

The opening remarks of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry at the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church, on June 25, 2021. These remarks have been lightly edited for clarity.

“Toward Truth and Reconciliation”

Let me start with a scripture that you know well; it comes from Galatians, Paul, who wrote and I quote:

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:27-28)

At our last meeting I shared with you some preliminary thoughts about expanding and deepening our ongoing work of racial justice and reconciliation, now through a churchwide effort of truth and reconciliation.

Many dioceses, congregations, schools, seminaries and other institutions of our church have engaged this work under a variety of names. Many throughout our church for years have participated in anti-racism training, Becoming Beloved Community, and many other important efforts and ways of engaging racism. This is not to replace any of that work, but rather to build on it.

I am convinced that we have an opportunity to encourage the work of truth and reconciliation throughout our church, and to do at the same time what, to my knowledge, we have never done as a churchwide community before — that is to engage in a process of truth and reconciliation for us, not only as dioceses — many dioceses have already done this — not only as congregations — many congregations and schools and seminaries have done this. Not all, but many have. But now to do this work of truth and reconciliation on the level of the churchwide community and organization of us as The Episcopal Church, in all the countries where we are located. To my knowledge this has not been done before on the churchwide level.

This is an invitation and an opportunity to do the hard and holy work of love. This is an opportunity to do and to model, I think, for our societies, the societies in which we live, what we must do to save our souls from the evils of racism, the evils of supremacy of anybody over anybody else, and the evils of the ways we hurt and harm each other in spite of the fact that we are all children of God, created equally in God’s image, and therefore brothers, sisters, siblings, the human family of God.

Allow me to locate this work of truth and reconciliation intentionally in a biblical and theological context. When I was a freshman in college, almost 50 years ago now, the late William Stringfellow came to lecture on campus. Stringfellow, as some of you know, was an Episcopalian and a lawyer who gave up opportunities for a successful and lucrative legal practice, and instead, seeking to follow Jesus, gave much of his life providing legal services for the poor. In time he became an advocate in the biblical sense of that word, and I believe he was one of our greatest theologians. I don't remember the actual occasion of his coming to campus, or what his subject was. But I do remember his response to one of the questions from the floor.

Someone asked him, "What is the deepest and most significant way that we can engage all of the manifestations of racism and bigotry? Personal, social, institutional. What is the best way to engage it?" And he answered, "Baptism."

Now I have to admit ... What was I? 17 or 18. At the time, I remember thinking, "Baptism?" I grew up in St. Phillips, Buffalo. I had seen plenty of babies baptized, but it never occurred to me that those babies being baptized was an answer to racism. I remember in my grandma's Baptist church that folk got immersed in the waters of the baptismal pool all the time. And while that was a bit more dramatic than baptism was in our Episcopal church, it never occurred to me there either that baptism was the answer to deep engagement with racism. But Stringfellow was right. The key to all of this for us as followers of Jesus Christ is baptism.

Jesus commanded us, in Matthew 28, "Go therefore make disciples of all nations." How do you do that? Baptize them, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the reality of the triune God. And then Jesus says, "Teach them everything I've taught you to do."

The sacrament of baptism is a lifelong commitment immersed in the reality of the triune God and daring to live the teachings and the ways of Jesus of Nazareth. It is a commitment to renounce, reject, and actively oppose in our lives and in our world anything that rebels against the God who the Bible says is love. It is a commitment to renounce anything that attempts to separate us from the love of God and from each other. It is a commitment to renounce anything that hurts or harms any human child of God or this creation.

You don't have to believe Michael Curry, but this is what the prayer book says. These are the first three promises of baptism in the Book of Common Prayer:

- Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?
- Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

- Do you renounce ... Listen to this one. Do you renounce the evil powers of this world, which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, that hurt or harm any child of God, or God's grand and glorious creation?

If these renunciations were check-off boxes, which they're not, but if they were, and we had to check off items that engage racism, Satan and spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God, is that about racism? Check off. Simple desires that draw you from the love of God? Smell like racism? Check it off. Evil powers which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God? Oh, I think that's a triple check-off.

Stringfellow was right. Baptism's the answer.

Baptism is not only about renunciation and standing against. It's also about standing for someone and something. It's about a committed life of ongoing repentance and revival in the best sense of those words. You know that the word *repent* means *metanoia*. It means to turn. To repent, to live a life, a constantly repenting life, is to turn away from that which is unloving. To turn away from that which brings darkness into the world instead of light. To turn away from that which hurts or harms, and to turn to Jesus Christ, and his way of love as our way of life.

Again, hear the prayer book:

- Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your savior?
- Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?
- Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

This work of being a baptized follower and disciple of Jesus Christ, this is the holy and hard work of love. The holy and hard work of baptism. And when and where that holy and hard work is done by a community, the beloved community becomes a possibility. In some sense, God's kingdom really does come on earth as it is in heaven.

And that realization ... In some sense, in that realization, I can actually see Paul getting excited, and the Pauline tradition getting excited. It's like Paul realized this and said, "Oh, my God, a baptism. This is not just about joining the church. This is about a transformed humanity and creation." And in his excitement, in Ephesians, one of his followers writes, "In Christ Jesus, you who were once far off, are now brought near. This Jesus has broken down the dividing wall of the hostility that separated us, that he might make out of all of our divisions and differences, a new humanity." I can see Paul. He goes wild in 2 Corinthians: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold the new has come. All this is from God who in

Christ was reconciling the world to himself, and who has now given to us ministry of reconciliation.”

And last but not least, as many of you as have been baptized, you have put on Christ. Whether you were immersed under the water or whether a little dab would do you. If it was in the name of the triune God, you have put on Christ. For those who have put on Christ, there is no more male or female, no more slave or free, no more Jew or Gentile, no more Republican or Democrat, no more black, white, brown. No more divisions, no more segregation, no more separations, for all are one in Christ.

Oh, my brothers and sisters, that’s what baptism is about. Following in the way of Jesus of Nazareth, his way of love, and that is a new way of life. Our work of truth and reconciliation is about that.

Like baptism, it is about facing truths of our past. Maybe even especially painful truths. But not to impose or wallow in guilt. Not for anybody to point fingers at anybody, but for us all together ... I want to say that again. For us all together, and I say that as a descendant of African slaves. I’m sitting right here in Raleigh, North Carolina, less than 100 miles from the plantations where my momma’s ancestors worked for nothing. But this is an opportunity for all of us, no matter who we are, no matter who we descend from, to face the pain of the past, to confess it, and above all, to learn from it. To tell the truth in love, as the Bible says, so that we can learn love’s more excellent way.

And having learned to turn, to repent, to turn in a new direction, in a new way, and to do that by righting old wrongs as best we can. To do that by repairing any breaches, as we are able, to help and to heal and to join hands together to make God’s beloved community real.

Here Bishop Curry outlines plans for a working group on Truth-telling, Reckoning and Healing which will be reporting to General Convention meeting in Baltimore next month.

And he concludes:

We genuinely have an opportunity not just for the church, but for the sake of the world, that God so loved that he gave his only son. We have an opportunity to be a witness in a society, here in the United States, but also in a world profoundly divided and dangerously polarized. We have an opportunity to witness how we can overcome our divisions and heal our hurts and find a balm in Gilead.

Maybe James Weldon Johnson captured his hope and dream and this commitment in the refrain of his hymn *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, where he wrote:

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us.

Sing a song full of the hope that present has brought us.

Facing the rising sun, of a new day begun

Let us march on, till victory is won.

Amen.