

Welcome Back! Thankful we can be together again....

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack, a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in.

That of course is from Anthem by Leonard Cohen, he wrote of this poem:

there is a crack in everything that you can put together: Physical objects, mental objects, constructions of any kind. But that's where the light gets in, and that's where the resurrection is and that's where the return, that's where the repentance is. It is with the confrontation, with the brokenness of things.

To be clear, I did not choose the lectionary...though truth be told I love it.. it is hardly appropriate for us this day, which in some cosmic world might have been better scheduled in the Easter season, and not the latter weeks of Epiphany. So it goes with preaching.

Today's Lukan Gospel was the beginning of Jesus teaching stories to his disciples and future apostles. They are broken into three parts: beatitudes and woes, loving your enemy, judgement. The Beatitudes, or blessings are found in Matthew who cites 8, and Luke 4. I encourage you to read and reflect on the 6th chapter of Luke, it is a firm foundation for discipleship, a plumb line for our journey.

Although there were many early adapters who followed Jesus curious about his healing ministry and teaching gathered this day on the plain, these lessons are intended for the 12 who had recently been called to follow Jesus and to fish for people.

Jesus proclaims in a significant public way contrasting blessings and woes. We might remember these blessings and curses from Deuteronomy, and from the multitude of prophetic voices.

Listen again. I rearranged the pattern and used The Message translation

You're blessed when you've lost it all.

God's kingdom is there for the finding.

But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made.

What you have is all you'll ever get.

You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry.

Then you're ready for the Messianic meal.

And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself.

Your *self* will not satisfy you for long.

You're blessed when the tears flow freely.

Joy comes with the morning.

And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games.

There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it.

“Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable.

“There’s trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular.

Jesus’s challenge, do the rich rely upon God? We know from Acts that the early church was a hopeful helpful socially conscious community where the wealthy aided those in need.

Jesus was tempted in the desert for food and denied Satan, and promises us the bread of life. Jesus fulfills this promise over and over with meals small and large, in the upper room and the feedings of the 5000.

Jesus always sides with the broken hearted, those who suffer from a lack of authentic justice. Jesus sides with those who speak truth. He sides with the individuals and families of those who have suffered from gun violence, police brutality, covid isolation.

These Blessings and Curses, prophetic warnings are intended to shake the foundations, suggest that we reconsider the use of our privilege. Joy, healing, and happiness for disciples of Jesus will not be found in riches, gratification, fame, but in right relationship with God.

God insists, “ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses . Choose life so that you and your descendants may live ” (Deuteronomy 30:19) Jesus has given us the plumb line to follow.

Jesus teaches that we must learn to follow this plumb line with practice, with God’s Grace to live a virtuous and moral life of faith, hope, charity, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

Jesus is not suggesting that being a disciple should be easy...quite the opposite, being a disciple requires deep commitment and faithfulness. As Matthew wrote, the road is easy that leads to destruction. Jesus promises that following him will be a blessing. As Bishop Jelinek told me once, if the path you see is clear, straight, and paved beware the devil lurks.

Bonhoeffer wrote in *Cost of Discipleship*, “When Christ calls a man, or woman, he bids them come and die.” die to your former selves and to turn towards Jesus and to become teachers and healers. Jesus says, whoever wants to follow me must pick up their cross.

Disciples are called to embrace a lifelong passion to question, to dig deeper, to transform from who they had been and to turn towards the path of a new identity. We disciples are sent to heal, feed, restore, and share the Gospel.

This community of Saint John's chooses, again and again, to follow Jesus, we choose to go deeper, recommit, and rededicate ourselves. Discipleship requires all-inclusive ongoing dedication to the Gospel. Discipleship also requires trust in God. As Kierkegaard wrote, and we often pray, 'with God's help, I shall become my true self.'

I suggest there are two important takeaways from today's Gospel:

First, that Jesus assumes we will become spiritually mature and will build the reign of heaven with him, as humble servant leaders, not people of power or privilege. Our journey to be sure will be frustrated by the world in which we live. Consider the steps of Learning in the Way of Love.

Second, Jesus does not call us to mission and ministry because we are gifted, holy, abundant, or talented.... rather we are called because we have the courage to drop our nets, to follow him, to embrace his teaching, to become healers and Gospel Agitators. Consider the step of turning in the Way of Love.

Catherine Meeks of the Absalom Jones center preaches, that we disciples, the Church, are called to lead and to teach people how not to be in the culture, how to be subversive, **to be of this world and not part of it**. We must remind ourselves that Jesus was a bad citizen...

The Church is not exclusively about buildings, stained glass windows, liturgy, adapting to the culture and being a good citizen. The church, the beloved community, is called to be a safe sacred healing center where people are invited and challenged to honestly speak their truth, share personal and family history, confess sins, and speak of their brokenness. Likewise, the beloved community is called to be a place of listening deeply...Then, in that truth, reconciliation can begin.

Catherine Meeks in her conversation preached that **there is nothing to be restored or reconciled for a people brought to this country as slaves in the cargo hold of a ship.** I was stunned, jolted, brought to tears.

Not to be overdramatic but imagine scales falling from my eyes or better my heart cracked open. In our family we are blessed to have African American great granddaughters, Japanese American grandsons. I have committed my entire adult life, contrary to ordinary yes, radical, peace maker, as a minister clearly called and committed to moving the arc of history towards justice. If nothing else these past few years have illustrated to me how far we have yet to go.

The dictionary definition of reconciliation is 'the action of making one view or belief compatible with another' and 'restoration of friendly relations'. To be clear, there is no reconciliation, no compatibility with racism.

We can tell the truth and commit to healing, and God willing move towards healing. With God's help we can together commit and recommit to reconciliation as an

agent for change. Change in the structures and systems that continue to promote racism, poverty, hunger, violence. Meeks suggests that this is much more than being allies, it is about being disciples together, hand in hand. We are learning and practicing at Saint John's how to be disciples together hand in hand.

Today we remember, we bless, the life, ministry, and contributions of Absalom Jones, first African American priest in the Episcopal Church.

As my brother John Bellaimy emailed me this week, his Black Students would have issues with such a celebration day during Black History Month.

He wrote, a part of me cringes, imagining my Black students' reacting to a gray-haired White congregation doing Absalom Jones day. Wish we could use it outside of Black History Month. Well said.

I encourage you to read Absalom's history, the blessings of his life and the curses we white privileged Episcopalians threw at him....it is not a celebratory story. The UBE spent years actively agitating the church to honor Absalom with this special day.

Byron Rushing, former vice president of the House of Deputies, African American, member of the House of Representatives of MASS for three decades assisted in pushing this day through the Episcopal Church, and wrote this regarding the feast day:

This action does not undo the centuries of pain that people of color have experienced in America, we must remember that **“it will not be until 2111 that people of African descent will have been free as long as they have been enslaved in the United States”** – He continues, dismantling racism is the work that Christians are called to do, especially in the midst of the crises America faces.

Blessed be Absalom Jones for his courage, faith, and commitment to the way of love; for founding Saint Thomas Episcopal Church in Philadelphia

Blessed be Absalom Jones for caring for the sick and dying during the 1793 yellow fever epidemic.

Blessed be Absalom Jones for following the plumb line that Jesus teaches.

Byron Rushing continues “The resurrection did not erase the crucifixion,” “The power of death was overcome, but it was not made like it never happened. God gives us good news because there is bad news.”

Let us, the community of Saint John’s continue to be disciples of the good news...that is how the light gets in.

Blessed are we who practice the way of love, the plumb line of Jesus, and continue to do all in our power to dismantle racism, personally, in the church, in all structural systems, speaking the truth, working towards the reconciliation of a history that is almost unspeakable.