

A Service of Repentance and Reconciliation

Sermon by the Right Rev. Robert C. Wright: “Towards the Beloved Community”

October 22, 2014 | The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta, Georgia

Isaiah 42: 1-7 / Psalm 72 / James 2:5-9, 12-17 / Matthew 10:32-42

“I will bless the Lord at all times, God’s praise shall continually be in my mouth.” In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good evening! Greetings to you in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And greetings on behalf of the 110 worshiping communities that are the Episcopal Church in Middle and North Georgia. We are brought together tonight, here at the Cathedral and around the diocese through live streaming, by the members of The Beloved Community: the Commission for Dismantling Racism. These courageous and insightful men and women have gathered us so that we might be in compliance with a General Convention Resolution of 2006 which invites us to “...make a full, faithful and informed accounting of our history... including the complicity of the Episcopal Church in the sin of slavery, segregation, discrimination and their aftermath.”¹ And, that we would again fulfill our promise made at baptism: That faced with the fact of our sins, we “would repent and return to the Lord.”²

Important as this is, we are here for a more profound reason. After all, commissions and confessions, resolutions and services of repentance and reconciliation are about one thing in the end. They’re about equipping the church to be The Beloved Community. That’s what this evening is about. That’s what Baptism is about. That’s what the Eucharist is about. We are here to be refreshed by our calling as people of water and Spirit, here to remember who we are and whose we are.

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You remember The Beloved Community; it’s that phrase that Dr. King popularized. It’s the acknowledgement that practicing the love exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth can, has, will transform “opposers” into friends and bring about miracles in people’s hearts. The Beloved Community seeks to describe the reality that good is created, locally and cosmically when people practice Christian love through reconciliation and redemption. And that the practice of Christian

¹ The General Convention of the Episcopal Church, Resolution 2006-A123

² The Book of Common Prayer, Pg. 305

love generates a unique goodwill that transforms old-age gloom into new-age exuberant gladness.³ If nothing else, friends, tonight remember Beloved Community work begins with us acknowledging and “laying aside the weight and the sin that entangle us and running with patience... looking to Jesus the perfecter and finisher of our faith.”⁴

Tonight is the Diocese of Atlanta, once more, taking up the work of being the Beloved Community. And, to accomplish this work, our first commitment must be to look back together.

God would not have us to be blind to who we have been and what we have done to each other.⁵ Just the opposite. I was reminded just this evening how poignant this service is: 51 years ago the newspaper reported that Dr. King’s son was refused admission to the Lovett School, which was then housed on this campus. And the bishop then, Bishop Randolph Claiborne, refused to issue a statement about race, except to uphold the policy of segregation and to wonder “why a Baptist would want to go to school with Episcopalians.” You might be interested to know that tonight I have on one of Bishop Claiborne’s vestments. I believe you can rewrite old narratives. And you might be interested to know that it was a white priest, Father (John) Morris, who confronted the bishop about desegregating the schools and the diocese, and who ultimately lost his license to serve as a priest in Atlanta as retribution for his actions.

We have to look back. But to look back as the Beloved Community is to see through the lens of repentance at the times when we have not loved the Lord or our neighbors with our whole heart. And through the eyes of reconciliation: “What was lost is now found, what was dead is now alive. Your sins are forgiven.”⁶ Without the twin virtues of repentance and reconciliation there is only the brittle, scared silence we maintain as we walk around each other on eggshells.

To look back at the history of Georgia with a courageous and objective eye is to see Africans sold into slavery by Africans and brought to Georgia by Europeans. It is to see human beings enslaved and strategically stripped of language, religion, culture and family. It is to see both the law and the church betray their ideals. It is to see immeasurable wealth created for individuals, businesses, churches and communities because of stolen labor. But not only that: As time marched on, it is to see human beings unchained from physical shackles only to be chained to poverty and illiteracy and discarded like rusty farm equipment. In modern times, it is to see the prison industrial complex of today replace the housing projects and plantations of yesterday. Then there are the rampant executions of black men and teenagers by vigilantes and police alike that produce rivers of tears and mountains of bitterness. To say nothing of the voter suppression

³ “Facing the Challenge of a New Age, “1956: The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

⁴ Hebrews 12:1

⁵ Isaiah 42:7

⁶ The Book of Common Prayer Pg. 451

movement that is happening in Georgia as I speak. This is because the number of black and brown people is increasing and the number of white people is decreasing. In Georgia, for the first time, white children are the new minority.⁷

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Because all of this is dangerous to see and to speak about, some choose to be the forgetful community rather than the Beloved Community. Why? Because we wonder silently if Christian fellowship is durable enough for these kinds of conversations. Because we wonder if reconciliation isn't just a word only used on Sundays. Because we're Southerners, and this is just too unpleasant. The forgetful community argues that if we keep a blind eye and choose mass amnesia, then in some distant future all the brutality and blood of our past will simply evaporate, leaving a more polite narrative. They would rather expunge our history than process it. They call this a postracial society. I call it the Etch-a-Sketch approach to human relationships.

Spiritually this would be the equivalent of erasing Jesus' betrayal, beating and bloody death in favor of a sanitized Easter story. They would make Jesus a hologram holy man without nail holes. But it is precisely His nail holes that give us His command to forgive, not to forget and to love enemy rather than to shame enemy for all of its persuasive power.

God is a genius! This is what it means to be the Beloved Community. Here is a word for oppressor and oppressed alike. Each week in our churches we come together to remember Christ's life, death and resurrection. All of it! We do this so we can hear and know and trust that pain and guilt and shame don't have to have the last word. That though we may be found culpable, there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus.⁸ Though we have colluded with systems of oppression, "where the Spirit is, now there is liberty."⁹ Whether victim or oppressor, this is the opportunity of tonight. That remembering the past and then remembering God's ability to make gold out of garbage, we press on. So, enveloped in the durable belovedness that flows first from God and then from person to person, the Beloved Community takes some risks together. We pledge to look and see together. And we pledge to allow what has been un-discussable now be discussed. This, the prophet Isaiah says, is the righteousness that God calls us to.¹⁰

After twenty-four months, I am happy to say I have visited the majority of our worshiping communities. And I have seen the Cross of Jesus on display in each place. But I wonder, if in addition to the Cross, maybe every church needs to have some reminder of the Apostle Paul also.

⁷ The State of America's Children 2014, Children's Defense Fund

⁸ Romans 8:1

⁹ 2 Corinthians 3:17

¹⁰ Isaiah 42: 6

You remember Paul. We first meet him watching Stephen be stoned in Jerusalem. He was an oppressor, an abuser. He wrongfully incarcerated Christians. He did these things because his professional ambitions caused him to compromise on respecting the dignity of every human being. But one bright day He met the risen Christ.¹¹ After that he met the Beloved Community in Damascus. And at his coming, that Beloved Community had an immense choice to make.

Should they listen to their suspicions or make room for an exception? Should they be exclusively a community of friends or friends with the larger community? Should they choose judgment or should they choose mercy? We know the end of the story. They choose mercy over judgment. They choose to draw their circle wider. They choose to “repair the breach.”¹² The very man Paul sought to destroy became the man who demonstrated for Paul what it meant to choose compassion over fear, and reconciliation over estrangement. That seemingly benign act, by one person, almost 2,000 years ago set loose on the world the most prolific spokesperson for reconciliation the world has ever known.

If we are to move forward as a church and state, we have a choice to make today. Like the Beloved Community in Damascus, will we tame our suspicions and prejudices and move towards each other, or will we fortify the distance that fear and enmity demand? The peace that Jesus brings does not make things easy or placid. His peace shakes things up until we are holding on to Him and Him alone for dear life. Without the work of the Beloved Community back in Damascus, there would be no Beloved Community here and now. Because of their repentance and reconciliation work then, Paul would later confess, “I was a persecutor of the church but by the grace of God, God’s grace was not in vain and so I labor....”

The response to grace is action. And grace on the ground becomes justice. And so this Service of Repentance and Reconciliation must not be a cheap grace. Yes, we must examine our hearts and attitudes and confess our polite hostility towards one another. But we shouldn't stop there. Our world is made up of systems. And systems are always more immoral than individuals. Bureaucracies are belligerent. And so today, we should understand that we are being expelled from this gathering to actively dismantle systemic evil wherever we find it. In the church, among those who hold the public trust, in financial systems and in our schools. And to be clear, what is being asked of us tonight is more than financial charity. Like Dr. King told us, we must not only praise the Good Samaritan for bandaging the wounds of the stranger. It is the church’s work, the Beloved Community’s work, to ask why the economic system is such that on the Jericho road

¹¹ Acts 7,8,9

¹² Isaiah 58:12

crime is an attractive option for young people? What are the schools like in the Jericho road community? Is there a decent living wage in Jericho?¹³

This gathering is more expulsion than it is anything else. And so on a night like this, I remember Jesus' one-word sermon to his disciples. It was simply "Go."¹⁴ Go healing, go trusting, go planting, go to enemy territory, go naming demons and casting them out, and go tearing down strongholds. But as we go He told us this, "Greater is He who is in me than he that is in the world."¹⁵

There is spiritual wickedness in high and low places. But our wrestling is more with the principalities and powers of this world than it is with each other. It may sound like a feeble sending off to the unschooled ear, given the velocity and ferocity of the world. But that's what it means to be the Beloved Community too. To feel "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body."¹⁶

When the Bible finishes its story of God and of people of fear and love, of repentance and reconciliation, we are left with one image. And that is of a great gathering of people, a family reunion. Every nation, language and tribe are there. We've all got long white robes on and palm branches in our hands. And we're singing, all of us. Singing together like one fantastic choir, singing, "Thanksgiving, power and might be to God forever!"¹⁷ And what we're told is that in this place there is no hunger and no homelessness, no wealth and no war. And in that place neither are there any more tears! Just us, finally together. No divisions. With God. In God. Raindrops returning to the ocean. Reconciled. Restored. Repaired. Rejoicing. What we have now beloved, is the grace of knowing that we can speed up this day with our words and with our deeds.

"I want to walk as a child of the light; I want to follow Jesus. God set the stars to give light to the world; the star of my life is Jesus. In him there is no darkness at all; the night and the day are both alike. The Lamb is the light of the city of God. Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus."

Thanks be to God!

Hymn lyrics by Kathleen Thomerson

¹³ Luke 10:25-37

¹⁴ Luke 10:3

¹⁵ 1 John 4:4

¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 4:8

¹⁷ Revelation 7:12