

Lent IV, Year B

March 15, 2015

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Atlanta

"Above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins."

- I Peter 4:8

Good morning. My wife Lynn and I and members of our congregation (especially some of our youth) are glad to be with you this morning at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. You have a wide and well-deserved reputation for worship, preaching, and an exciting common life and shared ministry in our Lord's name. I am very grateful to The Very Rev. Charles Fischer for inviting me to preach this morning. It is part of a conversation we began last fall to see how our respective congregations may be able to explore what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ in the context of the United States in the 21st c.

So let me begin by telling you something about my story. I am a child of God. I am a sinner forgiven by God's grace. And by that same grace of God, I am a follower of our Lord Jesus Christ. I believe that is an identity shared by many if not most of us here this morning.

I am also the son of Margaret and Joe Oglesby. My parents moved to and met in Atlanta in the first half of the 20th c. In her early teens, Mom was sent to live with relatives in Atlanta right after the Great Depression in which her father lost their family farm in North Carolina. Mom went from the oldest child of a rural landowner to a "poor relation" dependent on the kindness of her urban family with jobs. My parents met at church and were married in March of 1940. They were married for sixty-six years and each have now passed on.

I am the second of their two sons. My brother Joe, named after our father, is older than me by seven years. I have taken great comfort over the years in how second sons are often the

avored ones in the Bible. I was born at Crawford Long Hospital in October 1958. I was baptized at Episcopal Church of the Incarnation in February 1959. We lived on Highview Road at that time. In 1965, my parents moved us from Southwest Atlanta to the Sandy Springs area, near Chastain Park. Yes, we were part of what was called “white flight” that occurred during that era. My parents explained it by saying they wanted us to have “a good education.” I think that was true in part, at least in their minds; but there was obviously more to it than that.

My parents, I think, were part of what has been described as “good people who did nothing” in terms of the racial issues in our country. My mother worked as a bookkeeper for Ellis Arnall’s law firm. She admired him and some of his famous associates who became known as more progressive politicians—men like Charles Weltner and Elliott Levitas. My parents would look down on our relatives who would vote for someone like Lester Maddox or J.B. Stoner. Yet my parents were far from progressive champions for civil rights. They seemed content with the status quo. I hesitate to tell any more of their story, because I am not clear of all that was in their hearts. I offer it in part only to provide a context for my story.

In addition to being a child of God and the son of Margaret and Joe, I am also a son of the South. My regional identity formed me in ways that often got mixed into my family, my faith-- and my race. For me, over most of my childhood, youth, and even my adulthood, unpacking that mixture has been a good part of my life’s work. By God’s grace, I have had helpers along the way to help me repent and be healed from the sins of my heritage—and hopefully for me to take part in God’s healing work in the world.

The first helper in terms of my healing about race, at least the first one I remember, is my grandfather, Horace. Grandpa was from Kentucky and had some different perspectives about race for a man of his generation. I remember a specific conversation he had with me when I was young—maybe seven years old-- in which he said that black people deserved respect and that I shouldn’t let the ignorant attitudes of other people influence me. That talk from Grandpa planted a seed in my heart that matured over the years and continues to bear fruit in my life.

Other helpers included my neighborhood and other childhood friends in Sandy Springs. The best influences tended to come from Jewish and Catholic friends whose families were more liberal politically and religiously than mine. Their words challenged me to see the world more broadly and with more understanding. I am grateful to each of them for their help.

When I came to personal faith in Jesus Christ as a fifteen year old, my prior way of seeing the world was challenged even more. As a result of my faith in Christ, I began to read Scripture and understand the human condition differently. Instead of an “us and them” mentality, I began to see that God was creating a new people and that God desires to tear down the walls that divide us and instead wants us to build bridges. The full implications of that would take many more years to unfold in my life.

A major change for me—and for Lynn and our two children at that time, Lauren and Will—was when we moved to Chicago in 1987 in order for me to go into management with FedEx (our third child, Katherine would be born during our time in Chicago). While there, I first really experienced being “other.” You see, I don’t have much of a Southern accent, so people would often make comments to me about the South, thinking I had moved from there but that I was not *from* there. Many Chicagoans—at least in my perhaps overly sensitive perception—don’t think much of people from the South. They said things that implied—or outright stated-- that Southerners are lazy and ignorant and preoccupied with having a good time. You know, like “Hee-Haw” was a documentary. When I would mention that I was actually born and raised in the South, many of them would say, “Well, (I’m sure) you’re different.”

So for at least part of my time in Chicago, I admit I held a defensive posture about my region. More than once, I even quoted Dr. King when he stated that Chicago was the most racist city in America (probably not the best way to build bridges!). During that time in the wilderness, I think I lost focus on the critical point about being a white Southerner— that my region is deeply connected to white racism; and for me to be healed-- and for me to be part of

God's healing work in our country-- I need to remember and acknowledge that. The lack of self-awareness from some of my associates in the north was their issue to deal with, not mine.

This point was driven home to me through a friendship I developed with a co-worker who I will call Karen. We worked in the same sales region and later participated on a diversity task force together. We were about the same age and we were both from the South. We enjoyed talking with each other, teasing and talking trash about work and so forth. One day Karen told me a story that helped me to see my regional identity differently.

Karen told me about a package she received when she first got into management. It came anonymously. It was a little toy that had a Confederate flag on it. It had a key that you could wind up and it would play "Dixie." Karen knew it was sent with malice—perhaps to mock her or even try to intimidate her. As Karen shared her story with me, she teared-up (and Karen was not given to crying easily), and my heart was broken, my heart was changed. I knew my sense of regional pride could never include those symbols again. I saw again the sin of my inheritance.

That story reminds me of the story from the book of Numbers that Jesus referred to in the Gospel for today. It is a strange story, but I believe it has truth to speak to me and for all of us as a people. The people of God were in the wilderness. They had lost their way. They had become bitter and resentful as a people. And so God embodied their bitterness in the form of poisonous serpents. That caused them to cry out for help, for healing from the poison. God told Moses what the cure would be—they would need to look at the cause of their pain in order to be healed. And they did.

As with any biblical story, any metaphor, we need to be careful in how we apply it in our lives and in our world today. But I believe this story can help us with where we—or at least where many of us-- are stuck as the people of God. It reminds me of something I read recently. I have been reading some of the collected columns written by Dr. Catherine Meeks. In one, she wrote that any talk of "racial reconciliation" is probably not accurate because "reconciliation" implies there was a preexisting relationship that was lost. Instead, Dr. Meeks wrote of

“acknowledgment,” that white folks in our country need to acknowledge our past and how our shared past continues to affect our present. We need to look at our bronze serpent.

I am not sure what this will look like for all of us. Rev. Fischer and I have had a couple of good conversations about possibilities. In our parish, we are in the midst of a Lenten series entitled “Living our Faith: Race in America.” The meetings so far have been heartening. I look forward to being part of what may come next. I commit to you that I want to be healed as a white son of the South and participate in the healing that God seeks to do among all of us. I realize that healing involves acknowledgement of the past and justice in the present. It also involves people willing to talk and pray together and also work on the bridge building our God seeks to do among us. I am committed to this effort and so is my parish as it continues to roll out over the weeks, months, and years ahead. Progress is often slow and hope sometimes grows dim. But we worship and trust in the God who does what we might find impossible.

So thank you again for the invitation to be here this morning. Thank you for your hospitality and your graciousness to Lynn and me and our parishioners as we visit today. I hope that someday soon you will come visit our congregation in Forsyth County. We would really enjoy having you with us. God bless you. Amen.