual



Meeting we set up a rubric for the conversations: Listening. Spending time together. Talking story. Across cultural canyons and racial divides. Beyond comfort zones. Despite fears. Risking offense. Hazarding indifference. Aware that there is a system of racism that is systematic and institutionalized, politically, economically, historically, descriptively, linguistically.

Whether or not those of us who are Caucasian requested white privilege, it comes to us like an unsolicited credit card that somehow we can't revoke; no matter whether we have been granted the full credit limit; whether or not we have worked to dislodge the stone of bigotry and melt the ice of indifference from our hearts.

We must in our sacred conversations look critically and creatively at the impersonal, automatic ways in which racism operates.

We who are advantaged by the

system cannot maintain an unholy innocence in the face of what is being done in our interest.

Yet, we are all assured, "Our conversations will be sacred if we pray for the grace and courage to speak the truth in love and to hear one another all the way through."

"Our conversations will be sacred if we trust in the Spirit of the living God to do a new thing in our midst..." [UCC Collegium]

Like, say, creating Jerusalem a joy and its people a delight. And it is joy — unpredictable and unearnable as a baby's smile — that can fuse disparate elements by its heat and warmth and tenderness into the wildest and most improbable of communities.

This is transformation. By pyrolysis: through heat, warmth, and tenderness that does not burn us up.

Audre Lorde has written, "The

sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference."

Shared joy is capable of sustaining an environment where the genuinely preposterous can happen: where the lamb and the lion cease to be prey and predator in one another's company, where the Cosmic Dream of abundance and blessing comes to all.

Let us keep up the sacred conversations so that our joy — and our Creator's joy — may be full.

You can read Mary Susan's profound Annual Meeting Sunday morning sermon, about her own childhood awakening to racism, at <www.ncncucc.org/annualmeeting>

Philippine bishop speaks out on civil rights in Mill Valley

Editor's note: Community UCC, Mill Valley, members Arn Lou Mutia and Linda Xiques helped to organize this event, and Xiques, a local reporter, submitted this piece. Thanks! The Northern California Nevada Conference has close connections to the United Church of Christ in the Philippines and has raised awareness for several years about the human rights violations and church worker murders there.

Bishop Eliezer M. Pascua of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines spoke June 29 at Community UCC, Mill Valley, about rampant human rights abuses and the targeting of church leaders by Philippine government militias.

Sixty people from as far as Livermore, Sacramento and Daly City attended, as well as the local congregation, of which Pam Shortridge is pastor. Filipino organizations attending brought



Mill Valley member and person in care Arn Lou Mutia and Bishop Eliezer Pascua, sharing cost and joy of discipleship in the Philippines at Mill Valley UCC June 29. Photo Bob Larsen and Bob Harmon

nearly 60 photographs of victims of "extrajudicial killings." Their somber photographic display was the background for Pascua's speech.

Pascua spoke of several victims by name: UCCP Bishop Alberto Ramento killed in 2006 in his sanctuary; Jose "Pepe"

Manegdeg gunned down in 2005 while getting on a bus; Madonna Castello shot in front of her 4-year old child in 2005. All were targeted for promoting human rights in their country.

Since 2001, there have been more than 800 such killings in the Philippines. Another 200 victims have simply disappeared. Some, like Pastor Berlin Guerrero, have been kidnapped, tortured and imprisoned.

These staggeringly large numbers are sometimes disputed by government sources, but as Pascua pointed out, "If even one person is killed for working for justice, that is too many."

He confirms that more than 30 clergy and lay workers of all denominations, including 15 from

United Church of Christ in the Philippines, have died violently.

"The killings happen in a political climate of impunity," said Pascua. No one is punished. He quoted Philip Alston, special reporter for the United Nations on extrajudicial killings and summary executions, as saying, "The Philippine military is in denial about the killings that are convincingly attributed to them."

In March 2007, Pascua, along with other church representatives, testified about human rights violations in the Philippines to a Senate Foreign Relations sub-committee chaired by Sen. Barbara Boxer.

As a result, \$2 million, out of \$30 million in new U.S. foreign military aid, was withheld from the Philippine government pending improvement in human rights. Now Philippine President Arroyo claims there has been improvement and she wants the \$2 million

released.

But according to Pascua, any reduction in the number of extrajudicial killings this year is a result of international pressure rather than sustained efforts by the government. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the World Council of Churches, the United Nations Human Rights Council and others have all issued reports on human rights abuses in the Philippines.

The evening ended with a "call to action" by the Filipino organizations in attendance. The Filipino people are struggling to improve their lives. Half the population survives on less than \$2 a day. They seek social justice and the civil rights that we in the U.S. take for granted.

The Filipino community in the U.S. asks all people of faith to learn more about this struggle and offer their moral support.

Five NCNCers bike 545 miles to benefit AIDS research

Editor's note: Coral and Barry Cogbill from First Congregational UCC, Santa Rosa; Carol Barriger, pastor at First Congregational UCC, Redwood City; Drew Metcalfe, pastor of Community UCC, Kenwood; and his partner Max Mason rode 545 miles from San Francisco to Los Angeles in June to benefit the HIV/AIDS outreach and education services of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center. Barriger wrote this reflection:

Flanked by cheering onlookers, an endless stream of bicyclists poured out of the Cow Palace into

the chill of a June dawn in San Francisco. AIDS LifeCycle 7 was under way. Twenty-five hundred riders and more than 500 "roadies" raised awareness and \$11.6 million to fight a disease, which continues to devastate individuals and families.

"Life-changing" is the only way to describe it. The ride is for such an important cause, and we are reminded of that constantly by the presence of the Positive Peddlers, an incredible group of HIV+ cyclists.

Every evening in camp we heard the stories of people who benefit because of the ride. Every

day, when the body hurts and the mind asks, "Can I go on?" we think of those we have lost, and those we love who can no longer ride. We ride for them. At different times, everyone dug down to a physical and spiritual place just to keep going.

I wore a "God is Still Speaking" bike jersey, and on my helmet were the names of those I have lost to AIDS, and friends who still live HIV+.

The ride is full of joy, hilarity, pain and camaraderie. For a week, a community forms; 3,000 strangers support and encourage one another, unfailingly gracious in the



God is still speaking, and riding!

face of shared challenge. There are hills with a reputation. (You know any hill that cyclists have

named can't be good!) Each person bears his or her own story of why they ride for the cause. The sense of shared mission, of shared journey, is powerful. In return, we receive along the way cheering and encouragement from people of all ages, plus free ice cream, pie, coffee and red licorice vines!

Without idealizing, I wondered at one point if this might not be a taste of the reign of God, journeying together in love on a shared and dangerous mission and changing lives along the way.