

PRINTED AND FORMATTED CONVENTION SERMON

Homily 2022 Diocesan Convention Final

I wish to open with a poem by Wendell Berry, an invocation of sorts, to center us. Berry often says that humanity's "difficulty is that the natural world is seen primarily for human use, not as a mode of sacred presence primarily to be communed with in wonder and beauty and intimacy."

Grace, by Wendell Berry

The woods is shining this morning.
Red, gold and green, the leaves
lie on the ground, or fall,
or hang full of light in the air still.
Perfect in its rise and in its fall, it takes
the place it has been coming to forever.
It has not hastened here, or lagged.
See how surely it has sought itself,
its roots passing lordly through the earth.
See how without confusion it is
all that it is, and how flawless
its grace is. Running or walking, the way
is the same. Be still. Be still.
"He moves your bones, and the way is clear."

In his sermon for the opening of this past summer's General Convention, the Presiding Bishop shared that work had been ongoing for some time, sponsored by several Christian denominations, to gather people's responses to the question: Who is Jesus for you?

Bishop Curry said, "This was a well-crafted, comprehensive poll or survey...which actually gave us a snapshot into the American population across all races, ethnic groups, all religious groups, all political groups, across geographical territories. I mean, everybody is in this survey.

And here were the results. Eighty-four percent of the American population says that Jesus is an important spiritual figure worth listening to. Eighty-four percent across all groups. Democrats, Republicans, independents, liberals, conservatives, religious, non-religious, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, no religion. Everybody. Eighty-four percent. Jesus is in.

Then we asked them, "What [do think] about Christians? What [do think] about the Church?" Well, they answered. Among non-Christians in particular, 50% associated Christians with the word hypocrisy; 49% with the word judgmental; 46% with self-righteousness; and 32% with arrogance. And then, nearly half of non-Christians in America believe that racism is prevalent among Christians in the Church.

The PB continued: Now ... there's actually good news here. It's embedded in those of us who believe that every problem is a possibility in disguise. Remember, 84% of the people surveyed across the board find Jesus attractive, something about him compelling. Eighty-four percent. The problem is there's a gap between Jesus and the experiences and perceptions people may have of his followers ... And it's that gap that's the problem. It's that gap that undermines our efforts to commend this Jesus and his way of love to a wider culture, to those who don't have a religious background. It's that gap between this Jesus, who is attractive, and some of his followers who are not. But there's hope because Jesus told us how to close the gap."

Jesus said, As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Joyfully Closing the gap.

After communion we shall sing Fanny Crosby's great hymn
Blessed Assurance from our hymnal Lift every voice:

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh what a foretaste of glory divine
Heir of salvation, purchase of God.
Born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.*

And then maybe we'll almost raise the roof on the refrain:
*This is my story, this is my song
Praising my savior all the day long,
This is my story this is my song,
Praising my savior all the day long.*

The good news we have to share is Jesus' love for all which reconciles us and restores us to unity with God and all people. That's a way to close the gap for sure. Our emphasis must be squarely on serving God and God's mission, entering more deeply into God's vision and will for all creation. God's mission both never changes and is constantly being renewed.

Pastor, educator, author, and prophet Howard Thurman, in his collection *Meditations of the Heart*, includes meditation 45 I Will Sing a New Song. Though he writes in the first person, and like me you may find it taps into something in you, also listen for what he might be saying to God's Church:

“The old song of my spirit has wearied itself out. It has long ago been learned by heart so that now it repeats itself over and over, bringing no added joy to my days or lift to my spirit. It is a good song, measured to a rhythm...the words belong to old experiences which once sprang fresh as water from a mountain crevice fed by melting snows. But my life has passed beyond to other levels...I know that the work of the old song, perfect in its place, is not for the new demand!

I will sing a new song. As difficult as it is, I must learn the new song that is capable of meeting the new need. I must fashion new words born of all the new growth of my life, my mind, my spirit. I must prepare for new melodies that have never been mine before, that all that is within me may lift my voice to God.

Teach me, my Father, that I might learn with the abandonment and enthusiasm of Jesus, the fresh new accent, the untried melody, to meet the need of the untried morrow. Thus, I may rejoice with each new day and delight my spirit in each fresh unfolding.

I will sing this day, a new song unto Thee, O God.”

Jesus said, “Abide in my love, by this the world knows you are mine, how you love others.” Sharing this loving Savior in our congregations and communities, in our diocese and the commonwealth, I see how it is woven throughout our mission and many ministries. I see how you love your neighbors.

For example when we had to cease in-person worship in the first months of the pandemic, the number one concern was “how can we keep doing outreach, in some significant forms, because neighbors are depending on us.” Beautiful. Hard to sense hypocrisy or arrogance then there is ministry over-flowing with joy and love for one another. AND, such loving service continued the Lord’s call to serve neighbor, but in the words of Dr Thurman, y’all did so with a new accent.

Again this is what you all do so very well. And the world wants more from us, and the harvest is plentiful.

The late Bishop Barbara Harris often said “Remember the God behind you is greater than anything in front of you.”

The Presiding Bishop suggests that there is a gap all of God’s Church has contributed toward, and that gap will be bridged, filled in, and made level as we love and serve to fulfill the Great Commission. Using Light. Hope. Love. All in full measure, in the Name of Jesus, both the same song and a new song, of God’s love.

I offer this prayerbook Collect:

O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing; Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you. Grant this for the sake of your only Son Jesus Christ, our Lord. *Amen.*

When you called me here 12 years ago I quickly learned that The Commonwealth is filled with accents in different regions! And I was told more than once, “Well Bishop by your accent you almost sound like a yankee!” I smiled and replied, “One of God’s greatest blessings is diversity!”

Beloved: As we tell the story of Jesus and his love, including our own personal stories, and sing our songs of praise, may we also find and develop Dr. Thurman’s new accents, and new songs, assuring all that they are loved.

Amen.