

## **The Language of Change** (Transcript)

July 19, 2020 – Year A Proper 11, 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 8:12-25 | St. Columba's, Inverness | The Rev. Ari Wolfe

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*Every now and again*, the apostle Paul says something that I can really... sink my proverbial teeth into. Often, like today, it's hidden within a larger body of work, buried among words and opinions that can be hard to sift through; or distracting or even disturbing enough that we might miss it. The shining gem to me in today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans was,

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Father Vincent pointed out last week that we modern-day Christians don't always look to the context in which a piece of scripture was written and we tend to see dualism in places where it wasn't necessarily intended. Surrounded by statements that may sound elitist, judgmental or dualistic, it can be easy to miss the larger, universal message.

We read admonitions to separate sheep from goats, wheat from weeds, and grain from chaff - all meaning “good” people from “bad” - and these can get taken rather literally. And of course, the “good people” are the ones that look and speak and worship like we do, and the “bad people” are, well, everyone else. Given our worldview, our society, our ever-changing translations which come from our ever-increasing understanding of the world that Jesus and his earliest followers lived in, the conclusions we reach may make sense. But they aren't always accurate, and that can lead us astray - sometimes for many centuries running. As you're probably already thinking, this is not limited to Biblical scenarios.

For the “good” people, “the night is as bright as day,” we “have the first fruits of the Spirit,” and are led to “the way everlasting;” we are “glorified with Christ,” and “creation itself will be set free.” For the “bad” though,

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:14, NRSV translation.

there are *consuming fires, existential labor pains, groaning, wailing, and gnashing of teeth* - and all of those are just from today's readings.<sup>2</sup>

But as Fr. Vincent reminded us, the differences aren't always as stark as they would sound; we need to know more about what this letter would have sounded like to the people who heard it then... to understand the subtleties in meaning, to read between the lines and see what is meant, what is inferred.

Paul writes, "if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."<sup>3</sup> This is not actually about whether we are, as human beings, going to die at the end of our mortal life span; we are. This is about HOW we live our lives, and what we use to measure the value of the lives we live.

**"...all who are led** by the Spirit of God are children of God."

That doesn't mean, by the way, that each of us gets to decide - or even that the Church gets to decide - **who is** or **who is not** being "led by the Spirit," **who is** or **who is not** "good" or "righteous" enough, or "going to heaven"... That is between each person and their God.

I've been meeting with the Racial Justice group<sup>4</sup> over the past two weeks, and it would be hard to miss the connections. What is racism - especially anti-Black racism - if not an assumed and man-made dualism imposed to divide and separate out one group from another, to mark one group as "outside," "other," and "lesser-than," in order to elevate the other group in its own eyes?

I first began to take a real look at this when I was in seminary. One of the books we were asked to read for my preaching class was called *Tears We Cannot Stop: a Sermon to White America*, by Michael Eric Dyson. It is a brutal and condemning book that conveys a lot of hurt and anger, and I

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, NRSV translation.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:13, NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> The Racial Justice Forum began work using the 21-Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge © on July 3, 2020. Information and lists of resources we used can be found at <https://deaconsjourney.com/justice>

found it exceedingly challenging to read. I also thought, in my ignorance, that the author was being hyperbolic in his descriptions of police brutality, of the level of fear and the deeply painful everyday experiences that he described people of color going through.

It took a person of color in the class who was willing to correct me and to share some of their own experiences, for me to begin to understand how very differently we have experienced living in the same cities, going to the same school, worshiping in the same Church, driving on the same roads and even parenting children of a similar age. It was hard to hear; but it was necessary. I also got to sit with a very uncomfortable truth: that from the Black perspective, “well-meaning White People” (which category I’m sure I have been in for most of my life), can be a more frightening group for people of color to have to deal with than angry White supremacists - or even the KKK.<sup>5</sup>

The latter two are an obvious and loudly-defined threat - they make themselves known. The former tend to see themselves as “enlightened” and have no idea how much harm they cause. I say “they,” but I should really say “we” - until I have helped to bring about tangible change, I need to include myself in that group.

People of color have been oppressed in our country **systemically**, since its inception.<sup>6</sup> As I mentioned in the Forum this week, one of the things that really brought the message home to me and spurred me to action several weeks ago was a sign someone had at the protest that we hosted in Inverness; it said, “The system is not broken - it was built this way.” It was. And for those of us who are White, of European descent, **our** people did that. We need to own that. But that doesn’t have to be the way it is, moving forward. We all have the power to change *How Things Are Done* - in big ways, in little ways... and we need to do that, in whatever ways we can.

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<sup>5</sup> A question about this point came up in the discussion that followed. I did not add this in for shock value (though I was shocked myself when I first heard it), or to lead White people to a place of hopelessness - quite the opposite. I think it’s important for us to acknowledge and understand our part in this *from the perspective* of Black and Brown people, so that we can do something about it. If we don’t see, understand and acknowledge our own inherent biases, how can we hope to become part of the solution? Two great resources for learning about this are the books, **White Fragility**, by Robin DiAngelo, and **How to Be An Antiracist**, by Ibram X. Kendi.

<sup>6</sup> Many articles & other resources on this are posted at <https://deaconsjourney.com/justice/racial-justice-resources/>

A friend of mine exemplified this a few days ago, by contacting her congressperson about something that alarmed and outraged her. She lives outside of Portland, Oregon and shared on social media what is now all over the news: Not only is an uninvited federal police force **occupying** Portland against the wishes of local law enforcement and the state government, in the name of “keeping order,” the officers are now driving around the area in unmarked vehicles and picking up people they **suspect** of being protestors.

If someone pulled up to one of your siblings or one of your neighbors... to one of your parents or children in an unmarked car and forced them to get inside and drove away, you would call that... kidnapping. Right? These **are** our family, these are our neighbors, our “beloved community” whether we know them or not - and they’re being dangerously mistreated.

But I am also saddened and *ashamed* - which is a word you will very rarely hear me use - that it has taken this to mobilize us, to get White people uncomfortable enough with what’s going on around us that we feel the need to act. Because for Black and Brown people across our country, this is not anything new. For those who are living undocumented in this country, this is the fear they live with every day; this is what every day looks like in their world. This level of policing, of being treated as less-than, of violence from the people who should be offering protection - this is part of their everyday lived experience.

Jesus admonished us to “love our neighbors as ourselves.” Paul wrote that “**ALL** who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” In our Hebrew reading from Genesis today, we heard, “All the families of the earth shall be blessed in you.”

It’s time to stop thinking and acting in terms of “us and them” now, of those who are “worthy” or “unworthy,” and see that we are one human family. AND at the same time, if some members of our family are being bullied, hurt, and oppressed by other members, we need to stand with the one, against the other. This is not a time for sitting back quietly or patting each other on the back for how far the civil rights movement has come... because it isn’t yet far enough by half. Our United States Constitution declares that

the idea “that all men are created equal” is a self-evident truth. But until **all** people are treated as such, we all need to be up in arms.

There’s a quote that’s been sticking with me this week, as I spent time in prayer and mulled over the scriptures for this morning, as I prepared for Friday’s antiracism forum, who I shared this with, as I contemplated what’s going on in the world around us. This is from a Native American Episcopal Bishop from the Choctaw Nation, named Steven Charleston. He says,

If we have a voice we should use it... the Word we revere is not found in a book but in a voice. Our shared witness to what is true, what is good, what is right makes a difference. The prophetic is not the partisan. It is the **universal cry** of the common person speaking truth to power. It is *the vision of community translated into the language of change*. **To be silent is to be silenced.**