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ABIDE IN PEACE

HEALING AND RECONCILIATION

A little book on liturgy

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Introduction

> *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*
>
> —Matt. 5:9

One of the places where I first learned what it meant to be a peacemaker was the Absalom Jones Center in Atlanta, Georgia, where I served as an intern for a year while enrolled at the Interdenominational Theological Center. Before it was the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing, the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center was the campus ministry center of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta; it served the five historically Black institutions that comprise the Atlanta University Center (AUC): Morris Brown College, Spelman College, Morehouse College, Interdenominational Theological Center, and Clark Atlanta University. Founded with a common mission to educate and empower newly emancipated Black Americans shortly after the conclusion of the US Civil War, the separate institutions of the AUC seemed to possess a common vision of a healed and reconciled world, a vision that has inspired students for more than 150 years.

The AUC is sacred ground, the place that birthed and nurtured the Atlanta Student Movement in the 1960s, the civil rights campaign that featured student sit-ins and demonstrations against Jim Crow segregation. Whether desegregating lunch counters or speaking up for the basic human rights of all people, this campaign cast a vision for healing and reconciliation through

struggle. Many leaders of the civil rights movement were either educated in the AUC or had some sort of involvement with it during their work as activists, including Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta Scott King, Julian Bond, and Marian Wright Edelman. The very ground we walked on seemed to call us to a particular vocation: peacemaker.

During my time as the intern, Wednesday celebrations of Eucharist were nothing out of the ordinary. We would gather in the small but neatly appointed chapel at six o'clock in the evening. Only a few of us were students in the AUC. Other members of our community were from the broader community: an older woman who regularly fostered young boys, a young gay couple who were spiritual refugees from an unwelcoming Christian community, and occasionally staff from the surrounding institutions. Each of us was drawn to the Absalom Jones Center for our own reasons. What held us all together was some unseen connection, a desire to be with one another, to worship together, and to spend time in conversation with one another late into the evening, and occasionally into the early morning hours. These conversations seemed to run the gamut from Anglican novices debating what we thought were the finer points of Anglican theology to listening deeply to stories of triumph and trauma, identity and hope.

It was within the walls of the Absalom Jones Center that I learned that the call to be a peacemaker is a call to put one's self in the vulnerable, terrifying place of being in close relationship with others. Simply put: To follow the way of Jesus of Nazareth is to voluntarily place one's self within the imperfect embrace of

the community that bears his name as we struggle together, learn to love one another, to forgive one another, to hold and support one another, all the while learning what it truly means to be human.

On one particular Wednesday, something quite apart from the ordinary occurred. The Eucharist was the same, but for whatever reason the words struck me differently. I cannot quite pinpoint what it was exactly. I simply felt called to take the words of the liturgy *seriously*, particularly the words that called me to be a peacemaker. During the Peace, I approached a member of the community I had offended, told him I was wrong, and asked for his forgiveness. He looked surprised at first, but slowly the wall of bitterness he had built using the stones of my arrogance began to collapse. He accepted, we embraced, and the liturgy continued. It was a normal Wednesday-evening Eucharist, but that moment is one that continues to echo in my soul. In that one moment I recognized the power that is present within the Church's vocation of reconciliation. I also experienced the sensation of reconciliation made: incarnate, tangible, and real. I began to recognize that a commitment to peacemaking requires trusting relationships and the embodied experience of putting that relationship back together when we have torn it apart.

Paul the apostle wrote to the church in Corinth that the essence of God's work in the Messiah, Jesus Christ, is one of reconciliation: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:17–18). The word

"reconcile" simply means "to bring back together." It is not simply a joining but a *re-joining*. When Christians say that we are a community of reconciliation, we make a bold proclamation to the world that, despite all evidence to the contrary, the normal state of human relationships with God, with one another, with ourselves, and with Creation is one of harmony and justice. The separation that we experience as a result of human sin and brokenness is an aberration of God's intention for us.

Christians also believe that the work of reconciliation is ultimately God's work accomplished in Jesus Christ in which we, God's baptized people, are called to share. The Book of Common Prayer uses the phrase "Paschal Mystery" to speak to this. The Paschal Mystery refers to the inexhaustible well of meaning and significance found in and around the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus and his saving work stand at the heart of the Christian witness. It isn't simply that Jesus teaches us something; Jesus *accomplishes* something revealed in his life and teachings. In the words of the Church of Scotland's baptismal liturgy:

> For you Jesus Christ came into the world:
> for you he lived and showed God's love;
> for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary
> and cried at the last, "It is accomplished";
> for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life;
> for you he ascended to reign at God's right hand.
> All this he did for you, little one,
> though you do not know it yet.

God has done something in Jesus that accomplishes the reconciliation the world needed. God has made the world new through the Messiah. Our work is to participate in God's work of reconciliation especially when the world around us seems stuck in division and brokenness. This is one takeaway from Jesus's oft-repeated words: ". . . The Kingdom of God has come near . . ." (Mark 1:15). It is here, incredibly present, and yet not fully here. Our call is to live in the age to come—the reconciled age—in our own present one.

If we are to take Paul's words to the Corinthian church to heart, then we see that the clear vocation of the Church in the world is to be the community of people made new by Christ who proclaim the reality of the Resurrection and then seek to live out the implications of the new life—namely, we become *reconciled reconcilers*. In every space and place where inhumane action and behavior contribute to the suffering of self and others, the exploitation of creation, and the dishonoring of God, the Church is called to the front lines, to heal the broken, and to mend what has been torn apart. God has done the ultimate healing and reconciliation. What is left for us is to draw attention to God's healing presence in the world. We've been healed by the graciousness of God. We are called to heal others. When the world asks Jeremiah's age-old question, "is there no balm in Gilead?" we respond by echoing the words of Africans held in chattel bondage, "There is a Balm in Gilead to make the wounded soul. There is a Balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul."

The need for reconciled reconcilers is especially pronounced in our age. In the United States, we live in a society where the alienation and separation are visible in our communities, our schools, our businesses, and even our houses of worship. Ours is a highly stratified society, one that sorts us by race and ethnicity, socioeconomic class, religion, and political party affiliation. These differences are not merely unfortunate or inconvenient; in many cases, these differences are matters of life and death, especially for those sorted to the bottom of our society.

In the past, mainline churches in the United States often neglected our vocation to be reconciled reconcilers, choosing instead to be keepers and guardians of a harmful status quo. If behavior is an indicator of one's highest ideal, then the highest ideal of the American mainline church has been and continues to be respectability, not reconciliation. We would often rather "keep" the peace than "make" peace. Martin Luther King Jr. said as much in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," where he chides "the white moderate" who prefers a "a negative peace which is the absence of tension" rather than "a positive peace which is the presence of justice." Toward the end of his iconic letter, King said, "If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century."

In saying this, Dr. King channeled the message of Paul the apostle. Our purpose is reconciliation, and if we are not committed to that work, we may as well close up shop. The Atlanta Student Movement of the 1960s and the Black Lives Matter movement

of our time hold up the uncomfortable truth which we must either accept or turn away: The peace we seek can only come through confrontation and struggle. We must shake off respectability, shake up the status quo, and put on the vocation of reconciliation and healing if we are to truly be the church.

Ours is a ministry of reconciliation. The church is most truly and authentically the church when we are on the front lines of human suffering and pain, embodying the work of Jesus, mending the broken, caring for the suffering, giving of ourselves so that others may live. What follows is an exploration of reconciliation through the intersection of Holy Scriptures and our liturgical practice. What I write here is a reflection on the liturgical rites for reconciliation and healing from the prayer book—the rites for the "Reconciliation of a Penitent" and "Ministration to the Sick," respectively—but also to explore the wider theological territory of reconciliation and healing. My goal is to help each reader reflect not simply on how we experience reconciliation and healing personally, but how we connect that personal experience to God's cosmic work of reconciliation to the world in which we live. My guiding liturgical principle is this: Liturgy is only Christian liturgy when those who engage in it do so with the understanding that we are participating in God's liturgy—the healing and reconciliation of the world already accomplished in Jesus. Liturgy is not the work of the people alone. Christian liturgy is our work with God that imagines and participates in God's new creation.

We will begin our journey in the first chapter by exploring the significance of the Creation stories in Genesis and what they say

about the uniqueness of the human vocation along with how this understanding helps us to diagnose the problem at the heart of the human condition, namely sin. In chapter two, we will listen to what our liturgical practice suggests about the human condition and our need for redemption by examining the two sacraments that form the basis for the Christian identity and vocation and thus inform every other sacrament: baptism and Eucharist. Chapter three focuses our attention on the rite for the "Reconciliation of a Penitent," particularly how we experience and appropriate this rite and the grace it communicates. Chapter four considers the "Ministration to the Sick." Chapter five builds on each of the previous chapters and seeks to cast a compelling vision for the kingdom of God, the end toward which the Church both journeys and points and the present and future reality our sacramental tradition assumes. In each chapter, we will reflect on the contemporary and contextual implications of each subject and attempt to draw out tangible and tactile responses to the need for reconciliation in our own world.

As I experienced many years ago at the Absalom Jones Center, so much becomes possible when we take our rites and rituals seriously, when we bring them close and allow them to reshape our minds and our muscles, thereby making peacemaking second nature. It is no accident for me that Absalom Jones Center is named for a man who spent his life as a peacemaker, working to build bridges between white and Black Episcopalians when so many white Episcopalians treated him as less than human even at great risk to himself. His name literally means "father of peace."

He was a peacemaker, and the center that bears his name taught me about peace. I hope to be able to offer some reflection to share that wisdom with others.

Reflection Questions

1. When you think of "peace," what images come to mind? What sources or influences inform your understanding of peace?
2. The Book of Common Prayer (833) contains "A Prayer Attributed to St. Francis," that asks God to "make us instruments of [God's] peace." How do you see this prayer as part of your faith? Where does this prayer challenge your understanding of what it means to follow Jesus?
3. Consider the definition of worship offered here: "Liturgy is not the work of the people alone. Christian liturgy is our work with God that imagines and participates in God's new creation." What does this understanding of worship, of liturgy, bring to mind? Is this a new way of thinking about common prayer? If so, how would this understanding influence your participation in worship?