

March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:14a, 22-32, Ps. 16, 1 Peter 1:3-9, Jn. 20:19-31

The Rev. Phil Brochard, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Walnut Creek

Those of you who have heard me preach before know of my love for public transit advertisements and of bumper stickers. Both mediums try and boil their message to that one line that sticks to the roof of your mind like peanut butter in your mouth. Here's one that I've shared before and *still* find so potent for our time, "Last time we mixed Politics with Religion...People got burned at the Stake." When I first read the statement a few years ago, it gave me pause. So, I tried to read it in context. Luckily for me this person had dozens of other bumper stickers on their car so I had something to work with. After my research, I came to realize that this person was wary of a state-run religion dictating the life of all of its citizens. Which I can understand. The theocracies of the Taliban in Afghanistan recently and of Roman Catholicism in Europe historically are very clear reminders of that danger. Sometimes though, that same fear can drive us entirely away from the preaching of the liberating Word and of our call to serve as witnesses of Christ's Reconciliation in the World. We become so afraid of upsetting the fragile "order" of the world that we say nothing and do nothing. We keep ourselves locked up by fear, unable to step out in any direction at all.

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Does this remind you of a merry band that we've just heard about? Those of you that heard my sermon a week ago during the Easter Vigil know how significant this passage from John's Gospel is for me. You see, a similar fear gripped the disciples in Jerusalem one Sunday evening a few thousand years ago. John's Gospel shows these disciples in the house where they had been meeting, in that Upper Room—with the doors locked out of fear. Fear of reprisals against them, because they were followers of a convicted criminal who had confronted the state. Fear that those who had followed Jesus might start looking to them for further leadership. And yet, in their darkest hour, in their abject fear, Jesus appears. Through the locked doors, past the shaken disciples, directly into the room where they were meeting, and of all things, saying, "Peace be with you." And, possibly sensing the fear that the disciples felt, he proceeds to show them his wounds so that they might believe. And believe they did.

It was this belief in the Risen Christ that propelled them through the doors kept locked out of fear. It was this belief that he had conquered death and was back to show them that he was still with them that pushed them forward. And it was because of this, that in our reading today from Acts, we catch up with this group in a very different state of mind. It is Peter and standing with the eleven, preaching to the assembled crowd about the incredible, inescapable Good News. In the words that follow our famous text read at Pentecost, Peter witnesses to the gathered what the disciples have heard, felt and seen. Jesus of Nazareth, killed by the religious and political authorities was risen, freed from the shackles of death. To that they would witness to the ends of the earth. And no longer would their fear bind them.

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I have a good friend and colleague who serves as an Episcopal priest in Oxford, Mississippi at a parish, and as the Episcopal chaplain on the nearby campus. That campus, the University of Mississippi, or Ole Miss, that was a flashpoint in the Civil Rights Movement in this country. And that same state, seven years ago voted on a state referendum to remove the Confederate “Stars and Bars” from the corner of their state flag. And by a two-thirds majority they defeated the referendum. The rebel flag remains. But it wasn’t just the outcome of the referendum that grabbed my attention, it was the words that came from many of the people that deliberated about this decision that caught me.

It was words like these from one Norma Patton, then 58 years old, of Flowood, Mississippi. She said, "I like the old flag. It's silly to change something that's not broke. Changing it would just hurt race relations. I don't think anything helps that stirs it all up." It's that last sentence that caught me, "I don't think anything helps that stirs it all up." You see, stirring up is a dangerous proposition, one that is sure to draw controversy, and possibly change. Stirring it up troubles the waters and rocks the boat. And makes people uncomfortable. Makes me uncomfortable. Because friends, at the root of that statement, I think is fear. Fear of what has happened, what is happening and what might happen.

Now back to my friend serving as a priest in Mississippi. This friend recently preached a sermon about social separation, rich and poor, young and old, and yes, in that context, black and white. And in the middle of his sermon, a congregant grabbed his coat, stood up, and walked out the door. There was no mistaking this man’s intent. But it wasn’t until my friend the priest got up the courage to call the congregant and talk it out that more became clear. You see, in the midst

of this frustrated man's rant about preaching and race and the role of the Church, he came to what I think many people in America have thought, which was this, "What good is it to talk about race anyways, why can't we just leave it alone?"

Now friends, before we decide to ride off on our geographical high horse, remember this: bigotry, discrimination and racism can be just as potent in California, the Bay Area and Contra Costa County as they are in Oxford, Mississippi. I have a friend, an African-American, who moved here to the Bay from the Deep South when her son was a teenager. And after spending his high school and collegiate years in the Bay Area, he moved back down South. For him, in the South at least people would say things to his face, rather than act behind his back. The subtle racism of the West Coast was just as diabolical as the overt racism of the South, just more hidden. Friends, we have as much work to do as witnesses to the Kingdom of Heaven as anyone, and now is the time to do it.

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This is why I believe the recent speech by Senator Barack Obama is so critical. Let me be clear at the start. As a priest of this parish I have never publicly advocated for any candidate for office, local, state or national, and I don't plan on doing so now. But as your priest I feel deeply called to speak about the Good News of Jesus Christ and how it speaks to the issues of our time. I hope that by now you know that I truly try to leave partisan distractions aside, I don't care if you are Republican or Democrat, Libertarian or Green, Independent or Decline to State, I just care that you engage the words of Scripture with the world in which we live. And one of the issues that burns in my soul is that of racism in this country. From the beginning of the national discourse about the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's sermons I have been paying close attention to the content and manner of the deliberations. And I have come to believe that Senator Obama's words are ones that we cannot as Christians ignore. In his speech of March 18<sup>th</sup> he attempted to speak to *all* Americans and to name some truths that we often don't discuss, not in the workplace, not on the sidelines of the soccer fields, or at the health club, or even in the pews of a Godly place like St. Paul's in Walnut Creek. He spoke frankly about anger and frustration, about anxiety and resentment, and, of course, about fear.

It was because of his words and that of the dramatic encounter that the disciples had with Christ in that locked room that I have been re-converted to the work of racial reconciliation. And reminded that this work must be met head-on, with candor, humility and good will, in short,

through action and prayerful contemplation. It was in further reflection that I was given an answer to the frustrated congregant in Oxford, Mississippi, when he wondered, "What good can it do to bring all this up?" The good it can do, the good that we can do, you and I, the people of St. Paul's in Walnut Creek, California is to witness to the power of the Resurrection, to the all-encompassing Kingdom of God. We can help the world see that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free. That in the Risen Christ we are all beloved of God.

We can show to this broken world that the wounds of Christ, those of the nails and the spear, these wounds have been healed, can be healed, that through the cross, that which divides us has been, can be brought to wholeness. We can show the world that dialogue, honest and sometimes painful dialogue, can and must happen for healing, real healing to occur. Dear People of God, I believe that these conversations must start here, with us, even though as Senator Obama wisely counseled, they will not always come easily. Because in a place where we gather together regardless of where we've come from or the color of our skin, in a place where we gather together to proclaim one Word, one Lord, how can it be otherwise? How can we profess to be one body around this one table if we can't embrace all of our brothers and sisters of Christ to share the same bread and the same cup?

Friends, if the work of racial reconciliation *is* politics, then I believe we have *no choice* but to mix religion and politics. In fact, they have been mixed for a long time, but we must live into them. In the words of a preacher and theologian of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, "The church once changed society. It was then a thermostat of society. But today I feel that too much of the church is merely a thermometer, which measures rather than molds popular opinion." (The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, [A Testament of Hope](#)) It is time for us to help reset the temperature. This cannot mean that we act out of worldly power and domination as the driver of that bumper sticker rightly fears. In fact if we are to act as those who truly follow the Cross, our way will have to be that of humility, kindness, respect and love. But friends, if the Resurrection is to mean anything, those doors once locked out of fear, those doors have been thrown wide open. And it is time for us to walk through them, witnesses to a doubting world of the healing reconciliation of the Risen Christ.

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