

WINGS OF THE DOVE  
IF CHRIST IS ALL IN ALL

Texts on Sunday, October 28, 2012

Isaiah 53; Colossians 3: 5-11

SINCE LAST JULY, here at The Riverside Church we have been weighing how our faith can guide and goad us to understand and act on issues over which we Americans find no joined will to move to solutions. The series has been called WINGS OF THE DOVE to invoke a holy desire to learn something of the deepest values in those we oppose, for if we might ever fly over the evils we deplore, somehow the two wings must beat together.

We close the series today thinking about racism. As a people, we can barely talk about it, yet it touches virtually everything that has gone wrong in America. The love of war for the sake of the power and money it makes flow; the love of power by and for the few; the hatred of what is different or foreign; the hatred of real education, real food, real wages, real medicine, real women, real wealth in a commonwealth in the real world—in all these, racism is implicated. Does it ever change, does it dry up, does it ever sag? Has Christian faith anything to do with courage for a better way?

Last summer, my wife and I traveled to Savannah, where, at the Telfair Museum, she was opening an exhibition of her extraordinary quilts—quilts expressive of beloved community and possibility for people society ignores. She had lots to be doing; me, not so much. So, with some direction from a man who is a force in that city to effectively connect anyone with what really matters, I started exploring the story of Savannah's slave trade.

But Savannah doesn't want to tell that story, and neither do the tourists from every corner of the country want to hear it, amidst the romance of Southern nights, the antebellum buggy rides and the stunning dwellings. Now, there in the heart of the busy City Market stands a simple old brick building, blank and unimportant. Up its stairway to auction on the bare wooden floor, thousands of slaves were moved in the decade before the Civil War ended. Early In 2009, historian Barry Sheehy spoke with a city news reporter about this edifice, once called the Montmollin Building. "It seems incongruous and wrong," Sheehy said, "that 'it's just business as usual' here, with absolutely no mention or mark of that part of the past. Yes, it's a sad chapter in the city's history, but how can you not acknowledge it?" This past winter, Sheehy released a book that gives up the tragic account of Savannah and the slave trade. But on that building, still there is no marker. On the old city's east side stands a tree called the Candler Oak. Perhaps 300 years old, perhaps witness to all our midnight evils, its limbs often bore the strange fruit of last century's lynchings. Of course, there is no marker.

It is not my aim to single out Savannah, nor even the South, as exemplar of racism. Rather, it is to have a plain parable of America's silence about its

tragic history. The works of racism are evil; the silence injects the evil deep into our relationships. Public officials will not speak it; religious leaders would rather have your dollars and dreams than help you feel for a faith fit for the world we really inhabit. Yet, my God, the story was there from the beginning. In his journals of 1520, Bartolomé de las Casas, the young priest who accompanied the ships of Cristobal Colombo on his expeditions to the New World, calculated in horror that in a mere fourteen years, the works of the great explorer slaughtered three million human beings through war, slavery, and disease. However off his calculation may be, how did we ever manage a happy October holiday in his name, or ever associate the work of Jesus Christ with the night Columbus brought upon the natives of these lands? Only through silence.

When a people cannot speak the truth, what fears stop the tongue? What needs drive resistance to responsibility, acknowledged in a word of repentance? Is the Christian religion a help or a hindrance? In the decades after the Civil War, when lynching was free and the Indian wars in full sway, the hymns of white America flowed with blood. Listen. From 1876: "Oh! precious is the flow / That makes me white as snow / No other fount I know / Nothing but the blood of Jesus." From 1899: "Would you be whiter, much whiter than snow? / There's pow'r in the blood, pow'r in the blood. / Sin-stains are lost in its life-giving flow; There's wonderful pow'r in the blood." And from 1912: "In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine, A wondrous beauty I see." Knew they not what they did?

O, religion! How you vex your God, using the Holy Name to seal you whitely in your sins. There is indeed power in blood! In vast rivers, the white Christian nations have made that power flow to themselves from the bodies of the bloodied across every continent. In the 1930s, during the angriest mood of his development, Langston Hughes sent part of a poem from Harlem right up this very hill. "Goodbye, Christ" the poem is called. "They've sold you to many / Kings, generals, robbers, and killers— / Even to the Tsar and the Cossacks / Even to Rockefeller's Church. / Even to The Saturday Evening Post. / You ain't no good no more. / They've pawned you / Till you've done wore out."

O religion! I believe our political confusion is but a symptom following from of our religious decadence, which in turn follows from white racism, driven by the fear of an elite class to lose power. It's an old story. One of the strongest patterns of sin showing up in the Bible is this tendency of religious traditions toward decadence. Humans abandon the mystical hope of founders and reformers either through utter despair of spiritual help or through placing all confidence in money and power, as many Americans do. When Isaiah of Babylon wrote his song of the suffering servant, he faced there in that city of exile just these two kinds of spiritual decay. Exiled for fifty years from home, too many of his people had either given up on the LORD and settled for Babylon's god and the chance to make some money; or were so defeated in spirit

that their personal and social integrity were rotting away.

To them Isaiah wrote a love song—a hope song—so strange and so open with meanings that no rabbi or scholar or poet or pew seat can ever comprehend its whole blessing. We Christians hear Christ in its every word, and it is good to do so—provided we do not doubt God’s freedom to rework God’s word any way God will. For surely Isaiah meant at least this: that his people in Babylon were themselves the servant who had suffered for the sake of all Israel; that the evil they had endured was now about to end, and could therefore be given a new meaning; that they should stand on their broken and wearied legs and begin the long walk home; that the whole diaspora of Jews, and all the world besides, should now see that at the hand of the LORD God, the future is open; for “out of his anguish the servant shall see light; the righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and bear their iniquities.”

Never mind that this word may only have worked its healing for a generation before it began to fail. It is always thus. Somehow, though, the song remained vivid to some of that people and thus became the lens by which the early church saw Jesus’ suffering appearing with cosmic significance. In the same way now, the Holy Spirit sweeps to our side with a word for our times: Do not salt away the words of the prophet within the wounds of the dying Jesus and walk away. If he is risen, if Christ is all in all, then the words of the prophet must also rise to life again, whenever they crucify any servant of the Lord.

Therefore, let us get about the business of redemption. Let’s not suppose that suffering redeems through some magical transaction, with God in a heavenly box office accepting tokens of suffering as the price of admission to the eternal banquet. Not at all. When suffering has a redemptive power, its work is far more beautiful and strange. It works upon the ignorant, terrified racist conscience to shock him with his own brutality; to see that he was blind; and then to see them whom he has despised and tortured and lynched and crucified. A redemptive power works upon the sufferer, too, to give her confidence that she is beloved and whole, beyond all human mismeasure. But here’s the catch: Redemption of conscience only works sometimes. This is where you come in, O church of faithful speech.

It is to you now to re-enact all the words of the prophets and all the sufferings of Christ. Do not leave the words to try to crawl out of an old book. Do not imagine that after Jesus, never again came a suffering servant who, “by a perversion of justice was taken away . . . cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.” To the contrary, all the peoples of color, not alone here in America, have been the crucified servant at the hands of white power. What awaits, then, is a chorus of Christian voices of all color and all timbre proclaiming to the powers and principalities, which are principally white, that a real redemption is possible for the powerful and the privileged; if we who have that power—it, who use it and abuse it and fear to

lose it—will receive that word of release which the suffering peoples have tendered and offered and continue to offer from generation to generation. Then we will know the meaning of Reformation for our own time.

It is my belief that unless those aligned with structures of power and wealth undergo this kind of repentance and accept this kind of redemption of conscience, the alternative will prove disastrous for all. Moreover, I believe that in America, Christians primarily have the language to proclaim this redemption—because they have access to the symbols of hope in Christ on which our civilization has depended for two millenia. In this sense, all the intractable political divisions you can name are linked to one hope, that the powerful, who concede nothing without a demand, might respond to a demand from the powerless, for justice; and that they feel, within that demand, the possibility of their own redemption and the power of a commonwealth in their repentance.

Professor James Cone has just published a book called *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. There, he renders a jazz cantata on themes like these we've treated today. His thought begins with a simple, appalling observation that

During . . . 2,000 years of Christian history, [the Cross], the symbol of salvation, has been detached from any reference to the ongoing suffering . . . of "the crucified peoples of history." . . . Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together; until we can identify Christ with a "re-crucified" black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy. (p. xiv)

Deliverance—redemption—is the purpose of all that we have weighed in our sermons over several months. By means altogether partial and ambiguous, deliverance of a kind is finally the purpose of statesmanship as well, though its horizon is short. Still, we owe to our children leadership able to hold our highest hopes in the clearest language. In this way, Dr. Cone closes his book:

[White and black,] we were made brothers and sisters by the blood of the lynching tree, the blood of sexual union, and the blood of the cross of Jesus. No gulf between blacks and whites is too great to overcome, for our beauty is more enduring than our brutality. What God has joined together, no one can tear apart. . . Just as Jesus had no choice in his journey to Calvary, so black people had no choice about being lynched . . . Yet God took the evil of the cross and the lynching tree and transformed them both into the triumphant beauty of the divine. If America has the courage to confront the great sin and ongoing legacy of white supremacy with repentance and reparation, there is hope "beyond tragedy." (P. 166)

Our tongues are freed for truth. As the apostle wrote, there is no longer any need to "lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self . . . according to the image of the creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, slave and free; but Christ is all in all!" In that hope, let us prepare for our new birth of freedom.

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