

Sermons for the Journey

The Rev. Duncan A. Burns
Proper 27 – Year A - 2017
Sunday, November 12, 2017

**“Hear my teaching, O my people; *
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
That which we have heard and known,
and what our forefathers have told us, *
we will not hide from their children.
We will recount to generations to come
the praiseworthy deeds and the power of the LORD, *
and the wonderful works he has done.**

In 2003, I served as clergy at Christ Church in Alexandria Virginia. I had the honor and privilege of being ordained to the priesthood by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. One of my assignments as clergy was to drive Archbishop Tutu to visit schools in the DC area. He was constantly in demand by politicians, leaders, and churches, but he preferred to speak to children because he felt Christ’s love could change their lives. One day we were visiting a grammar school and Archbishop sat on the ground with the kids. He had a wonderful sense of humor and the ability to relate with young children. He proceeded to tell the children about Rosa Parks and have a discussion about racial inequality.

He told them that Rosa Parks was a seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama. When she entered the bus that she rode to work every day, she was required to pay at the front of the bus and then leave the bus to enter in the rear of the bus in the colored only section in the back of the bus. One rainy day she paid the fare, left the front entrance, and headed for the rear entrance of the bus. The bus driver left before she could get to the rear entrance and she was left standing in the rain. On December 1, 1955 she got on the bus after a long day of work. She sat down in the "colored section" of the bus. After a few stops the “whites-only section" of the bus filled up. The driver (who had once left her in the rain) ordered Rosa Parks and three others to stand so that a few white folks could sit down. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat. She was arrested, fined in court, and fired from her job. A boycott of the bus system lasted 381 days and America began to deal with the racial inequality issue, which we are still dealing with 62 years later.

Today’s Psalm is about justice and mercy. Psalm 78 is a creative retelling of Israel’s story. God is constantly in tension between justice and mercy. The human race has always followed God’s gracious acts with human acts of disobedience. We need to recall God’s gracious acts, and we need to tell the stories of human injustice so that our children may learn from our mistakes.

Archbishop Tutu told mostly stories of forgiveness and grace in South Africa and stories of justice and mercy in America. I am humbled by the power of his witness each and every day of his life. While we may understand that racism was the norm in the fifties, can we see that there is still work to be done?

In today's Gospel we get a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven, which is the in breaking of God's mercy and love from Heaven down to earth. In today's parable, ten bridesmaids are waiting for their bridegroom. They do not know when he is coming. Since he comes at an unexpected time, some are prepared and ready and some have to go to the store for more oil. The message is to be prepared and to persevere at all times. My question is, "What exactly should we be doing as we await the coming of the Kingdom of God?"

Today's Psalm makes the argument that we must tell our children the stories of God's grace and mercy. At St. John's one of main areas we focus on is our children. We proclaim that our children are our treasure. This morning, I told Desmond Tutu story to our children. I will share the story with the next generation, and I pray they will tell the story to their children until God's Kingdom of justice and mercy prevails. The oil in our lamps is teaching by word and example the love of Jesus Christ.

This week, we will send 75 shoeboxes to needy children all over the world. Children in Puerto Rico will be without clean water for months and without electricity until next summer. Some of our shoeboxes will go to those children, as a sign of our love. Children who are sick in the hospital will receive gifts that I brought to the convention on Friday. If you have children, I urge you to pack a box this week with them and drop it off by next Sunday.

We need to care for all the children on this planet because God loves the little children and part of our mission at St. John's is to teach our children about the love of God. If we are generous, they will likely be generous. If we are caring, they will likely be caring. If we strive for justice and equality, they strive for it. If we teach them about the love of God, they will likely teach their children about the love of God.

People are becoming more anxious about the greed, hatred, and violence that we face in our world today. Scripture tells us that acts of human disobedience are not new. We are asked to persevere by doing what we discern that God is calling us to do. We are blessed with a growing congregation and as we close out our Stewardship drive, the vestry is preparing a ministry plan that focuses on spreading the Love of God.

As a parish, we will persevere in teaching racial reconciliation to the next generation. For me, the metaphor of oil is teaching our children the love and mercy of God. By our hospitality, by supporting one another, and by outreach to those in need, we teach the love of God. God asks us to do these things on a consistent basis until we meet Christ face to face.

You are called to glorify God in all places and at all times. You are called to be attentive to those in need and to watch carefully. You are called to shine the light of God's love so that it will shine bright enough for future generations. You are called to pass the torch of God's love at St. John's that has been passed for the last 272 years.

Desmond Tutu focused on children because it is what scripture teaches us to do. In the Gospel of Mark:

“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them” (Mark 10:13-16).

In the Gospel of Matthew:

“He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me’” (Matthew 18:2-5).

My mother asked me what I was preaching about this week. I told her that my focus was on Psalm 78. She laughed and told me that she had just given a spiritual autobiography on her early years. She told the story of her grandmother, a full blood Muskogee Indian, who had taught her the words of Psalm 78 as a child. My great grandmother told her that it was essential that we teach God's grace and mercy to our children. She told her about the people of Israel and how God did many acts of grace for them, but how they often turned to human disobedience. She talked to all her grandchildren and great children and taught us how to pray to Jesus Christ, who was our close and personal friend. I owe my faith to Mother Boo, my grandmother, and my mom. I will teach the story of Abraham to our 61 nursery school children this week at Children's Chapel. My daughter and my wife teach Sunday school at St. John's because it is so important. Desmond Tutu taught me that teaching faith to our children is about the most important thing that we can do in our lives.

I ask you to commit to witnessing your faith to the children of the next generation. Join me in caring for those children in the world that are in need and teaching them about Jesus Christ, who loves the little children. Jesus died on a cross that we might have faith and share that faith with the next generation. We are called to persevere in humility and gratitude as we witness to the next generation the forgiveness, resurrection, and love of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**