

February 10, 2019

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (A Day of Racial Healing, Justice, & Reconciliation)

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Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13]

Psalm 138

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹

Please be seated.

On a typical news day, one needn't look very hard to find stories about the continuing effects of racism in America. Over the last week, it's been in our faces, so to speak, because of the governor, attorney general, and top state senator of Virginia. Just a few days before that story broke, I stumbled across this well-timed warm-up in the New York Times: "'Mary Poppins,' and a Nanny's Shameful Flirting with Blackface." Here's the beginning of that article:

"Mary Poppins Returns," which picked up four Oscar nominations last week, is an enjoyably derivative film that seeks to inspire our nostalgia for the innocent fantasies of childhood, as well as the jolly holidays that the first "Mary Poppins" film conjured for many adult viewers.

Part of the new film's nostalgia, however, is bound up in a blackface performance tradition that persists throughout the Mary Poppins canon, from P. L. Travers's books to Disney's 1964 adaptation, with disturbing echoes in the studio's newest take on the material, "Mary Poppins Returns."

One of the more indelible images from the 1964 film is of Mary Poppins blacking up. When the magical nanny (played by Julie Andrews) accompanies her young charges, Michael and Jane Banks, up their chimney, her face gets covered in soot, but instead of wiping it off, she gamely powders her nose and cheeks even blacker. Then she leads the children on a dancing exploration of London rooftops with Dick Van Dyke's sooty chimney sweep, Bert.

This might seem like an innocuous comic scene if Travers's novels didn't associate chimney sweeps' blackened faces with racial caricature.²

The article goes on to describe that racial caricature in painful detail. It pains me to admit that, until I read the article, I had completely missed the implications of those dancing chimney sweeps. I am almost certainly missing a whole lot more.

Today we join Episcopal churches around Connecticut in recognizing this Sunday as “A Day of Racial Healing, Justice, and Reconciliation.”

Let’s spend some time more generally on the concept of *reconciliation*. The Episcopal Church understands the ministry of reconciliation as central to the Christian life. That centrality is expressed in *The Book of Common Prayer*, the words of which glue us together as an extended community of faith. I like to have us explore the *BCP* together on occasion, so why don’t you find one in the pew rack. Remember, *The Book of Common Prayer* contains a short “Catechism” also called “An Outline of the Faith,” presented in question-and-answer form. Let’s look at part of it, on page 855. It offers this:

Q. What is the mission of the Church?

A. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

Q. Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?

A. The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.

Skip down slightly, and you’ll see this:

Q. What is the ministry of the laity?

A. The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.³

Elsewhere in the *BCP*, the Collect of the Day for the second Sunday of the Easter Season is a prayer to “God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation.”⁴ The *BCP* also says this: “The ministry of reconciliation, which has been committed by Christ to his Church, is exercised through the care each Christian has for others” and “through the common prayer of Christians assembled for public worship.”⁵

Let’s hear it again: the Episcopal Church understands the ministry of reconciliation as central to the Christian life. As Christians, we are to be agents of reconciliation, through prayer and deed.

With that in mind, the assigned Gospel reading seems especially fitting for today. The last several Sundays have given us Luke's stories about the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In today's installment, Jesus calls his first disciples: Simon, who will soon be known as Peter, along with his partners, the brothers James and John. The men have returned from a fruitless night of fishing. To gain some space from the crowd, Jesus plants himself in Simon Peter's boat and they cast off. His teaching complete, Jesus prods Peter into letting down his nets. The result is a catch so miraculous that Peter crumples in the fear of unworthiness. Jesus soothes Peter's fear. Peter, James, and John respond the only way possible: they leave their nets and boats. They are off to catch people.

The dance described is a two-step: because of the miracle catch, the men realize that Jesus is the Christ; because Jesus is the Christ, the new disciples follow him. This is a miracle story, *and* it's a call story. The miracle is an end; it is also the means to an end. Jesus provides that miracle catch, which is his way of saying, "Yes, *and*." Yes, I am working miracles in your life, *and* you will help me work miracles for others. Yes, I am giving you unimaginable abundance, *and* you will spread that abundance to others.

That being said, let's move return to the specific issue of racism. In our churches, in our community, in our nation, we continue to live with the legacy of racism. It manifests itself in ways small and large. I could offer examples, but you need only keep reading the news. Instead, because we're in church, let's briefly discuss the church. As you well know, many churches have a shameful history when it comes to race. The Episcopal Church is no different, and not just in the Deep South. New England Episcopalians and therefore New England Episcopal Churches benefitted from the slave trade. The Episcopal Churches here in New Haven share a history that is threaded through with racism. In the church and beyond, we have not yet completed the work necessary to understand the legacy of racism and correct its lingering effects.

Today is the first day of what is planned to be a two-year season of Racial Healing, Justice, and Reconciliation. I believe that this congregation is uniquely positioned to contribute to this work, both inside and outside the church. Therefore I hope we will join together in taking our charge seriously. I don't yet know what that will look like, but I invite you to join the exploration that is beginning.

Meanwhile, our worship today includes several elements suggested by a diocesan planning team on which our own Deacon April served. One was the Collect for the Day, which I repeated at the beginning of this sermon. Coming up after this sermon is a Litany of Repentance and then a Commissioning for the Ministry of Justice and Reconciliation.

At the ordinations of clergy, it is traditional for the preacher to end the sermon with what is called a “charge” to the person being ordained. In this charge, the preacher exhorts the new priest or deacon to take seriously the responsibilities that they are assuming, as they leave their old life behind and take up a new one. For Barack Obama’s first inauguration, the poet Elizabeth Alexander offered a poem entitled “Praise Song for the Day.” It closed with a section that sounded a bit like a charge to the nation, a charge that also feels like a good fit for this faith community at this time. The imagery is particularly well suited this season after the Epiphany, which arcs from the birth of God as love, to the revealing of that love as the light of the world. This is how it goes:

Some live by *love thy neighbor as thyself*,
others by *first do no harm or take no more*
than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.⁶

Back briefly to *The Book of Common Prayer*. As it says in the “Catechism,” in his new covenant, “Christ promised to bring us into the kingdom of God and give us life in all its fullness”; in response, we obey Christ’s commandment “that we love one another as Christ loved us.”⁷ In love and for love, carrying on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world, we fish not only for our own satisfaction, but as those called to call others into the fullness of God’s kingdom. The sin of racism continues to hobble our society and all God’s people. Let’s strengthen our work as agents of racial reconciliation. We need only to let down our nets. The miracle catch awaits.

Notes

¹ “Prayer for the Human Family,” *Book of Common Prayer*, 815.

² Daniel Pollack-Pelzner, “‘Mary Poppins,’ and a Nanny’s Shameful Flirting with Blackface,” January 28, 2019, *The New York Times*, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/28/movies/mary-poppins-returns-blackface.html> (accessed February 9, 2019).

³ From the “Catechism,” *The Book of Common Prayer*, 855.

⁴ Contemporary Collect for the Second Sunday of Easter, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 224.

⁵ From “Concerning the Rite” introducing the Sacrament of Reconciliation, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 446.

⁶ Elizabeth Alexander, “Praise Song for the Day,” available online from the Poetry Foundation at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52141/praise-song-for-the-day> (accessed February 9, 2019).

⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 851.