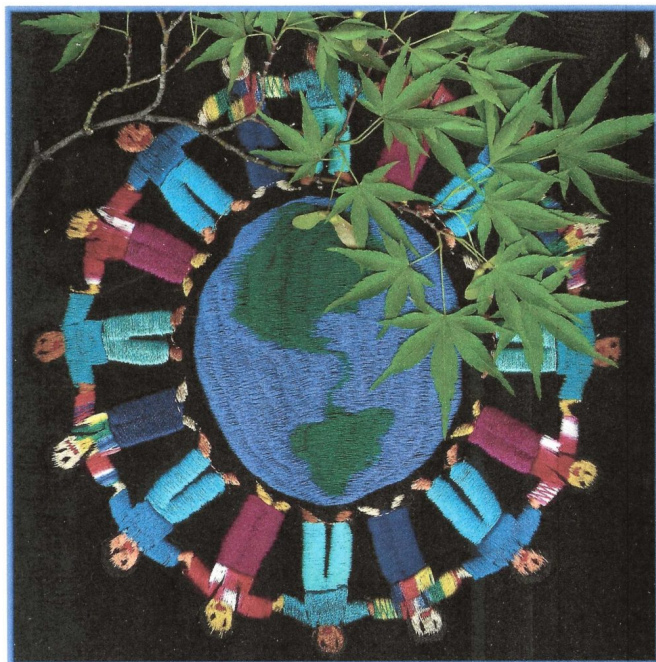


“Transformation Through Truth and Grace” by Paul Holmes



The 7th Sunday of Easter

May 21, 2023

Prayer: God, help me to not screw up too badly this morning.

Except for playing football in high school and college, I've never seen myself as fully competent to succeed in life. Per my own way of thinking, I've always fallen short. I'm not tall enough. I've got bad hair. My voice is not authoritative. I'm not sophisticated. I lack charisma. I'm a slow reader. And perhaps most importantly, I don't really understand what I'm talking about. It follows then that whatever I say this morning will not satisfy. It will not be sufficient.

Despite that opening paragraph, I am OK. This sermon is not a pathetic appeal for pity. Rather it's a sermon about two certainties that have been constant supports my whole life and

that have allowed me to not only cope with my inadequacies, but to survive and thrive. The first certainty is God's gift of grace. The second is the reality of white privilege that has benefitted me my whole life.

Both are unsolicited and offered to me whether I'm deserving or not. One, God's grace, is available to all and springs from divine love and goodness. For reasons that I cannot explain, I have always had complete confidence that I have access to and have been blessed by God's grace. The other, white privilege is chance at birth. It is perverse and it profanely denies a basic concept of Judaism and Christianity, that we are all created in God's image. From this pulpit, nearly a year ago, I called for white Christian repentance – that's kind of my theme again today, but with adding a possible way forward.

Nearly each week, since the murder of George Floyd, 3 years ago this week, 7 to 12 Seekers have faithfully stood vigil on the sidewalk out front. One of the signs raised each week reads "END WHITE SUPREMACY." Why would Seekers call for the end of white supremacy? In their book "Reparations: A Christian Call for Repentance and Repair," Duke Kwon and Gregory Thompson offer a partial response, focusing on the wickedness of white supremacy's sustained theft of truth, theft of power and theft of wealth.

In past sermons, several Seekers have spoken of America's two foundational sins – the sin of chattel slavery and the sin of indigenous removal and genocide – as well as the complicity and complacency of white Christian churches therein. These sins and their related histories of othering, stereotypes, dehumanizing, theft, control, demonization, and racial violence have endured since our inception and continue to gnaw away at us as a people and us as a nation. Over the past 20

years, nine states have apologized for slavery, and in 2008, the House of Representatives passed a resolution apologizing for slavery and subsequent discriminatory laws, but that resolution died in the Senate. As a nation, we have never confessed, never repented or asked forgiveness. As Christian churches, we have seldom done so.

(Pp 117) – For me, one of the most disturbing stories in the “Repatriations” book is one discussing how many Christian churches in the antebellum south were themselves enslavers. Those churches not only paid their expenses but built church wealth by purchasing and “owning” enslaved people, leasing them out to the highest bidders. Please just sit with that for a moment, these so-called Christian churches as some of the most abhorrent enslavers.

Rather than actively acknowledging and truthfully confronting such realities in our history, our white dominated governments and power structures have historically chosen a more positive and mythical national narrative of freedom for all, Manifest Destiny, American exceptionalism and generally seeing the U.S. on the side of right and justice, on God’s side.

I am a product of those mythical narratives; one of those who largely bought into that narrative. Until recently, I have seldom wrestled with competing perspectives and allegiances. Uncritically, I’ve conformed to white cultural norms in my language, mannerisms, sense of rightness, and trust in our institutions of education, finance, housing, economics and justice.

Most of my life, I have felt a strong pride in America and I spent much of my career extoling America’s goodness and values around the world. That was not only my country’s history, but also my personal history. I still believe in American goodness, but I now find myself fearful that our goodness and our ability to move forward are eroding because of our refusal to truthfully confront our history. And as a part of our

history, I explicitly include America's white Christian churches. I now find myself committed, fixated even, to unlearning those myths and relearning and acknowledging my country's true history in order to preserve our remaining goodness and to help make ourselves better.

How are we to move forward? One sentence from Bryan Stevenson, Director of the Equal Justice Initiative offers a clue for me. He said "Reconciliation with a difficult past cannot be achieved without truthfully confronting history and finding a way forward that is thoughtful and responsible." That concept was central to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process and it is central to the movement towards restorative justice. The process of reconciling with a difficult past helps uncover and acknowledge what has happened, pain and all, thereby opening the way for tears, forgiveness and healing.

Another clue as to how to move forward comes from South Africa's Rev. Alan Storey, son of Rev. Peter Storey. On Good Friday, Alan preached a sermon entitled "Alchemy of the Cross." In that sermon he acknowledged that facing the truth of our history and the painful truths that confront us each day is, for many, too much to bear. We all can understand that feeling amidst the truths of an endless stream of hate and horror – mass murders, abuse, bombings, starvations, assassinations, kidnappings, and on and on. Sometimes our minds, bodies and spirits just scream out in pain.

These truths, taken by themselves can be paralyzing. As Alan Storey states, "[Such] Truth without grace is too much to bear." At the same time, he continues, accepting "Grace without truth is cheap, meaningless." Many of today's powerbrokers urge us to turn away from the truth. Don't teach it in our schools or print it in our books. Certainly, that would be easier and less painful. But turning our backs on the truth prevents us from moving forward. "If there is anything that will save us," Storey continued, "it is the

alchemy of truth and grace that saves us.” Understanding alchemy as transformation, he is saying that truth and grace, acting together, is transformative. Acknowledging the truth opens the door to grace and God’s transforming power.

I believe that the words of Bryan Stevenson and the words of Alan Storey, are a prescription – for me as an individual, for us as a nation, and for us as the Christian church in America. We can move forward; we can find grace by seeking and acknowledging truth. Truth and grace, coming together at the same time. The song begins “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” There you have it, the alchemy of truth and grace in the first line.

Likewise, we can hold love of church and country at the same time that we critique church and country.

Kwon and Thompson believe that all of us who have benefitted from white supremacy’s theft of truth, power and wealth have a responsibility to help redress the harm caused. And they see Christian churches as good places to start. They cite three reasons why “the Christian church in America bears a singular responsibility to address the historical thefts of white supremacy.” Those reasons are (pg. 101):

- First, the church’s fundamental mission; its purpose is to love, and in their words, to “become agents of repair;”
- Second is the church’s complicated history of faithfulness and good on one hand, and on the other, “its failure in the face of White supremacy;” and
- The third reason is the church’s “moral tradition, particularly its ethics of restitution and restoration, [that] equips it with the spiritual resources with which to address this history.”

In other words, they believe the church has the capacity to

transform; the capacity to transform itself and the capacity to transform the communities and world in which it serves. My sense is that, as sincere and committed adherents to the teachings of Jesus, we have no choice but to acknowledge the truth, repent and to work tirelessly to end white supremacy, and gratefully welcome God's grace, inching us towards reconciliation and love. That work must be central to a faithful Christian calling.

Just acknowledging or confessing my white privilege doesn't accomplish a thing. In fact, I fear it might even sound boastful or performative. Acknowledgement by itself does not help those harmed by white theft of truth, power and wealth. By itself, it does not address racial inequality or tear down systems of white supremacy. But it is a beginning, encouraging us to un-learn those myths and re-learn our country's true history. And that learning may compel us towards redress, repair and reconciliation.

Yes, we already have examples of redress and repair: EJI's Legacy Museum in Montgomery, AL; a network of civil rights museums expanding around the country; specific universities and churches acknowledging their roles in slavery and racial violence. Yet, 247 years after the Declaration of Independence, and more than 2,000 years after Jesus' birth, we are still only at the beginning. White supremacy is not a thing of the past, it has long endured, endures today and will not be quickly dismantled. Here in America, the civil rights gains of the past are constantly under assault today.

Seekers' theme for Easter is "So That We May Be One." Sadly, our reality today is that we are a nation divided. We are a people divided. We of the Christian church are divided. These current divides are symptoms of a critical deficit of grace. Our hope lies in divine intervention, in the hope of resurrection, in the transformative alchemy of truth and grace.

Kwon and Thompson believe the Christian church has the capacity to transform. How do we make this a Christian movement in America? How do we make the message of that sign “End white supremacy” central and integral to who we are? Kwon and Thompson believe it is our choice. They write, (pp. 191 – “Reparations, after all, is not driven by the bondage of shame but by the freedom that comes from living in light of the truth.” (pp. 178 “...the call of reparations is not merely for a check to be written or for a debt to be repaid but for a world to be repaired.”

I would like to close by reading a prayer by Rev. Naomi Washington Leapheart. She is the Director for Faith-Based and Interfaith Affairs for the city of Philadelphia and her prayer is entitled ARE WE READY TO BE REPARATIONS PEOPLE? Sallie read it months ago as our prayer for peace and justice. It feels even more paramount today.

ARE WE READY TO BE REPARATIONS PEOPLE? – by Rev. Naomi Washington Leapheart

We begin, O God in confession.

We confess that we have taken your name in vain.

We have invented white supremacy in your name.

We have colonized first nations in your name.

We have brutalized black people in your name.

We have worshiped in the morning and lynched in the afternoon.

We have hidden our weapons in your words.

We have cheered for the demise of the vulnerable.

We have dismissed the tears of those we made invisible.

We confess that this nation has left her debt unpaid for far

too long.

We have covered up those who serve as our national mirrors telling us the truth about ourselves.

We have gas lit the communities that are in fact our conscience.

We have punished those who protest.

We've projected our national shame about our national history onto the bodies that remind us of our sins.

We have converted our national guilt into national immobility.

We confess that the United States is addicted to her own mythology, addicted to dominating power, addicted to reaping where we have not sown.

So Forgive Us.

Forgive us God, but we don't want any cheap grace.

We want mercy that we have earned by our living.

So God, help us earn our mercy.

Help us be rooted in courage.

Help us see that even if we are not guilty, we are responsible. * Help us be relentless in our pursuit of the whole truth.

Help us heal from the wounds we can't even see.

Help us keep the faith.

Help us stay in the fight and then help us write some checks, release some resources.

THIS time in God's name For Justice.

Help us redeem our own souls – AMEN