

WORN OUT ALTARS TOO WELL DEFENDED

A Sermon Delivered by

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text> Romans 12:9-10: **9** Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; **10** love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

W.E.B. DuBois would refer to the reality of being Black in America as “living behind a veil.” I first glimpsed that veil as a freshman in college at Stetson University in 1972. I have shared this incident with you before but it is so instrumental in my development and my sense of what the Gospel is that I again share it with you. It is a story about a beautiful child named William. He and I met in a simple Baptist church that resided near the campus in Deland, Florida. In 1972, I was 18 years old and he was ten.

That little church I attended had begun a bus ministry in an effort to grow the church. The leaders had apparently planned for everything except the possibility that Black children would get on the bus and come to church. William was one of those children and he and I became good friends. He would always sit with me in worship. At some point, I found out through the grapevine that the bus ministry was going to be ended; the deacons and leaders did not want a “mixed” church [41 years later there are still those, black and white, who do not want a mixed church]. This stunned me. I had not personally encountered such blatant racism before. I could not conceive how William was perceived to be a threat. One Sunday soon after finding out about the plan to end the bus ministry, William and I stood together for the invitation hymn, the last hymn of the service where people are encouraged to give their lives to Christ and join the church. I felt a tug at my elbow and looked down at William, thinking he was going to ask me what time it was. Instead he looked into my eyes and asked, “Is God really hearing us?”

That moment crushed my naiveté and nearly overwhelmed my faith. Here was a child wondering if God could hear him when the truth was, the adults could not and would not hear him. I could not reconcile the bigotry of adults in that little church with the innocence of this child. I walked out of that church and never returned.

About the time same time, I had encountered the thought of Martin Luther King, Jr. On a small, beautiful campus in the South, I was coming to grips with the racist condition of our country. I will never forget and always be grateful that a university ripped open the veil. I awakened not only to the fact that I was a White person, but I realized that having grown up sheltered was a luxury not afforded Black children in this country. If you are African-American, you find out very early that the country identifies itself over and against you. My having come to an awareness of my racial identity late in life is somewhat touching since it speaks to the truth that my parents and my home life was not racist, but ultimately it is a sorrowful truth. For I certainly had not heard a preacher condemn racism from the pulpit

nor had I any inkling of just how complicit the Church had been in slavery and other forms of oppression throughout its history. I could not articulate the implications of our history in the crushing crucible of racism, but I was waking up. Forty-one years after entering college, I now pastor an interracial, primarily African-American church and have taught for sixteen years at Howard University School of Divinity. I wish William knew this. Perhaps it is enough that I know it.

Today we are celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington. I was ten years old at the time of that march. Those who gathered here to demand jobs and freedom did not know me nor I them and yet, it should not escape us or glide past us that the devoted actions of a courageous people can and have enormous consequences. Do not give into the notion that your act of devotion, your courage cannot change things. Through the corridors of five decades, the actions of those marchers and the words of its prophet continue to echo and resonate within our heart's fondest ideals and dreams for a better world, a more just nation.

When in college I listened to Dr. King's sermons or read his essays, I realized that his affirmation of freedom included me, that his celebration of the liberating Gospel of Christ also included my liberation. This is a fundamental fact of my spiritual journey and life. I grew up in that freshman and sophomore year at Stetson. I became aware of how in America, we taught a history that celebrated independence, liberty and justice for all while at the same time denying these treasures to African-Americans; I became aware of how the Christian church was a willing conspirator, working hand in hand with the government to damage the psyches and spirits of Black children by telling them they were less than full citizens; I understood for the first time that the Church really did not believe the very gospel it preached, for if it had believed, then slavery would have ended the moment the first slaves were brought onto these shores; had it believed in the crucified Lord it preached about week after week, it would not have harbored men who would go out each week and lynch and crucify men simply because they were Black. I was liberated, thank God, from that kind of Christianity, that kind of evil religion which mouths in sanctimonious and holy tones its self-righteousness, while at the same time hating and destroying the lives of others. Were it not for Black history--a history of men and women who loved Jesus in spite of what a racist church had done to them; a history of black women and men who defied the oppressive and evil instruments of religious persecution and celebrated in vibrant and enthusiastic ways a God who heard the cry of his people in Egypt and told pharaoh to *let my people go!*; had it not been for the history of a Black church that insisted that justice roll down like waters; then I would have thrown out my faith and eaten the porridge of cynicism. I understand why people walk out of churches and swear to never enter them again. Using what is holy to lash, diminish, imprison and even annihilate people is the vilest violation of God's name. The only act that comes close to that kind of blasphemy is when a person who has found their freedom turns around and denies it to others. A dynamic that is very much at work, mind you, in both black and white churches that dehumanize persons of minority sexual orientation.

In my journey, God has led me to places where the dialogue between White and Black is alive and intense. Very often I hear the poet, Langston Hughes, calling to both Black and White:

*Not me alone
I know now
But all the whole oppressed
Poor world,
White and Black,
Must put their hands with mine
To shake the pillars of those temples
Wherein false gods dwell
And the worn out altars stand
too well defended.¹*

Riverside Baptist Church has heard and responded to this poetic call to action. We are putting our hands together to dismantle the altar of the false god of America that is sometimes worshipped by all-White and all-Black congregations; the god who could make a billion worlds and a billion galaxies but apparently cannot inspire people to sit in the same place and worship together; the god who insists that we are too different to understand each other; the god who prefers division to unity; the god who is not spirit but who is made in our image. It is time to dismantle worn out altars and stop defending them. Do not overlook just how powerful it is that we worship together. People can sneer at this, as a famous Black clergyman told me when he referred to our little church as a “blended” church. I’m fine with calling us blended but I prefer another word: Gospel. We have taken seriously the Gospel of Christ who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility and made us one. You can go on spending your life defending the worn out altar of segregated worship but I won’t spend another second of my life defending it. I turned my back on that altar thirty-nine years ago in Deland, Florida.

I believe in what we do here because it is a daring attempt to tell the truth about ourselves. It is a daring attempt to believe in the Gospel that makes us one people. And it is certainly a dare in a racist culture to believe in each other and assert that we, in our splendid and glorious diversity are those people who have One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism. Listen to what the Apostle Paul instructed the Christians in Rome to do, *Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.*

Genuine love. What is that? Genuine love means I love you for who you are, not what I wish you were. It means I spend as much time listening to you as I do talking to you. Genuine love means more than a nod or a wink, but it means being there for each other when the times are difficult. It means loving when everyone else around us is pushing us to hate each other, distrust each other. It means wanting the best for each other and doing our best by each other. Be genuine in love, not artificial, condescending or paternalistic. Let love be authentic. This is what I love about our church and it is why I am passionate about making sure we pass it on to another generation. I believe we are trying to practice genuine love here in this church. The next time you are asked by a

¹ Langston Hughes, "Union," originally published in *New Masses*, September 1931, but cited here in Faith Berry's *Langston Hughes* (CT: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1983), p. 131.

Walmart coupon carrying Christian what programs you have here, tell them you have one: we're trying to live out the first great commandment and a second one very much like it, we're trying to love God with all of our heart, mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. We don't have an ATM in the house, we don't have a snack bar, we don't have a sunglass hut, gun shop or car shop; nor do we have shelves of programs offering deep discounts for cheap grace. What we do have is a firm belief that if we can just place our bodies and minds in a sacred place where Christ is honored and people are called to live as Christ lived, we just might be healed and heal the world. This is what we have, the threefold "program" of Jesus Christ: we teach, preach and heal. That is program enough.

Hate what is evil. Did you know you're allowed to hate? We talk about love most of the time and we should. But there is a time to hate. What should we hate? Evil. Hate that which denies the humanity and dignity of people. This is why John Brown was such a hero to abolitionists and slaves. He did more than talk about love, he gave up his life for those who were enslaved. I like what David Thoreau said about John Brown when the rest of the country was calling him crazy or treasonous. Thoreau said, *"The slave-ship is on her way, crowded with its dying victims; new cargoes are being added in mid-ocean; a small crew of slaveholders, countenanced by a large body of passengers, is smothering four millions under the hatches, . . . [John Brown was] a man who did not wait till he was personally interfered with or thwarted in some harmless business before he gave his life to the cause of the oppressed.*

I cite this example of John Brown to remind us that there have always been some in our midst who knew how to love genuinely and to hate evil. I offer him as well as an example of a White man in this country who dared to tell the truth about himself, his nation and the world. The sad and pathetic truth is that most people went placidly through their lives apathetic to and unconcerned for the oppression of others. The sad and pathetic truth is that this nation has always harbored its own terrorists. On that point, would you allow me to quote from a sermon I preached the Sunday after 9/11? This is an advantage of being an older pastor. I have a lot of sermons. Here is what I said on that Sunday, September 16, 2001, when we were awakening to the truth that Al Qaeda had attacked the twin towers in New York and the Pentagon; I proclaimed:

America has its own terrorists and it has in its history from the outset been involved in terrorism. We should remember that so that we are sober in our assessments of the challenges set before us.

African-Americans know that history in vivid and real ways. White supremacist Christians carried out a brutal campaign of terror against African-Americans. And the moderate and liberal and upper class citizens of this country tolerated it and turned their backs. We didn't have an anti-lynching law until 1929. So it is with a measure of skepticism that we receive the message from our President and the Congress that they are willing to throw every resource at hand toward the elimination of this threat of terrorism. We know our history and we know that those same resources, from sheriffs to soldiers were not made available for the

protection of African-American citizens. We were slow and reluctant to change that history.²

Cornel West asserted, in his popular book, Race Matters, that changing things will take both White and Black together. We will not accomplish justice in this land alone or separate. West's assertion is not far from the poetry of Langston Hughes. And it is that truth that energizes me as the pastor of this church. For here we have such a coalition. Here we have found the law of love is able to overcome hatred and to bind us in bonds of human freedom, dignity and courage. Say what you will about what our church should be doing and what programs it should be offering, but may it be said of this church at Seventh and Maine Avenue that we tore down the worn out altars; may it be noted about us, "behold, how they love one another." Black History, Church History, Blended History—these are woven into the seamless garment of Christ, our Lord and Savior. March on. March on. Keep your eyes on the prize. March on.

Amen. +

² Michael Bledsoe, "A Call to Prayer," a sermon delivered to Riverside Baptist Church, Washington, DC, September 16, 2001.