

## St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for August 23, 2020 ~ Proper 16A

The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

We've reached the point in transition between settled Rectors where we have the results of the parish-wide survey and are engaged in holy conversations. We've seen more than the normal number of changes in the last year, many of which have been thrust upon us by the Coronavirus Pandemic. The changes that happen in this or any church during a time of transition are nothing compared with the changes that are so desperately needed in the world around us. Our news media have been chock full of shocking examples of how things need to change. The headlines during the last several weeks have heralded stories of political strife, racial and ethnic conflicts, poverty and injustice, abuse of power, desperation, and violence. And we've just begun reading about the tragic fires in the Western United States and the threat of two simultaneous hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico.

And, lest you think that the Church doesn't have any responsibility for involvement in that change, I direct your attention to that part of the catechism that declares, "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." That is our imperative! That's what the Church is for. Ongoing changes in our common life are necessary in order for us to be God's instrument of change for the reconciliation of the world at our doorstep. The involvement of the people of this parish in the Union Gospel Mission, 4Saints Food Pantry, the Presbyterian Night Shelter, drives to collect shoes for homeless neighbors and teddy bears for children at Cook Children's Hospital are among the examples of how you are indeed taking action. I want to encourage you to continue and I also appeal to you today to do even more in expanded involvement and funding in these endeavors, in advocacy that addresses wealth inequality, racism, and injustice, and in continued efforts to strengthen the health and the quality of your life together. This is the heritage of the People of God.

Consider Moses. His ancestor Joseph had been the savior of the Egyptian people. By the time of Moses birth, the animosity of the Egyptians toward the Hebrews was so bad that Pharaoh made them slaves and ordered the execution of every male Hebrew child. Moses' mother hid him as long as possible and then set him adrift in the river, from which he was drawn and then raised in Pharaoh's household (Ex. 1:8 - 2:10). When he grew up, he became outraged when an Egyptian taskmaster beat an Israelite slave and he killed the taskmaster. He fled for his life and, years later, God called him to lead the Israelites from slavery to freedom. During their Exodus, God gave Moses the Law as an objective standard against which to measure their progress in living with one another in their newfound freedom. God did not want people living in or causing racism, poverty, and injustice. Something had to be done and God had a hand in it.

Likewise, the occasion for St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans was racial strife and a power struggle between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome. Something had to be done so Paul wrote this epistle. From chapter 12 through the first part of chapter 15, he outlines how the gospel transforms believers and their behavior. He describes that transformation as a "renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). It is a transformation so radical that it amounts to a "a transfiguration of your brain," a "metanoia", a "mental revolution." Infighting hindered them in their life as the Body of Christ. So, Paul writes, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned" (Rom. 12:3).

Paul goes on to describe how believers should live. He explains that Christians are no longer bound by the Law of Moses, but live under the grace of God. That is the way from slavery to freedom. We do not need to live under the law because, to the extent our minds have been renewed, we will know “almost instinctively” what God desires of us. When that happens, the Law becomes an objective standard for measuring progress in the “lifelong process” of this mental revolution and its impact on changing the world. This is a call to go on to Christian maturity!

A friend in Austin shared an interesting quote from Shane Claiborne on her Facebook page yesterday. It provides a wonderful description of what such maturity looks like. I told her it would find its way into this sermon. Claiborne writes, “Peacemaking doesn’t mean passivity. It is the act of interrupting injustice without mirroring injustice, the act of disarming evil without destroying the evildoer, the act of finding a third way that is neither fight nor flight but the careful, arduous pursuit of reconciliation and justice. It is about a revolution of love that is big enough to set both the oppressed and the oppressors free.”

God does most of the work. That’s the hard part for us. It’s about grace. It’s about trusting God to change us so we can change the world. We’d rather read a self-help manual and fix ourselves up. But the truth of the gospel and the good news of the gospel is that God does most of the work. The Church is here week after week to remind us of that. How can we experience this lifelong process of mental revolution that can impact the evil forces of this world, such as poverty, racism, and injustice?

Desire it. Admit that you can’t save yourself or save the world by yourself. Believe that the One who is greater than you can transform you. Turn your life and the life of your Church over to him. Believe that the best years of St. Martin’s are in the future that God is setting before you.

That One, Jesus Christ, is here to meet us at his Table. Whether our attitude is right or not, he is always here. But when we come desiring, admitting, believing, surrendering, when we are as receptive and trusting as children, when we receive him in this way, it is the first step in the journey *from* slavery – to the past, to hurts, to disappointments, to prejudices, to the way we’ve always done it – *to* the glorious liberty which is the destiny and the inheritance of the children of God. You don’t want to shortchange yourself.

One day at a place called Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his followers, “Who do you say that I am” (Mt. 16:15)? In that spirit, I invite you to ask yourselves every day, “Who is Jesus Christ and what difference does he make?” There are answers to that question in the Scriptures and in the confessions of the Church. But it is imperative that the question be answered again and again in the heart of each disciple and each congregation from generation to generation in our ongoing pilgrimage from slavery to freedom. For it is in that living, giving relationship that the Word again takes on flesh and dwells among the people who live in the mission field at the doorstep of this church.

Those doors open outwards and so do your lives. What happens *in here*, whether you are physically or virtually present, is to equip and empower us to be the Body of Christ *out there*. We receive Word and Sacrament so that we might become Word and Sacrament in a world of hurt, of today and tomorrow, not that of yesterday. And, the good news for St. Martin’s is that God still has a unique mission for you that no other faith community has been called to serve in this part of Creation. Freely you have received. So freely give. Don’t hold back. God will be glorified, that glory will be reflected in your life together, lives will be transformed, and, you will, as our Junior Warden Christopher Mullaney often reminds us, “become the change” that changes the world!