

Sermon: Last Epiphany

The Rev. Mike Wernick

February 26, 2017

Year A
Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 2
2 Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

On April 3, 1968... the day before he was murdered... Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a speech at the Church of God... in Memphis... he was in Memphis to advocate for thirteen-hundred sanitation workers... because the city refused to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants...

In his speech he said: *Who is it that is supposed to articulate the longings and aspirations of the people more than the preacher? Somehow the preacher must have a kind of fire shut up in his bones. And whenever injustice is around he tells it. Somehow the preacher must be an Amos, and say: "When God speaks who can but prophesy?" and "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."*

Somehow... he said... the preacher must say with Jesus, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me..." and King said he was anointed to deal with the problems of the poor...

He said: *Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!*

Today is the last Sunday in Black History Month... it's also our last Sunday before Lent... when we begin to look at... ask forgiveness for... and turn away from... our corporate sins...

On September 18... the day the Diocese held its Great Parish Swap... Joel and I were away... and I wasn't here to welcome those from St. Philips... who came to worship with us... so last Sunday... because I was still on vacation... we went there to worship with them... and one of the women... who's father had been the Rector there before his passing... read two things that I want to share with you today... the first is A Slave Catechism... written by the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America... and the second is a compilation of some of the institutional racism in the Episcopal church... and because the ELCA did not exist then... I have sandwiched between them... a few examples from the Lutheran Church in America... published in 1994... by the Missouri Synod...

This Catechism was written in 1862... and was designed especially for the instruction of slaves... to keep them in line... and it included with citations from scripture... which attempted to justify its inherent racism...

Q: Who keeps the snakes and all bad things from hurting you?

A: **God does.**

Q: Who gave you a Master and a Mistress?

A: **God gave them to me.**

Q: Who says you must obey them?

A: **God says I must.**

Q: What book tells you these things?

A: **The Bible.**

Q: How does God do all his work?

A: **He always does it right.**

Q: Does God love to work?

A: **Yes, God is always at work.**

Q: Do the angels work?

A: **Yes, they do what God tells them.**

Q: Do they love to work?

A: **Yes, they love to please God.**

Q: What does God say about your work?

A: **He that will not work shall not eat.**

Q: Did Adam and Eve have to work?

A: **Yes, they had to keep the Garden.**

Q: Was it hard to keep the Garden?

A: **No, it was easy.**

Q: What makes the crops so hard to grow now?

A: **Sin makes it.**

Q: What makes you lazy?

A: **My wicked heart.**

Q: How do you know your heart is wicked?

A: **I feel it every day.**

Q: Who teaches you so many wicked things?

A: **The Devil.**

Q: Must you let the Devil teach you?

A: **No, I must not. I must obey my Heavenly and Earthly Master.**

Racism within the Lutheran church was essentially no different from that which existed in society at large... and was subject to the same forces that expressed themselves historically in this country. When Lutherans came to America in the 18th century and confronted slavery... they were not of one mind. The Swedes were the first Lutherans to oppose slavery. When Gustavus Adolphus proposed establishing a colony in the New World... he took the position that the colony would *gain more... by free people with wives and children...* than with slaves. But other Lutherans supported slavery and saw no moral inconsistencies. In 1708 a Native American... the first slave on record to seek membership in a Lutheran congregation in New York City... caused a crisis. His Lutheran owner protested his acceptance by the church out of fear that he would lose his property. The crisis was resolved when... at his confirmation... Thom promised to

continue to serve his worldly master and mistress as faithfully and truly as if he were yet in his benighted state.

In 1735... when colonial Lutherans took notice of Negro slaves becoming members... the constitution of a church in the Hudson Valley... specified that the pastor should ascertain that Negro slaves not intend to abuse their Christianity... by breaking the laws of the land... or dissolving their ties of obedience...

On the Episcopal side... in the years 1866 - 1877... right after the Civil War ended... only 20 Blacks were ordained... and of those... only six advanced to the priesthood... and two of these were in southern dioceses where the need was the greatest... the difficulty stemmed from reluctance on the part of southern bishops and standing committees... to ordain Blacks... southerners were unwilling to see former slaves as equal citizens... and their patronizing attitudes reinforced the dependency of Blacks on the white church...

And so Black parishes under white leadership didn't survive... but in the 1860s and 70s... many sprang up under Black clergy... but... with the absence of white leadership... these parishes were excluded from Diocesan and General Conventions... the Church's *Negro Problem*... was that it insisted upon regarding Blacks in their midst... as an "alien race"... and in 1878... a separate seminary... was founded to train Black clergy... and did not close until 1951...

Alexander Crummell... organized the Black Episcopal clergy to fight racism... and was instrumental in establishing the American Negro Academy... a national organization of the best educated and prominent African-Americans... in 1882 a Mississippi priest launched a virulent attack on Blacks... arguing that sparse Black Episcopal growth... was due to their intellectual and moral inferiority... the southern bishops then proposed the Sewanee plan... to segregate Blacks into a racial diocese... John Peterson called

Black clergy together and the Convocation of Colored Clergy was formed... the conference met annually and lobbied at General Convention...

The Convocation served as the conscience of the church recalling it to its Catholic ideal... and thanks to its work... segregation was never written into national policy or canon law... but at the turn-of-the-century... there were only 15,000 Black members in the Episcopal Church...

In 1904... an independent body of twelve men... the American Church Institute for Negroes... established colleges in each southern state to educate Blacks... so that they might help their communities... this was a demonstration of social outreach... but not for the purpose of bringing them into the fold... for the most part... people were willing to support education... as long as it ensured a continued separation of the races...

Once a number of Black clergy had been ordained priests... the next obvious question was whether Blacks could be consecrated bishops... there were already two Black bishops in the Episcopal Church... but they were not involved in American dioceses because they were charged with missionary work overseas... in 1874... James Theodore Holly... was consecrated the first Bishop of Haiti... which is part of the Episcopal Church... and in 1878 the first black bishop attended the Lambeth Conference in England... in 1885 Samuel David Ferguson... was consecrated Bishop of Liberia... and was the first black member the the American House of Bishops...

But there was a struggle among whites over the idea of ordaining a Black bishop... would he minister to Blacks only... or to whites too... there was fear of a Black takeover... of upsetting the "natural" social order... Southern bishops tried to set up separate missionary societies for Blacks under diocesan bishops... and when this was rejected by General Convention... they disenfranchised Blacks... by setting up "colored convocations" with no rights in the diocese...

In 1907... after much debate... General Convention created the office of Suffragan Bishop... for the purpose of *colored work*... and the appointment of Blacks to that office... however... these new bishops were allowed no vote in the House of Bishops... supporters consulted with Anglican dioceses around the world... and found that "the most satisfactory pattern was supervision by white bishops... with natives as assistant bishops"... only two Suffragan Bishops for Colored Work were ever elected...

Although legislatively... the Church was moving slowly forward... the attitudes of some bishops... clergy... and laity lagged far behind... for example... in 1910 Bp. Reese of Georgia said: *colored people today enjoyed every privilege which the church as a divine society can give them... except the gift of Suffrage in its councils... the right to full Suffrage*... he said... *is not an inherent right in the Church... it is a constitutional right*... and a couple of years later... the same bishop addressed The Council of Colored Churchmen... professing that a benefit of slavery... was that they *were forever cured of worshiping the idols of their ancestors in Africa*... though he blamed Blacks for their low economic status... attributing it to their laziness and self-indulgence...

On the mountaintop... Martin Luther King, Jr... saw the potential of Transfiguration... of how God's word... and redemption... and love... could change the course of history... but if the church... which is supposed to lead by example... is capable of this... it can be no surprise that this is but one of the systemic evils against which we must contend...

We all want that mountaintop view... but sometimes we want to get there without any of the climbing... sometimes we want to take a cablecar to the top... so we can be Transfigured without any effort... so we can be changed even while we hold on to ideas and beliefs which keep the light from shining through us...

And while baptism is an ancient... water purification rite... and has provided a kind of membership into the church... neither of these makes us disciples... that is a choice we

must make... as we mature in our faith and become adults... as these young women are doing today...

Discipleship opens us up to Truth... and Truth changes us... it's blinding light can scare us so much... that we too become frozen by fear... as the three disciples were... but then God's warm touch comes... and says... *Do not be afraid...*

As we enter into Lent... I pray we seek forgiveness for having resisted the prophet's voices... and turn back to doing what God calls us to do... that we let Christ's grace melt the Law in our heads... and kindle a fire in our hearts... and in our bones... and that we welcome God's touch... so we may be Transfigured too...

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