

PASTORAL ADDRESS OF THE BISHOP

The Bishop's Pastoral Address of the Right Reverend Sam Rodman
The 203rd Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina
Benton Convention Center, Winston-Salem, NC
Saturday, November 17, 2018

In a moment of desperation, when I learned the Highway Business 40 was scheduled to be closed earlier this month, I announced to the staff at our meeting on October 30 that, as your Bishop, I would be praying unapologetically that the closing of the highway would be delayed until after our convention. On Thursday, November 1, Daniel Robayo, our new missioner for Latino and Hispanic communities, tagged me in a Facebook post of an announcement that the closure of Business 40 would be delayed until 6 a.m. on Saturday, November 17. In the tag Daniel wrote, "Half a prayer OK?"

The good news is we all made it here. The challenge will be, will we make it home?

And in a sense this ties in with our theme for convention this year, as we move more deeply into the work of Becoming Beloved Community. We are all here, and we are all already a part of Jesus' Beloved Community, but will we make it home? Will we be able to move into the full reality of what Becoming Beloved Community means. As we near the season of Advent, I would have to say that we will probably never fully realize the Beloved Community until Jesus returns, until that second Advent. But that does not mean we don't expend every effort, here and now, to move forward toward that vision. And to do all in our power to ensure that this Beloved Community—this homecoming if you will—includes every single person, every beloved child of God.

There is a powerful story about explorer Ernest Shackleton's ill-fated journey to Antarctica in 1914, where the ship gets frozen in the ice. Shackleton, realizing they will not be rescued, leads a small party to go and get help, and in the months before they are able to return to rescue his crew, his greatest concern is for the safety for every member of his team. When he arrives months later with a ship to bring them to safety, he is greeted by the crew who line up along the shore, knowing how deeply he cares for them, and they greet him with the words: "All Well." "All well" to reassure him that not one of the crew has been lost in the intervening months.

By now you probably know that I am all about team leadership, team relationships and the importance of team formation as a model for leadership in the 21st-century church. This story is a metaphor for the importance of team, the sacred value of each individual on the team, and a deep commitment to the well-being of every team member and of the whole team.

Today, as a team of the whole Diocese, if you will, we are here to understand in our own context the connection between Truth Telling and Practicing the Way of Love in Becoming Beloved Community.

And in doing this work we recognize our responsibility to care for one another, to include one another, to honor one another as we go about the delicate work of understanding the impact of

racism and the construct of race on our church. Melanie has already shared with us in a powerful way something about the connection and the relationship between the Jesus Movement, Becoming Beloved Community and the Way of Love. And she shared with a story from her own history, from St. Paul's, Richmond.

Of course all of this work has historical antecedents in the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. But even before that, the connection between Truth Telling and Practicing the Way of Love has biblical roots. From Paul's letter to the Ephesians:¹

“He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe. So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and knit together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

This passage is part of the biblical roots of Becoming Beloved Community. And we can feel and hear the connection between truth telling and love in these verses.

And the work of Becoming Beloved Community means living into the vision of the Body of Christ that is captured here in this portion of Ephesians, part of the work we need to do is to find how to speak the truth to each other in a loving way. A loving way is a way that leads to hearing one another, honoring one another and healing one another. And when we hear one another's stories with an ear to the sacred truth that is being conveyed through their experience, we are actually living into our vocation of becoming the mature Body of Christ. Through holy listening, these stories have power to transform us, as we join in the Way of Love to become Beloved Community.

This is hard work. Let's be honest about that. When we speak the truth to each other, some of what we share may not always be easy to hear. This is especially true when we are in conversation where we bring different perspectives, different experiences, different expectations.

Last year we said we would do this work together with particular attention to race, learning more about the history of race, the systemic toxicity of racism and the challenge to face the truth of our own history, particularly our history within the church.

We said we would focus on this work as individuals and as congregations. We also said we would look at the ways systemic racism has impacted and affected all of us. And we would give particular attention to our own history within the church and within our Diocese.

Specifically we agreed to encourage all our congregations, convocations and all ministries of our Diocese to find ways to help sustain our Historically Black Episcopal Congregations **through**

¹ Ephesians 4:10-16, New International Version

prayer, bringing awareness of their existence, *telling the stories of these congregations*, supporting these congregations and working to implement programs such as the Office of Black Ministries' New Visions Initiative for Congregational Vitality.”

We talked about this work, and here are some of the ways we have begun doing this work since our last Convention.

Diocesan Council decided that if we were asking the whole Diocese to engage in this work, we needed to commit to doing this work ourselves as leaders. Council participated in a two-day training on race and anti-racism following the Racial Equity Institute model. Council also created an outline of next steps for us to take as a Diocese in this work.

Here are some of the steps that we've begun to take.

Promoting curriculum and other resources to invite and encourage congregational engagement in the work of Becoming Beloved Community. These resources have included revising our own [Seeing the] Face of God curriculum; promoting the Advent series Becoming Beloved Community, which has now been adapted for other seasons. We've also continued to provide scholarships for Racial Equity Institute training across the Diocese.

We are also planning to provide funding for New Visions, and in this past year we offered four regional trainings and workshops on Invite Welcome Connect for our Historically Black Congregations and others. We're partnering with the Racial Justice and Reconciliation Committee and Episcopalians United Against Racism.

We're also trying to amplify the local efforts that are already bubbling up in the congregations. It's probably not a surprise to all of you the things we decide at Convention don't necessarily automatically get incorporated at the congregational level. But the other reality is that this isn't just the work of Convention; it's the work of the Holy Spirit. And so this work is already bubbling up across our Diocese, and when it does, we need to capture those moments and to share them with one another, not only to celebrate the way that the Spirit is moving us forward in the work, but also because sometimes we learn from each other. We see the example of what another congregation has done, and we recognize we could do that, too.

Council has also begun a conversation about our own history and the impact of systemic racism here in our own diocese. And our archivist, Lynn Hoke, and historiographer, Brooks Greabner, in partnership with Nita Byrd at Saint Augustine's and Jemonde Taylor at St. Ambrose, organized a tour of historically African-American churches in the East.

Does this mean we have forgotten about our other priorities? No. Council is developing similar goals and objectives for Supporting Vulnerable Congregations, Collaboration, Formation and Care of Creation. These, too, are moving forward, but our focus in this year's convention is to go deeper with that first priority.

In order to do the work of Becoming Beloved Community through all these priorities, we have to do our part to work toward dismantling the systemic racism in our church. If we don't do that work first, the other work is poisoned.

We actually passed a resolution last year which stated the following: that one of the ways we would begin this work of facing our own history is that we would take the time to hear the stories of our historically African American congregations, to listen to their history and to listen for the impact of systemic racism. Our intention here is not to focus on shame and blame, but to recognize and understand what has happened and to begin to ask the harder questions: To what degree are there vestiges of these patterns that are still in our system, what I sometimes call the ghost in the machine? How will we work together to purge these historic patterns? How are we called to live differently into the future as a result of what we are hearing and learning now?

So Thursday the people of All Saints, Warrenton, shared a story of their experience of having their church closed. Not everyone was able to be there, but it was broadcast livestream, and Melanie shared some of their story yesterday. This morning we will hear shortly from Chapel of Christ the King in Charlotte, a church that is in a neighborhood that is going through a significant transition. We will hear some of the challenges that they are facing as they witness to the love of Jesus in the community that surrounds them.

Later this morning you will hear from St. Titus, a congregation in Durham that is growing and thriving but also facing challenges. Some of these challenges are not present challenges; they're challenges that are driven by this history and by the impaired system.

Let me pause for a moment and say there are any number of reasons why people actually avoid doing this kind of work. It can be painful at times, painful to hear these stories, painful to tell these stories. For centuries we have buried parts of our history. Some might suggest we would be better off if it stayed buried. But that would leave the toxicity in the system. This is risky work because we are all in different places as we face this history, and it sometimes stretches and tests the bonds of love that hold us together.

But I love the point that Melanie made the other night about the labyrinth, that there are many points of entry to do this work. It's the Holy Spirit's way of reassuring us that God always meets us where we are and takes us to the next step. So there's not one way of doing this work; there are many ways. But we can't do the work without hearing the stories. And we can't hear the stories without a way to support and strengthen us.

This is why the Way of Love is so essential to this work. This simple rule of life, this accessible discipline gives us the opportunity to immerse ourselves in prayer and spiritual practice as we go about our work. This is not only hard work; it's heart work. So we need practices to build up our heart muscle. These disciplines also help anchor us and hold us close to God and close to one another as we peel back the layers of history, as we dig up the truth that we might have left buried, as we bring to light the part of our sacred journey that may have been hidden.

Turn, Learn, Worship, Pray, Go, Bless, Rest – these are all practices that strengthen our hearts, that open us up to one another. They help us to live into the vibrant promise, the dream of God, when we see each other as beloved children and as brother and sisters.

As we prepared for today, we have talked about the Way of Love as our touchstone, our mantra, the practice that strengthens our hearts to do the work that the Holy Spirit is calling us to do, the work of justice and truth-telling in love.

How do we know that this is the Holy Spirit calling us to do this work? Because the foundation of it has been laid from the very beginning; and from the Jesus Movement; and from that passage from Ephesians; in *Becoming Beloved Community*; in the invitation to Go Deep, Go Speak, Go Do. The call to become Beloved Community is our call to action.

And here is another piece of hearing these stories. Those of us who are white need to approach these stories with what I call a hermeneutic of contrition. What does that mean, exactly? It means we need to seek out and own our responsibility here, to recognize that any systemic problem means that we share in the responsibility, and we need to use every ounce of our power and privilege to chart a different course for our future. It means we bear a greater share of the responsibility for doing this work because the system gave us an advantage. And we need to ensure that what we hear and learn propels us in a new direction.

But the first step in this work is awakening. When we bury parts of our history, we bury a part of ourselves. Sharing these stories is an awakening, a resurrection. A couple of weeks ago we heard the story of Jesus raising Lazarus. His words at the door of the tomb were: “Lazarus, Come Out!” The literal translation of those words is a double imperative: “Lazarus, Here! Now!” In sharing these stories, here and now, we are living into Jesus’ resurrection promise. We are being awakened to the truth. And the truth will set us free to chart a different future.

The truth is that we are all here. But we are not all on level ground. The playing field has given certain advantages to some and disadvantages to others. The discriminatory factors, we know, include race, class, gender, access to education, to name a few, but race is the linchpin in our context in the United States. It is baked into our democratic DNA in ways we are only now beginning to face and to wrestle with. And it goes against everything that Jesus taught, preached, lived and died for.

One of the stories I tell about myself is that I have an odd capacity to untangle knots. It probably comes from years of working with acolytes whose cinctures and crosses were forever getting tangled. And there is a very simple principle I follow when trying to untangle a knotted mess. Go to the place of greatest tension first. Race in this country is the source of our greatest tension, and if we are ever to find a way to resolve our political differences and divisions, we are more likely to gain traction if we begin with racism and race. Jesus is asking us to help untie the knot of racism. Remember the final words he speaks to the people at Lazarus’ tomb: “Unbind him, and let him go!”

We are calling these stories of our Historically Black Congregations “Stories of Truth Telling and Resilience in a Time of Inequality and Injustice.” As you listen to the story of Chapel of

Christ the King, and later to the story of St. Titus, listen to their experience. Pay attention to their words, listen to their hearts, and then pay attention to your own reactions and responses. Listen not only for the ways the system has failed; listen for their resilience, their faithfulness, their gifts for leadership that the Church is called to uphold and revere. Honor these stories, and honor the people telling them.

I believe this work will transform us, as a Diocese and as a church. I believe this work is essential to our biblical call to reconciliation. I believe this work is all about the biblical promise of liberation and new creation. “Unbind them, and let them go.” In Christ we are set free. In Christ we are a new creation. And in Christ we are becoming the dream of God, the Beloved Community. This is a homecoming that includes all of us. Amen.