



Committing to Resurrection

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

July 19, 2020

In the name of the Triune God, who is the Beloved Community in whose image we were made. **Amen.**

In the past several months during this pandemic, our St. John's community has had countless incredibly rich, prayerful conversations over Zoom. Even though I know we're all heartily sick of Zoom, it has afforded us a peculiar kind of intimacy that I have come to treasure. Several times, I have heard Doug Mensing say something that has pierced me to the quick. For those who don't know Doug, he is a long time St. John's parishioner who is passionate about caring for our earth, and has been leading our "Earth Matters" ministry for a long time. Anyway, we were talking about caring for the earth and about the sacrifices we need to make individually and as a community in order to flatten the curve when it comes to climate change. And he said, "I think we should focus less on what we need to sacrifice and more on what we will gain if we do this." There was a wisdom and a hope in those words that somehow cut through all the busy superficiality anxiety of the now, that shined a light into a beautiful future he could see and that he invited us to imagine.

We are in week five of what I've been calling a "Six Week Introduction into a Lifelong Journey: Dismantling Racism through Jesus' Way of Love." This week's focus is the verb "commit." This week we are all personally being asked, what do you believe God is asking you personally and us as a community to commit to with regard to dismantling racism?

Notice, we still have another week ahead of us, which is "discern." Discern means asking, what specific action steps are next? What small step is the very next thing God asks us to do? But this, week, "Commit," is different. Commit is more big picture.

And I will say this with all my heart. It will not do to commit to a negative. In the end fighting something only ends with exhaustion and burnout even if the cause is as worthy and as necessary as dismantling racism. I believe we are asked to commit to a positive. To a beautiful vision with roots in authentic hope, with the sprouts and life of justice that have sprung up from the ground even in the midst of all the violence and all the death. Martin Luther King, the night before he was killed, wrote this:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. 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. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.¹

What gave Martin Luther King the incredible power and vision that he had was his passionate engagement prophetic imagination with the ancient stories of scripture. They gave him a vision of a land where people could go to be free, a vision of a God who can confront Pharaoh and defeat him without an army, a vision where the lion lies down with the lamb and people of every tribe and language and nation are gathered with joy around the throne of God, a vision where a simple oppressed carpenter with brown skin named Jesus became a healer and a truth teller and radically committed to love and to nonviolence. This same Jesus gave his spirit to a bunch of cowardly disciples, so that soon the news of God's unconditional love spread to the four quarters of the compass.

When Martin Luther King studied the teachings of Jesus and the brilliance of other deeply spiritual leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, he saw that nonviolent love is the greatest force for change on earth. My friends, we are called to love George Floyd, and our new neighbors in the homeless encampment two blocks from St. John's at the trolley, and we are called to love our relatives who voted differently from us and even to love our deep and bitter enemies. But love is not a cheap fluffy sentimentality. It is a force that calls the highest good

¹ Martin Luther King, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," April 3, 1968, reproduced in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 19, 2020, accessed July 17, 2020 at https://www.phillytrib.com/special_sections/mlk/i-ve-been-to-the-mountaintop/article_f45287ca-6dae-5dd9-b0d6-ebf6b3cb6911.html.

from all and demands an end to violence and selfishness that prevents the flourishing of all God's children.

I believe that we at St. John's are called to commit to something. But the something we are called to commit to goes beyond dismantling racism, even though dismantling racism has to be front and center of our lives of faith because God is anguished about it. It has to go beyond fighting injustice anywhere which is a threat to justice everywhere, even though God calls us to hunger and thirst for justice. It is about committing to the simple and radical and total willingness to follow Jesus' Way of Love. We need a vision of the good that is the beacon toward which we are journeying in a dark world. This vision is the actual presence of the Spirit of God who is active outside the walls of our building, who is the one that hovered over the face of the chaos and the deep at the beginning of time, who gave birth to the earth in all its beauty, who made us in God's relational image, who made us for Beloved Community. The Spirit of God is already doing incredible things.

The Spirit of God is active in Dianne Pizey, who this week went to North Minneapolis in response to Don and Sondra Samuels' call to pray for the Healing of our City. She was there when gunfire rang out across the street in a drug deal gone violent, and she stayed to pray for more healing and she showed up the next day to do the same. The prophets of North Minneapolis are organizing a prayerful witness in the heart of the violence. The Spirit of God is active in Melissa

Pederson who is organizing help for our new neighbors down the street who are living in the homeless encampment. My friends, we can actually organize our entire community's life around asking this question: where is God's Spirit ahead of us, actively healing and addressing injustice and creating community, and how can we just go and participate in that?

When we do this, we will find ourselves with new and wonderful neighbors. We will find we are cultivating a new relationship with Liberty Community Church in North Minneapolis, with Pastor Alike Galloway and Pastor Paul Slack who is helping us go deeper and into the heart in our journey dismantling racism in ourselves. As I am opening myself to God's Spirit and asking to be liberated from selfish preoccupations I am finding synchronicity springing up all over the place. I think you are too. This is happening because it is God who is initiating all this change.

My friends, to dismantle racism, we need a vision of the promised land. We need to get to the mountain and see across to the other side, so we can commit to something worth our whole lives. That something is more than ending violence and prejudice and oppression. It's all the difference between death and resurrection.

As I said to you a few weeks ago, quoting Emmanuel Katongole: "Jesus' story is a constant reminder that we live not by the logic of cause and effect but rather by the

mysterious order of death and resurrection.”² The death is easy to see. It’s everywhere. It’s breaking our hearts with the scope and horror and extent of its pernicious persistence. It’s in the outrageously disproportionate numbers of African American men in prison. It’s in the failure of the federal and Minnesota governments to keep the terms of the treaties that they made with Lakota and Ojibwe children of God. It’s in the fact that there are greater standard of living disparities between black and white people in Minnesota than in the rest of the country. The death is in the terrible and violent practices of many in the Minneapolis Police Department, especially the Third Precinct which created and legitimized Officer Chauvin’s utter disregard for human life. The death is everywhere.

But it’s resurrection that is calling us forward. Resurrection is the impossible yet undeniable new life that God makes out of death and that is actually happening. Look around in our country. People are experiencing a moment of being awake. They are seeing and feeling the anguish of what has been allowed to go on for far too long. I believe with all my heart that God’s Spirit is active in this.

And I know that the empire is as strong as ever also. Following Jesus’ Way may or may not get rid of Pharaoh today or tomorrow. But we can have an alternative kingdom right here in the midst of empire, birthed in the love of God. As Martin Luther King said in his last speech, “Let us develop

² Katongole & Rice, *Reconciling All Things* at 33.

a kind of dangerous unselfishness.”³ Let us allow God to finally free us from being curved in on ourselves—curved in on the false illusion of our own separate individual lives—and to devote our attention and energies to the sacred rhythms of practicing Jesus’ Way of Love. To stand with black and brown brothers and sisters and siblings and love our neighbors into justice. To allow our own attitudes to be transformed. To laugh and be humble. To cultivate relationships with folks whose life experience and skin color is different from ours. To share our resources. To be kind to people who don’t see things the way we do and invite the best from them. To use nonviolent resistance to invite change from the empire.

I think I’ve shared with you before that I once saw something on some Episcopal website that asked the question, do Episcopalians believe in being born again? And the answer was: yes, we do. We believe we are born again, and again, and again. The life of faith, the spiritual life, is a life of countless large and small choices that one makes, and new life is always possible.

Having said that, there are times in the life of the world that are times of reckoning, great moments that seem to be orchestrated by powers greater than ourselves, whose architecture is mostly invisible to us, but whose presence is obvious for all to see. Now is such a time. What we choose to do or refuse to do, to see or refuse to see, will have impacts

³ Ibid.

that no one can foresee but that I believe are of great significance. Now is the time for white America to wake up and say, not one more life under the knee of systemic racism. Not one more black pastor driven out of the neighborhood, not one more child born into a generational poverty created by systemic racism. Even if we can't accomplish this on our own, we are called to the work. The crucifixion is there, it is evident for all to see. The resurrection is ahead, and we who follow Jesus are born to its rhythms and its hope and its beautiful vision. Let us be born again to the life of God's Spirit, who makes the impossible possible and who heals the sick, brings good news to the poor, frees the captives and raises the dead. **Amen.**