

Sacred Ground Session 10: Becoming Beloved Community (Feb. 15, 2022)

This is the eleventh article in a series to provide an insight into what the participants in the first St. Luke's Sacred Ground Circle learned over the past year of work. We will be providing one article a week through the summer to try to broadly capture the material that was presented. This will be supplemented by the personal statements of Circle participants describing what the experience meant to them and how they believe the Holy Spirit is calling them to respond.

Note: This session has been extensively revised in the updated Sacred Ground curriculum released in March of this year. Our meeting was conducted under the previous curriculum and thus reflects the originally assigned readings and films.

We began by contemplating the inspiring words of 1 John 1: 5-10 with the message “God is light.” Living in that light, “*we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin. If we claim, ‘We don’t have any sin,’ we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from everything we’ve done wrong.*”

We then joined together in prayer, using the Collect for the End of Racial Prejudice developed by the Diocese of West Virginia:

One God, in Three Persons, creator of one human species, in many hues: all who pray to you are descendants of Adam and Eve, all members of one race called “human.” Forgive the blindness that causes our eyes to notice and magnify those things we regard as different from ourselves in others. Teach us to see clearly, that we, your children, are far more alike than we are different. Help us to put aside the racial prejudices imbedded within us, and to see within every person the Child of God you created, our sister or brother, destined for Glory. In the name of One who died for all persons, of all colors, Jesus Christ.” Amen.

This session was about arriving at the center of the spiritual labyrinth the group had been walking together for the past six months. It was described by the curriculum creators as being about coming home to God and each other, after having walked back through time and placed markers to notice and name the ways we humans have gone astray and the ways we have grievously hurt others and have been hurt. The group had walked through many chapters of racial oppression in the United States and our own relationships to it, our own pain and the pain of others.

The session was about repentance. The Hebrew concept of repentance is ***returning in sorrow***, and this is certainly a strong feeling that I had at this point in the journey. Deep sorrow that this legacy of racial animosity and oppression is part of our national story, something that has not only worked to hold back persons of color from being able to enjoy all the freedom and goodness of the beloved community that God intended for them, but has shaped the lives of my family, my community, and my church in negative ways as well. Sorrow, not guilt, pointing me ahead to the need for repentance, repair and forgiveness. Every participant expressed also feeling along the way the New Testament concept of repentance - ***metanoia*** (a spiritual change of heart) – causing us to want to turn around and walk in a new direction.

In the words of the curriculum’s developer, “Processes of repentance, repair, and forgiveness cannot be prescribed or insisted upon. They cannot be induced through internal or external applications of guilt, shame, or moralism. They must be chosen in freedom. They can be called forth in countless ways by the spiritual power of ***agape*** love – love of God, of neighbor, of stranger, and of self.”

This was the truly remarkable thing about our reflection on Howard Thurman's insights in his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Writing in 1935, at a time in which the Black community in the United States was still suffering under the crushing weight of Jim Crow laws and social ostracization, Thurman named this call to love as the high call not only for the "privileged", but principally and centrally for the "disinherited." He built on the unequivocal rejection of hatred as a response to oppression discussed in our previous Session and redirected attention to the central love-ethic that is the religion of Jesus. Love not only of those who look like you, live and worship with you, but love of all your neighbors, even those who may see themselves as your enemy. Thurman challenged the disinherited and the privileged alike to set in true motion the command to love one's enemy by seeking ways by which they could experience a common sharing of mutual worth and value, the first step towards agape love. "It takes concrete experience for this attitude of meeting a person where they are to develop; mere preaching of love of one's enemies or exhortations cannot accomplish this result," Thurman wrote. In this regard, we were reminded of the comment by Rev Martin Luther King, Jr. thirty-odd years later that the Sunday worship hour is the most segregated hour in America.

In the face of this clarion call to love our neighbors, the group revisited a document from one of the early sessions on Key Distinctions for Understanding Race and Racism (https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/01/key_distinctions.pdf). We shared how our understanding of racism had changed during the journey and how we as individuals and a congregation are inevitably bound up with issues of race, racialization and racism. Drawing on the insights of Jim Wallis, founder of the Sojourner community and magazine, we recognized racism as a sin that seeks to undermine the very creation of human beings as being equally valued, loved and cared for in the eyes of God. (See Jim Wallis, *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*.)

We considered two films that documented examples of efforts to put the theology and practice of repentance into concrete effect. "Dawnland" shares the unfolding of a truth and reconciliation process under the auspices of the state of Maine for decades of child welfare policies that were destructive to Native families and culture. "Repairing the Breach" shares the efforts and some of the results of the Episcopal Church's grappling with its complicity in slavery – notably, the passage of an apology for slavery and the call for repair processes via resolutions **A123 Study Economic Benefits Derived from Slavery** and **A127 Recommit to Being Anti-Racists for the Next Three Triennia (Until 2018)** at General Convention in 2006.

Looking forward, we reflected on the recent steps taken by the Diocese of Virginia, following on the **Racial Audit of Justice** released by the National Church in April 2021 (https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/04/RR-Racial-Justice-Audit_Exec-Summary_ENG.pdf) to come to terms with, atone for and begin the process of making reparations for our collective sins of racism, including **R-10: A Resolution to Begin the Work of Reparations in the Diocese of Virginia** (https://www.thediocese.net/Customer-Content/www/CMS/files/Annual_Convention_2021/R-10_Reparation_Work_Resolution.pdf) and **R-4: Supporting the Impact Fund for Racial Justice and Healing** (https://www.thediocese.net/Customer-Content/www/CMS/files/R-4a_Impact_Fund_for_Racial_Justice_and_Healing_Corrected.pdf)

Finally, we each shared what the Sacred Ground experience had meant to us. Father Nick has captured some of these reflections and included them in the brief video that can be found in the Sacred Ground page of the St. Luke's website (<http://www.saintlukeschurch.net/sacred-ground>) We reflected on how we each feel called to tell the truth, proclaim the dream, practice the way of love, and be a repairer of the breach.

Recognizing that the National Church was at that time drafting a new final Session to focus on Next Steps, Father Nick led us in celebrating a Eucharist to express appreciation and gratitude for the journey together. The group reconvened in June, after the new final Session had been released. A summary of that meeting was

published in the June 23 Community News and will be repeated next week to remind people of where we currently are in the journey. All those willing to join with the first Sacred Ground circle as we define and implement our next steps are welcome. Please contact Skip or Marjy Jones. A second Sacred Ground circle will be organized for the fall/winter if there is interest among the parish.

As a reminder, Sacred Ground, a film-based dialogue series on race and faith, is one tool that supports the Episcopal Church's long-term commitment to racial healing, reconciliation and justice under the banner of Becoming Beloved Community. The race dialogue series is an attempt to be responsive to the profound challenges that currently exist in our society, focusing on the challenges that swirl around the issues of race and racism, as well as the difficult but respectful and transformative conversation about race. It invites participants to walk back through history to peel away the layers that brought us to today, and to do that in a personal way, reflecting on family histories and stories, as well as important narratives that shape the collective American story. It holds the vision of beloved community as a guiding star – where all people are honored and protected and nurtured and beloved children of God, where we weep at one another's pain and seek one another's flourishing.