

The Motion from Inward to Outward

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, May 27, 2016

On Thursday night (with the blessing of many from our Genesis Mission Group I had seen the night before at Bible Study), I was able to travel to DC to meet a man who really came out on to the international scene a few days before as he delivered a heart-felt sermon at the Royal Wedding where Prince Harry and Megan Markle were married. The Episcopal Bishop, Michael Curry, gave a compelling word of encouragement to the royal couple, honoring Megan's own African American heritage and the legacy of struggle of the African American experience in this country, but on an international stage now. His words rang throughout the listening audience, which included Queen Elizabeth herself, and not shying away from the fervor of a Black Baptist preacher, which his father was until changing to the Episcopal church later in life. Bishop Curry's theme on love was not to be dwarfed by the House of Windsor's presence, he spoke confidently and prophetically—truth to power—as only people emerging from the legacy of slavery can, with incredible authority, even to the representative empires who first colonized and enslaved them. This was our Moses calling out, and these were his words; Bishop Curry said, "We must discover the power of love, the power, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that, we will be able to make of this old world—a new world!" These were the words of hope that filled the abbey's air as the first African American duchess in this Royal Family performed her nuptials in front of the world. And Bishop Curry so as to immediately put feet to his challenge returned to the US to lead a prayer vigil to the White House this past week, where I was to meet him and countless others who refuse to let this Gospel that we preach, a Gospel of love, go unheard by our leadership in this nation. You read his powerful, and yet challenging words, in the opening-responsive liturgy for our worship service today. I jotted every word like a hungry, young reporter, eager to soak in every new truth I could discover. May we rise up to the challenge he has boldly set before us:

"What binds us together is Jesus of Nazareth, his teaching his life... Jesus answered..., 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'. That's why we are here. Love your neighbor. Love the neighbor you like, and the neighbor you don't like. Love the neighbor you agree with, and the neighbor you don't agree with. Love your democrat neighbor, your republican neighbor. Your black neighbor, your white neighbor..., your Latino neighbor, your LGBT neighbor. Love ALL your neighbors!" –Bishop Curry (5/24/18)

Today is Memorial Day, a day we commemorate the lives lost in service to the protection of our nation—our heroes lost. Jesus said "No greater love has a person than to lay their life down for others". Indeed this is exemplified in the sacrifice of so many. So as not to squander their legacy, may we rise up to the challenge to create a new world. May we rise up to the call to love all people.

However, I was reminded this week by another in our church community, that David Edwards taught us that we cannot love others if we do not first love ourselves. And such a true teaching this is. It is impossible to sacrifice if there is nothing to sacrifice in the first place. Our first treasure is found deep within ourselves. We must value us, first. Even as the prophet Isaiah in his communion with the Almighty (Isaiah 6), where he came face-to-face with his Creator, was overcome with self-loathing—"I am unclean" he said. He felt dirty, miserable, unworthy. But God immediately made a way to re-energize the prophet Isaiah with self-worth, with acceptance of self. In the symbolic gesture of a burning coal to his lips, Isaiah was renewed. His mouth filled with the "things of God". He was set back on track, ready to do God's service once again. How many of us are waiting for our "burning coal" moment? How many of us are sitting in the presence of the the divine, and find ourselves desiring to

have our mind, our heart, our mouths filled with heavenly thoughts? And what would be those thoughts? Certainly not self-loathing. No. We would accept our existence as special, as unique, as a derivative of the Creator's divine design. We are here for one purpose above all others: To love.

So, there at the vigil, I met up with our friends Mike Little and Kim and Jim, and others from Church of the Saviour who had canceled their evening "church time" together in order to attend—in solidarity with the bishop and so many others, like Father Richard Rohr, Jim Wallis, & Tony Campolo. Our friend Rose Berger from Sojourners Magazine happened to be the one greeting folks into the vigil, and gave me such a warm hug—as if to say "Yay! Church of the Covenant is here!" as if it was the icing on the cake (or maybe for us here in Lynchburg, the cherry on top). Solidarity. Doing what we are called to do, standing in love, together. This is what it is about!

Dr. Forbes, pastor of Riverside Church in New York, was one of the last to speak at the vigil, but his words were piercing. He explained, "Dr. King said 'if you are going to be great, you must be a servant.' That's why one of his favorite songs sings, 'If I can help somebody as I pass along. If I can cheer somebody with a word or a song. If I can show somebody he is traveling wrong, then my living shall not be in vain.' So, let me tell you something... we are in the atmosphere of Pentecost, when the wind of change began to blow. Therefore you need to understand what's happening here is what the Lord says, 'in the last days I will pour out my spirit upon ALL, & sons and daughters will prophesy. That's what you are doing now! Hallelujah!"

These words were heavy upon us in the audience, among the participants, but we responded appropriately with a resounding "Hallelujah!". This immediately reminded me of our discussion of Pentecost last Sunday with the children, right here at church, when we contrasted the selfishness of the Tower of Babel and its destruction by God with the pouring out of his spirit on the people in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost after Jesus' assent, where people could miraculously hear their own native languages, their heart languages, being spoken by people that did not even know their language. God loves us. God wants us to know that. There is a love connection between the Creator and Creation and God wants us to know that She hears us, she feels us, she is with us—and wants us to love, not just ourselves, but to love the un-loveable around us. God needs us to-- if we are going to do as Bishop Curry challenged us to do, and to create a "new world".

I was also touched earlier this week when I was driving around with another young pastor, a white Baptist preacher, from a neighboring county. I was explaining to him who Church of the Covenant is... he listened intently, but it wasn't until I mentioned Church of the Saviour that a connection was made. He stopped me suddenly, and said, "I know of Gordon Cosby, a good old Baptist boy." I said, "yes, he was Baptist. Do many Baptists around here know about him?" He said, "I don't know, but I learned about him when I was researching WWII Chaplains." It was then my turn to be surprised, as he started to tell me how he had done some WWII reenactments, playing a WWII chaplain himself. He studied the chaplains of WWII and had come across Gordon's story. How he had been a chaplain with the 101st Airborne, para trooping behind enemy lines, ministering to so many young men in the worst of conditions, seeing death and pain everywhere he'd turn—and so much need for spiritual help—and vowing to never do ministry the old way again, never doing "church" the traditional way again, he deputized several of the soldiers, as fellow ministers/priests, to go out and minister to all those in need. Christian ministry changed from a vertical hierarchy for him, to now a horizontal action of raw, unfettered love. We are all ordained. We are all called. The covenant binding us together in this cause.

As you all know that new vision turned into the Church of the Saviour of DC, founded in the late 40's, which then translated into the Church of the Covenant here in the 50s. Its very foundations were formed with an understanding of sacrificial love, seeing firsthand the fallen soldiers giving their lives, suffering death and demise, and Gordon and Bev, and Jack, and others returning home, safe, and able to change the narrative of the human condition in the world. To replace greed with generosity. To replace hate with kindness. To replace apathy with genuine care. And we can see it all around us, a world begging for us to engage it now, just like when those young men returned home then. Wanting us to still love it, nurture it, to shift it from the inward to the outward—to take what we have self-actualized and to put it into play with the lives around us. Let us heed Bishop Curry's words of hope, and to change the "old world" into the "new world". Let us honor the fallen by living out lives of absolute love in this world. Let us memorialize sacrifice of life by living out the life we've been given, and love everyone, even the seemingly un-loveable. Let us say to our Creating Source, just as the prophet Isaiah did, "Here am I Lord, send me."