

“S’ Is for Spirit: The Holy Spirit Leads in Messy Ways to Accomplish God’s Inclusive Vision”

Bishop Beverly J. Shamana — San Francisco Area
Wednesday, May 5, 2004

The grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Buenos días—good morning. Que Dios les bendiga ricamente—may God bless you richly. And Happy Cinco de Mayo! Won’t you join me in prayer?

Gracious and loving God, for the beauty of this day that you have given us, for your praise, and for worship, we give you thanks. Make us one now in your word, one in your service, and one in your love. We pray in the name of Jesus our Christ. Amen.

I want to invite you into a mystery this morning. We are the people of the greatest and most profound mystery that the world has ever received, and that is the love of God that is made known to us in Jesus Christ. This is the mystery of love that wrapped itself around our brother Paul, our brother Saul, as we meet him in the pre-dawn scene of Acts 9. And is he ever met!

I want to step into this morning’s scripture through another kind of mystery, however, and that one comes from a contemporary writer named Sue Grafton. And I believe that she touches many delegates and visitors at this General Conference. How many of you know the name of Sue Grafton? Amen. I thought you would because there are United Methodists in good standing, mission-minded United Methodists, who love the intrigue of a good mystery and gleefully devour stories of mayhem, malice, and murder. Sometimes with a flashlight under the covers—you know who you are. Some of you are right here with us.

You are the ones who know that in the world of Sue Grafton, “A” does not stand for “apple” nor “B” for “bicycle.” In the world of her loyal fans, “A” is for “alibi,” “B” is for “burglar,” and “C” is for “corpse.” Right now, Sue Grafton is poised on the cusp of “S.” I’m glad that she didn’t get there. I was just hoping that my sermon would hold for General Conference, but I am hoping that 1,200 United Methodists can nudge her toward something suitable for the book club of First Church, Pittsburgh. Something that even the offspring of John Wesley can read out in the open. No more dimly-lit closets or plain brown

wrappers. When you pull out her next one, “R” is for “ricochet.”

Now, for those of you who are wondering what mayhem and malice are doing among the water-washed people of General Conference; there’s none of that here. Amen? May I suggest that we take a little ride with Grafton’s gumshoe, Kinsey Millhone, and our friend and well-known hero of the Book of Acts, who is described as breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

This is the Paul whose day job, before the Spirit, was defensible, acceptable, measurable. Now, you know, there’s a lot to be said for a job that has built-in evaluation. Amen? A checkoff list that you can measure, for heaven’s sakes. Did I do it or did I not? Is it finished or is it

not? That’s what’s so rewarding about carpentry and mowing the lawn. You know when it’s finished. None of this waiting around for 20 years for someone to come back and say, “We loved that sermon that you did that Thanksgiving that meant so much to us.” Anyone who has worked in the church or a general agency or a seminary or on a campus knows the satisfaction of projects that can be crossed off the to-do list, programs that have a beginning and an end. Paul had a built-in to-do list, and he did it well.

And who doesn’t need a support group? Paul had a covenant group to die for. You know, all of us bishops are put together in covenant groups; and Paul’s group included high priests, government officials, backers with money, who paid him well for each name that he could check off of his converts list. This is the bio of the Paul we love to love without reservation. This is the background of the Paul we love to love with much reservation.

Like a typical Grafton mystery, the plot thickens as Paul is cloaked in his alphabet of killing and destruction. “S” is for “squeezing” the life out of the stalwart band of Jesus’ followers. “S” is for “stomping” on their hopes for the new reign of God that would come among them. “S” is for the “circle” of death—that’s a pre-conversion



United Methodist Bishop Beverly J. Shamana gives the sermon during morning worship at the denomination's 2004 General Conference in Pittsburgh. A UMNS photo by John C. Goodwin.

spelling—that persecution that grows wider and wider. Mayhem and malice are already on the scene as Paul carries papers that authorize his reign of terror. Sounds like another biblical plot just waiting to be translated on the big screen. Mel “You-Know-Who,” where are you?

I want to borrow from the writer’s toolbox this morning to help us navigate through the waters of the Spirit to see what God might be saying to the church this morning. But first things first. When we enter this drama of Saul’s conversion, the first thing we realize is that “S” is for the “Spirit” that does not come in a neat, orderly package.

Anybody know this kind of Spirit? It is the Spirit of reason and tradition and experience and scripture, but it is the uncontrollable Spirit that meets Paul on his way to pick up his check, that unmanageable divine Spirit that stirred over the ancient waters and birthed and billowed creation into being. It is this Holy Ghost that comes to shatter any lingering myths that God’s Spirit is confined to human ways. The Spirit blows where it will, and you will hear the sound of it; but you do not know where it goes or where it comes from. And so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

And so the Spirit that appears in Paul’s journey is unpredictable and uninhibited. Paul fell into the dust, for heaven’s sakes. He got dirty, and he lost his intellectual and professional equilibrium. I say to you this morning, conference, when the Spirit of God gets hold of you, your best-laid plans, your good and solid intentions, your well-constructed agenda can be changed in the twinkling of an eye.

I was at the ’92 General Conference. I was at the ’76 General Conference. I was at the 2000 Jurisdictional Conference, and I’ve heard those call stories. I’ve got one myself. We heard them Monday night at that Spirit-filled book signing where we told how the Spirit entered our lives, sometimes at the 11th hour, just in the nick of time. We heard stories about what you want for your daughters as we signed those books.

We talked about how the Spirit intervenes, and we found ourselves handing in a letter of resignation to an employer. We found ourselves asking our families to make plans to move closer to a seminary. We found ourselves reworking our budgets and happy to live on a smaller shopping income.

“S” is for the “Spirit” that says, “If you want a faith life, beautiful United Methodists”—thank you, Bishop King—“if you want a faith life that is manageable and clean and not messy and runs exclusively on clock time, then we’d better be prepared to stay right here in the dust and talk about it because it ain’t gonna happen.”

“S” is for the “Spirit” that says, “If what we want is a Jesus that can meet us after 9 A.M., when we are alert and fully fed”—I’ll vote for that —“that fits a reasonable schedule, a Jesus that doesn’t upset the comfortable or offend the established protocol, then we’re going to be dis-

appointed because that’s not the Holy Spirit of Jesus that said to our friend in the dust, ‘Get up, brother. I have sent you a partner, someone to take you by the hand and lead you into this new way of living that God has prepared for you. Now you know him as enemy, but I have sent him to show you a better way; and he is going to help you out of your distress.’”

I wonder this morning, General Conference, if God is saying to us, “If you want some guidance, call on the persons who are most unlike you, whose spiritual understanding is directly opposed to yours, and ask them, ‘Now what should I do?’” Now, I don’t want you to throw any tomatoes. I’m just trying to read and hear into the scripture, the text, to see what God is saying to us today.

Once again, the scripture gives us a kind of two-sided mirror. One side says, “The truth will make you free.” The other side says, “If it doesn’t blind you first.” One side says, “The truth will make you free if you’re willing to step aside and move to the back of the line called ‘entitlement.’” One side says, “The truth will make you free if you’re willing to sit in the dirt awhile and learn from this Jesus who loves you enough to turn your life around in the other direction.” “S” is for Spirit.

After that—you need to be careful when the scripture says, “after that.” “After that, after that,” the scripture says, and that usually means after your life has been shaken up and pressed down and given back to you in a way that you may not even realize. “After that” means after you laugh a little and cry a lot. After that comes the best news of all. He was filled with the Spirit, water-washed, and got his appetite back—and that’s in descending order of importance—and then he had a big lunch, maybe a plate of tacos in honor of Cinco de Mayo.

“S” is for the “Spirit” that comes to immerse us, to tenderly cover us, happily mother us, and extravagantly smother us in the light of God’s transforming power, so that we can walk with Jesus day by day. I wish I could take this microphone off and do what Jesus does day by day.

You know, conference, if you love God, you’re gonna love who God loves. Amen? And it doesn’t look like love if we’re chasing people down with threats and persecution. Now Paul found this out; Paul found this out on his way to meet God, and I think our church is still working on it. We cannot chase people down with threats and persecution and then finally say, “And God loves you, too.”

In true mystery style, in Grafton’s style, somebody or something’s got to die or you don’t have a story. Now Ananias was given to Paul, and Paul was given to Ananias; and the Holy Spirit said, “You’re partners.” Now I know it wasn’t a very hospitable introduction, but you are partners anyway. Now can’t you just feel it coming? The Bible done gone to meddling. You can feel it creeping up on this partnership idea.

But the mystery genre is right: Something’s got to give in order for God’s unlikely merger to work. Now the rough



Bishop Beverly J Shamana of the San Francisco Area preaches during morning worship in the 2004 United Methodist General Conference in Pittsburgh. A UMNS photo by Paul Jeffrey.

part of it is that we generally think that some person has got to die, and we don't mind giving them a hand because they're not the ones that we picked anyway; but they are given to us by the Holy Spirit. Yikes! Did you happen to read in the *Interethnic Newsletter* yesterday? It had this little nugget. Every crisis comes with a gift in its hands, and we must deal with the crisis in order to receive the gift. Did you see that?

Paul had a dream that came with a gift in its hands: the unlikely visitor. And we don't usually even get that much of a hint of who's being given to us by the Holy Spirit. Our divine partners just show up, you know, in our legislative committees, on the walkways to plenary. They hand out pamphlets, buttons, fliers. They come into our work groups; they're in our delegations. They're just everywhere, and we want to ask, "Where did these people come from anyway; and why, O Lord, have you sent them to this General Conference? It's my first one, and it's so messy." Now you can say "amen" without offending anybody around you. We just all say it together. Nobody will be offended.

So they just show up by whatever means possible to be our holy and sacred companions on the journey. And usually they're the ones we call enemy, misguided, thorn, wrong, single-issue; and they just keep a'coming. Sometimes, church, the Lord sends folks in the church to the church to lay hands on the church systems that are

breathing persecution and threat against God's people. Now I know some of you are thinking, *Well, this bishop is just talking about that homosexual issue again.* Well, I am; but it's not the only thing I'm talking about.

It's not the only thing that I'm talking about. We are not a single-issue people. What about society? I believe somebody ought to lay hands on the system of military secrecy that is so intent on winning public support, so intent on winning public support for a war that's over but not over that it won't let the nation grieve. It won't let its people grieve for those families and folks who continue to lose their loved ones in this non-war that's not over. It's unconscionable. It's an unconscionable theft; it's a theft that would deny families the privilege of shared grief with the nation.

We need to lay our hands on the eyes of a war machine that keeps the body count a secret—no photographers, no coffins, no body bags, and no national tears, and, therefore, no healing. We need a church called "Ananias" to lift the scales from the nation's eyes; and, yes, they will call us enemy, misguided, thorn, single-issue, but we have the ancient words of truth: "The Lord has sent me." That is our calling. Thank you.

Now, you know the litany. We've been calling it all week. The penal system, the justice system, education, fairness for workers. We need a church called "Ananias" to lift the scales from our systems that oppress. And who's asking

our young people those intriguing, elegant questions that inspire them to new possibilities? Vast and wonderful questions about their lives. And what is God calling you to do, young people? Who asked them that, about the wonderful gifts that God has given you?

About a month ago, I spent a weekend with our confirmation youngsters in our conference at a camp; and it was a wonderful time. I look forward to it every year. And I took my shepherd's crook and put it in the middle of the room and then asked them, "How many of you have felt God's nudge—just a little push—and you know that God is asking you to something with your life that is special?" And one after another, a few hands went up. These are 11-, 12-, 13-year-olds. And I said, "What does that feel like?" And some of them said, "Well, I've seen a cloudy image." And someone else said, "It feels like a warm hug." And another young boy said, "I felt, I've heard a whisper in my ear."

And so I asked them the next question. I said, "You know, what is God saying to you?" And some of them said—at 11—"I know I want to be a pastor." Others said, "I wanna be a counselor, a religious counselor." And even the adults were kind of overhearing our conversation. One of them said, "Working with youth has meant so much to my life."

And so I asked them to form a circle, and they put their hands on the shepherd's staff—I believe the hands of future bishops were on that staff—and we prayed for God's anointing over them and for the call, the presence, of the Spirit that they felt in their lives. Who's going to ask the children of our world, "What is God calling you to with these abundant gifts that you have been given?" I sorrow for children in places who are so poor that a question like that is at the bottom of their priority list. They don't have the luxury of even thinking and talking about what God is doing because they're just trying to get a meal from one day to the next. We need a church called "Ananias" to lift the scales from our eyes to see what's important in God's eyes.

I want you to help me to punctuate this journey that we're on this morning with a song. It's one that I treasure because it puts us on the street with the unlettered Jesus, the Jesus who just shows up without invitation, the unsophisticated Holy, the Jesus in the newspapers, and the Spirit in the shack. The hymn is called, "We Meet You, O Christ." "We meet you in simple and wise, we meet you in a palace, we meet you in a shack." Now we could sing it in the regular $\frac{3}{4}$ tempo that we always do and just march it right through from beginning to end and be through with it; but we're talking about the Spirit that we just kinda see over our left shoulder, that sometimes sneaks up and surprises us. So I'm gonna ask you to sing this song in a different kind of unfamiliar tune: calypso. This is gonna be Jesus in calypso dress. And I've asked our musicians to just help us with this so they can lead us through and we can

sing it in a way that is in concert with the Spirit that is unpredictable. "We meet you, O Christ, in many a guise, Your Spirit we see in simple and wise."

Amen. Amen. Please be seated.

Images that stretch us to Jesus. Emily Dickenson wrote, "There's a certain slant of light . . . [that] when it comes, the landscape listens, [and] shadows hold their breath." Paul had a certain slant of light that changed his sight and his direction.

Twenty-five years after his Ananias encounter, the Paul of Romans 8 put it something like this, "The whole creation is on tip-toe with longing, waiting, holding its breath for the sons and daughters of creation to come into their full glory." "S" is for the "shadows" that hold their breath.

We meet you, O Christ, in the Spirit that, running ahead of us, prompting us to community—always pointing to Jesus, always pointing to Jesus, always pointing to Jesus, even when we would rather look the other way with barriers tightly nailed down between us. We meet you, O Christ, in the Holy Spirit that will not bend to our limited vision of what the church can be, but lifts our vision to an inclusive family that is big enough for all God's children just as we are. We meet you, O Christ, in a Spirit that knows how to pray for the whole family in sighs and groans that are too deep for words, who will pray for the whole church of God.

We meet you, O Christ, in a Spirit that has already run ahead of us, in a Spirit that says, "I believe I'll just run ahead and see what the end is going to be." We meet you, O Christ, in the Spirit that says, "Come on, church, you haven't been this way yet, but I have. You haven't crossed over this mountain. You don't know what's over there, but I have. Come on, church!" We meet you, O Christ, in a Spirit that says, "You have not been through this valley, but I do. Come on, church! Let me take your hand. It's gonna be all right." We meet you, O Christ, in the Spirit that takes the hand of a church that's been sitting in the dust of a 30-year debate about who's in and who's out, who's acceptable and who's not. And that self-same, unmanageable Spirit says, "I want you to see what it looks like on the other side of the debate, where everybody is at the table shoulder-to-shoulder, and nobody looks like the other person; and it's gonna be all right. Just come with me and there's nobody in a second row." We meet you, O Christ, in the Spirit that says, "There's a certain slant of light."

I'm praying for a light, dear church, because I believe the landscape—creation—is listening, holding its breath, to see how wide are we going to open our arms, how wide are we going to swing open the doors of God's church. You know, we have not just been praying—preaching to the choir. Folks outside of the church have been listening. They've heard our message that a Savior named Jesus has been sent, who proclaimed in himself there is no east or west, in him no north or south, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth; and they believed it.

They heard our message, and they believed it. We gotta keep preaching it. Amen? We gotta keep living it. We gotta keep preaching the Word of God and telling folk that “S” is for “Spirit.”

“S” is for the “Spirit” of God who binds us all together in the love of God. Praise God! “S” is for “Spirit.” Thank you.

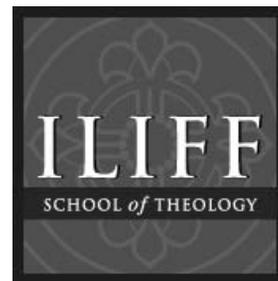


Delegate Nancy Denardo of the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference (right) briefly rests her head on the table during a session of the United Methodist Church's 2004 General Conference in Pittsburgh. Delegates face long hours of legislative and committee meetings during the two-week conference. At left is Western Pennsylvania delegate Jeffrey Greenway. *A UMNS photo by Mike DuBose.*



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