



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"High Born & Open Minded"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On May 22, 2022, 6th Sunday of Eastertide, from Acts 17:1-12

My family comes from small towns in the Appalachian Mountains. We are mountain people, and we are proud Virginians. But I need to be sure you understand that we are Western Virginians, and not West Virginians. This is a crucial distinction which is very important to my family. My parents fell in love in Lynchburg Va., and they moved into a trailer outside of town while my mother taught at the college and my father worked at the foundry, and they were living in that trailer in Lynchburg Va. when I was born. Coincidentally, Lynchburg is also where the architect of the Moral Majority and founder of Liberty University, Jerry Falwell was born, which I hope you won't hold against us. We were both born in Lynchburg, but Jerry and I turned out to be two very different kind of pastors. Thank God for that!

Growing up in the mountains of Virginia my mother inherited certain ideas and sayings from her family. One of the most important was about the Hilers. Whenever I came to the table with disheveled hair, wrinkled clothes, chewed with my mouth open, got food on my face, failed to clean my room, forgot to take a shower, burped at the dinner table, used lewd language or inappropriate grammar, my mother would say the same thing her mother said to her, and grandmother said to her, down through the ages— "Now Ben, don't be a Hiler. Get it together. Clean up your act. That's how a Hiler behaves and that's not who we are. We're not like the Hilers." This was another important distinction for my family. We may be humble people from Western Virginian, but we are not West Virginians, and we are not Hilers. We believed we had more couth and sophistication.

You may be wondering, "What in the world is a Hiler?" You're not alone. I wondered that my entire life and so did my mother. We thought it was an expression everybody used. I had ideas about its origins. I thought the Hilers might a group of people who lived on hills, eking out a life just a few feet lower than my ancestors, and because we literally looked down on them, we created this nickname. Another idea was that Hiler might be an abbreviation for Hillbilly, or someone who is from the remote regions of Appalachia. Turns out neither was right, but the first was closer. After years of cautioning each other not to be like the Hilers, we were stunned recently when a relative told us that the Hilers were a real family. My great grandmother grew up in Clifton Forge next door to a family of pig farmers named the Hilers who allowed their pigs to roam inside the house. This behavior was so alarming my ancestors constructed their identity in contrast to it. We used this poor family's name as a warning about good manners that was been passed down four generations. We may not have known who we were, but we knew we were not like the Hilers.



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Distinctions like this occur in every community. Janette Thomas Greenwoods fantastic book, *Bittersweet Legacy*, demonstrates that in Charlotte, after the Civil War, black and white business owners and professionals began to describe themselves openly as the “better classes.” Greenwood contends this “term tells us a lot about the sense of moral and social superiority these men and women presumed.” Greenwood argues, the concepts of class at that time were dynamic and relational, especially for the black better class, whose livelihood depended on their relationship with their white counterparts and the recognition they them.ⁱ Just as I inherited the idea of the Hilers and internalized a distinction between their family and mine, many Charlotteans inherited the idea of better classes and internalized this distinction as well. But what did that do to us spiritually?

Late feminist scholar bell hooks begins her book *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, saying, “Nowadays it is fashionable to talk about race or gender; the uncool subject is class. It’s the subject that makes us all tense, nervous, uncertain about where we stand...many citizens of this nation, myself included, are afraid to think or dialogue about class. Meanwhile, the ever-widening gap between rich and poor has already set the stage for ongoing and sustained class warfare.” She writes, “Race and gender can be used as screens to deflect attention away from the harsh realities class politics exposes. Racism and sexism can be exploited in the interests of class power. Yet no one wants to talk about class. It is not sexy or cute. But class conflict is already racialized and gendered, creating division and separation. [And] to work for change, we need to know where we stand.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Where *do* we stand, as people of faith and good conscience, on class? We should stand with God who is said to be “no respecter of persons,” and with Jesus who, as it says in our text from Acts this morning, suffered, died, and rose from the grave “to turn the world upside down.” Many reduce the book of Acts to the story of the early church and a travelogue of Paul’s missionary journeys. But Acts is a gospel—the second half of Luke. Luke and Acts represent a singular narrative with a grand vision, which is what makes the scripture we have today so strange and disturbing. Following scholar Phillis Tribble, one might call this a “text of terror.” You may be surprised by this, given how ordinary the story appears on the surface, but not all “texts of terror” contain bloodshed. Some have incredibly small details, subtle words, and slight turns of phrase that are lost in translation, which can make a seemingly innocent gospel narrative into a terrorizing story.



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Here's the shocking news for us Baptists—not every word of scripture is holy. I'm aware of the often proof-texted scripture from 2 Timothy 3 which states that "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching." However, not every word is inspired. The stories or overall message might be inspired, but not every word is "god-breathed" or "life giving." Some words in scripture are uninspired, God-forsaken, and death dealing. For instance, when Luke describes Paul and Silas's visits to Thessalonica and Berea, he becomes excessively excited by the fact that the rich and powerful are being converted to become followers of Jesus. In this story, he used words like "prominent," "stature," "high-born," and "highly respected"—words that reflect stark economic distinctions, terms of derision and division. What disciple would not be thrilled about prominent people joining the church? Isn't this good news? Perhaps it can be, but not the way Luke made these distinctions in Acts 17.

As theologian Willie James Jennings shows us, "Luke is sharpening a distinction he's operated with from the beginning of Acts. We could call this a class distinction. [And] that distinction is now doing strange and twisted work...Luke is not only unleashing cultural insult inside cultural code, but he is also deploying a dangerous optic—the perception of status and the status of perception...[and] this way of perceiving status is being mixed with conversion, [which] ...has always been an intoxicating and horrific mixture of perception." Jennings goes on to claim, "At this moment, Luke has lost the gospel even as he tells of its opposition [and acceptance]. Luke's class distinctions participate in the very wickedness he is describing to us. This is no small matter because from such a social optic grows the impatience to see people in their complexities and the justification to treat them like trash. That optic grows inside Christianity, threatening the gospel from within and distorting Christianity's power of discernment."ⁱⁱⁱ From these distinctions grew the justification for Christians and the Church to treat certain people like trash.

Luke's intertwining of class distinctions with conversion is particularly alarming, because of all the gospel writers, Luke should have known better! Luke gave us the most class conscious of all the gospels. Even a quick survey of Luke provides a mountain of examples. The gospel of Luke has more about money, more hoarding possessions, and warnings to the rich than all the other gospels. Luke's the only gospel with the Magnificat where Jesus's mother proclaims, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Luke's the only gospel with the parable of the Rich Fool and the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. And Luke's also the only gospel with the story of Zacchaeus a wealthy tax collector paying reparations



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Then in Acts, Luke wrote, “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” And then two chapters later, “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common,” a passage that strikes fear in the heart of every Christian capitalist. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus and the early church stand in solidarity with the poor, engage in class struggle, and strive to build a community where distinctions between the classes are no longer determinative; a beloved community that literally “turns the world upside down.” So how in God’s name did Luke go from writing the most equitable and egalitarian gospel to being enamored with “prominent people with status,” “the high born,” and “highly respected?” In short, he wanted to win, and in striving to win he lost the gospel.

Luke wasn’t perfect; neither was Paul, or Silas, or Jesus for that matter. Remember when he called the Syrophenician woman a dog? Luke’s blind spots reveal our own, just like our obsession with J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* back in 2016 revealed our desires for easy answers after the election, when Vance was just another politician using class and scapegoating the poor to gain political power. We all have our blind spots, and it turns out even the most equitable, egalitarian, and economically progressive people can become intoxicated with the spirit of class distinction. It’s about how we think about people; how we treat people. Even the most radical among us have blind spots when it comes to class, and that’s because class is not just a social, political, and economic issue; class is a spiritual issue.

Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr, says there are three major obstacles to the spiritual life that have been the same in every age of history since Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, and have remained consistent from the Desert Mothers and Fathers all the way to Thomas Merton—and those are “power, prestige, and possessions.” Rohr claims, “We can take nine-tenths of Jesus’s teachings and clearly align it under one of those three categories: our attachments to power, prestige and possessions—they are the biggest impediments to the spiritual life and yet for some reason, much of Christian history has chosen not to see this, and localized evil in other places than Jesus did.”^{iv} Class is the way the obstacles of power, prestige, and possessions manifest themselves in our lives today, which means that for Richard Rohr, and the entire mystical tradition; the greatest impediment to the spiritual life is class.



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In this season of rebuilding community, we have the opportunity to decide what kind of community we want to be. We can decide for ourselves how class will operate among us. We can reject the idea that class is always the “elephant in the room” or the “Bruno” no one talks about. Monsters become less scary when you bring them out of the dark. This is what our former Senior Minister Carlyle Marney discovered when he came to Charlotte. Marney spent his career as a firebrand from Texas preaching against white supremacy throughout the South. He had faced the demons of systemic racial injustice head on, but in Charlotte he was confronted by different force he said he was unprepared for—the force of class. Marney said, “The real threat to the gospel [in this city] came from the assumptions of upper-middle class life: a complacency which does not hear and is not interested in the cries of the politically powerless and the victims of injustice.”^v He felt that the “Church is divided most tragically not by denomination but by the prerogatives of social class and economic privilege.”

In 1959, one year after he arrived here, Marney gave a lecture in which he characterized us churchgoing folks in Charlotte as “established enough to be unchallenged,” “settled enough to need an earthquake to disturb us,” “old enough to begin to want some dignity and poise and senile stultification,” “rich enough to be social leaders,” “powerful enough to feel no social pressure,” “pious enough to know now conviction for our sins,” and “complacent enough to feel no real responsibility anywhere.”^{vi} It was a humbling description of what class can do to our spirituality. But knowing his work was cut out for him, Marney aimed to change all that by proposing a new twist on the old egalitarian concept of the priesthood of all believers which he described as becoming “priests to each other,” or as our covenant states today, “priests celebrating God’s presence in community and in the world.”

We can’t be each other’s priests if we are holding on to power, prestige, possessions, prominence, status, high-birth, or high respectability, or if we treat people differently because of their class. Class distinctions cannot exist in the priesthood of believers. Being enamored with class distinctions is the path that led to the conversion of Constantine, Empire religion, and pastors laying hands on corrupt Presidents. We can’t become the community the Spirit is calling us to be if we are unwilling to look into our hearts and examine the ways class has separated us from God and our neighbors. By not addressing it, we reinforce the structure of the world around us and replicate it inside the church. Any community that is unwilling to face their classism remains trapped in the wilderness of temptation haunted by the demonic forces of greed and power. Wrestling with classism is deep spiritual labor.



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I don't see it as a coincidence that when bell hooks wrote her book on class, she was also reading noted spiritual author Richard Foster, Matthew 25, and her formation in the Black Church. She said, "Again and again we were told in church that once we crossed the threshold of this holy place sanctified by divine spirit, we were all one. As a child I did not know who the poor were among us. I did not understand that as a family of seven children living on one working-class income, that when it came to material resources, we were poor. Sharing resources was commonplace in our world—a direct outcome of a belief in the necessity of claiming the poor as ourselves. Indeed, showing solidarity with the poor was essential spiritual work, a way to learn the true meaning of community and enact the sharing of resources that would necessarily dismantle hierarchy and difference. Solidarity with the poor is the only path that can lead our nation back to a vision of community that can challenge and eliminate violence and exploitation. It invites us to embrace an ethics of compassion and sharing that will renew a spirit of loving kindness and communion that can sustain and enable us to live in harmony with the whole world."^{vii}

Now that is a beloved community, and if we truly want to build that kind of community here, we must seek to take on the mind of Christ, which in the words of Philippians 2, requires that we "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." This of course is not easy to do, but it is the only true spiritual path and the way of Jesus. Paul didn't say, "Regard others as equal to yourselves" he said regard others as better, because there are truly no better classes of people, there are simply people with money and power and people with less, and Christians are supposed to treat everyone as if they are part of the "better class."

My family and I were no better than the pig farmers who lived next door to my great grandmother. We were not "better" than the Hilers. The distinctions we made between them and us were ridiculous and did nothing but distance us from God, our neighbors, and our truest selves. By dehumanizing them we dehumanized ourselves. We lost so much we could have had if we were willing to live in solidarity with the Hilers. Pigs for one thing, and all the good that comes with them; friendship and wholeness for another. Just imagine what the world, and the church, could be if we stripped away the class distinctions that divide us. We might find that when all the pretensions of prominence, prestige, and status fall away what we are left with is the truth of our humanity, the reality that we need each other, and a deep spiritual connection and with all human beings and all living things on our planet.



At the end of her book *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson offers us a vision of a new world. She states, “In a world without caste, instead of a false swagger over our tribe, family, or ascribed community, we would look upon all of humanity with wonderment. In a world without cast, being male or female, light or dark, immigrant or native-born, would have no bearing on what anyone was capable of. In a world without caste, we would all be invested in the well-being of others and recognize we need one another more than we’ve ever been led to believe. In a world without caste, would see that when others suffer, the collective human body is set back. A world without caste,” she says, “would set everyone free.”^{viii} We are called to build a beloved community where class has no power, where it doesn’t matter if you’re prominent, prestigious, high-born, or highly respected in the world, and where everyone is regards others as better than themselves, because as the mob complained to the authorities in Thessalonica, a community like that has the ability “turn the whole world upside down.”

ⁱ Janette Thomas Greenwood, *Bittersweet Legacy: The Black and White Better Classes in Charlotte 1850-1910*, UNC Press, Chapel Hill, 1994.

ⁱⁱ bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, Routledge, New York, 2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ Willie James Jennings, *Acts: Belief Theological Commentary on the Bible*, WJK, Louisville, 2017.

^{iv} Richard Rohr, *Preparing for Christmas: Daily Meditations for Advent*, Franciscan Media, 2012.

^v John J. Carey, *Carlyle Marney: A Pilgrims Progress*, Mercer Press,

^{vi} Carlyle Marney, “We Have This Treasure,” Lecture 4 at the Summer School on “The Church and Evangelism” July 9, 1959, sponsored by the Council of Southwestern Theological Schools. The description of religion in Charlotte is in the audio tape of the Southwestern lecture but not in either of the written transcripts. Quoted in Carey, *Carlyle Marney*, 43.

^{vii} hooks, *Where We Stand*, 39 & 49.

^{viii} Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, Random House, New York, 2020.