

Interfaith Prayer Peace Vigil- August 27, 2017

SERMON: REPENTANCE, RECONCILIATION, and HEALING

Christ Episcopal Church, La Crosse, Wisconsin

The Very Rev. Canon Patrick P. Augustine, D.Min. DD.

We gather here in this house of prayer as brothers and sisters from many church denominations as inter-faith community to pray, repent from the sin of racism and seeking healing and reconciliation among all God's people in our nation. It reminds me the impact of Christianity seeking justice, freedom and dignity for fellow human beings through the work of William Wilberforce, the power behind the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in the year 1807. Wilberforce was elected to parliament in 1780 at the age of twenty-one. Wilberforce as a disciple of Christ and human rights activists was greatly influenced by the witness of the converted former slave trader John Newton (author of Amazing Grace hymn), began his long campaign against slavery. His Bill to discuss abolition of slavery was introduced in the British House of Commons in 1789. It was defeated in 1798, 1799, 1800 and 1801. It was not until February 4, 1807, that the abolition document finally passed the House of Lord, and not until February 22, 1807, that it passed the Commons. Nineteen years had gone by. Men had grown old in the cause. Some had died. Yet when news of the abolition of the slave trade reached Wilberforce late on the evening of February 22,

the reformer looked into the face of his old friend and fellow abolitionist Henry Thorton and said, “Well, Henry, what shall we abolish next?”¹

152 years ago, the Civil War among North and South ended on June 2, 1865. A war that claimed 750,000 lives. With the defeat of the Southern Confederacy the institution of slavery was abolished. But the roots of American racism run deep. The recent most example of is of August 12, when we saw the images of a noxious rally of White Supremacist and Neo-Nazi, KKK, clashing with counter-protesters. Heather Heyer, 32, was killed when a 20-year- year old white nationalist plowed his car into a crowd of protesters. The roots of American racism run deep. Wilberforce said, “Well, Henry, what shall we abolish next?”

What should be abolished from the hearts and minds of people of the United States. Racism, White Supremacy and xenophobic principles. Last week 300 concerned Christian theologians and ethicist released a statement condemning white supremacy, racism, neo-Nazi ideals as sin against God. I like to share with you a part of it:

White supremacy and racism deny the dignity of each human being revealed through the Incarnation. The evil of white supremacy and racism must be brought face-to-face before the figure of Jesus Christ, who cannot be

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Nehemiah*, BakerBooks. 2006. P.88.

confined to any one culture or nationality. Through faith we proclaim that God the Creator is the origin of all human persons. In the words of Frederik Douglass, "Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference.

We live in a sinful and wicked world, and our calling to live and work for the Lord Jesus Christ in that world is never ended. The evil manifestation of racism has appeared in the history of human beings for many centuries on our planet earth. Racism is a complex issue and we need to talk about its ugliness on its many levels. Racism is part of our human making. My purpose from this pulpit is not to teach history of racist white America. I am sure all of you are aware of the wrongs of the past. My purpose is to look at the present picture of our society where Dr. Martin Luther King said:

“We must face the sad fact that at eleven o’clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing ‘In Christ there is no East or West,’ we stand in the most segregated hour of America.”

Has it changed since this statement? Not much, it remains segregated, divided society at many levels. The theological question to be asked here is, how do God’s people strive for justice and peace, for racial equality and reconciliation among all people of races and faiths, for the respect for the dignity of every human being?

How would the Kingdom of God be realized on this earth where “from every family, language, people and nation” gathers as brothers of sisters color and race blind to “worship and praise,” and “a Kingdom of priests to serve our God?” That is the vision of the Seer in the Book of Revelation.

In our appointed readings, the Prophet Amos speaks forcefully to the issue of racism:

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings I will not accept...take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 21-24).

This passage speaks forcefully to the issue of structural racism and add race to economic and political power and the result is one race’s superiority over others. But in the fullness of time, out of this exclusivistic community came the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christians came to see as the agent of blessings to all nations promised through Abraham. Jesus offered a new vision for a new covenant community and a new Law to abide known as *agape* commandments

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one , you shall love the Lord

Your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12: 29-31)

And then Jesus extended the definition of neighbor beyond the Jewish community to include the *despised Samaritans*. And even more radical and revolutionary teaching in the Sermon on the Mount concerning love of enemy:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, “Love your enemy, and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5: 43-44).

Jesus not only put these thoughts forward but put it in action. In the Gospels we learn his conversation with a Samaritan Woman at Jacob’s well (John 4). He heals the daughter of the gentile woman from Syro-Phoenicia (Mark 7: 24-30). The Gospels depict Jesus reaching out to people of non-Jewish racial and ethnic backgrounds. Jesus presented the vision of the beloved community born from his resurrection—a community that was to become inclusive of all races, nations, and ethnic groups. The Risen Christ impelled his church to be a witness to the gospel to the ends to the earth—and not only to Jews but to gentiles as well.²

“For God so loved the world—” an world including every race and ethnic group.

² Rev. Murray L Newman, Lecture on Racism and the Church to the Episcopal House of Bishops in March 1993.

A fellowship in which all are included, work for racial justice in society at large, the perfect covenant beloved community may not be realized in our own life time in this nation and the world.

What must we do now in our lives in the 21st century 2017 in the United States of America. For too long, we have avoided to address the sins of the past like slavery, lynching and dark past of our racism history. We must repent, weep over the laxity of the church and nation. Far too long, we have been “silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained-glass windows.”³ The Holy Scripture teaches that repentance is not meant to create deeper guilt but as a tool for turning from sin and walking a different path. In repenting, we acknowledge the fractures that sin has created both in our souls and in our social systems, and we commit to doing the work of repair. Our intention is not punishing American with this history. Our prayer, efforts and hope is to liberate and redeem our nation from past sins of racism.⁴ We want to find a way that gets us to redemption. On the path where “Truth sets us free.”

My brothers and sisters we cannot get to that glorious destination as a beloved community if we are unwilling to give voice to the truth of our past. We

³ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. *Letter to Birmingham Jail*.

⁴ Christianity Today, September 2017. P.40.

need to begin our long march with contrite hearts to seek healing and reconciliation. The truth shall set us free, heal and reconcile us.

Now, is a call for us as followers of Jesus Christ, people of all faiths, colors and races in face of divisions and racial hatred let us not waste any more time. Let us “March in the light of God.” Join Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote these words in his letter from the Birmingham Jail for the elimination of “Triple Evils of Poverty, Racism and War.”:

We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity. (Letter from the Birmingham Jail page 19).

Seek brotherhood, sisterhood, racial equality and reconciliation and healing balm for the healing wounds of such division and hate rising again in America. Scripture guides us where to find that healing balm:

There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole,
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul.
Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.

If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul,

You can tell the love Jesus, and say, "He died for all." (The Hymnal 1982. #676).