

May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, the labor of our hands, and the legacy of our faith be always acceptable in thy sight O LORD, our strength and our redeemer.

Men and Women of St. Augustine's Church, Honored Guests, Christians of all Denominations, people of faith throughout the world, welcome. Today we celebrate coming home, that act of centering our lives around those things we believe to be at the core of our spirit and our faith. We rededicate our communities, our families and friends, and our very souls this day to those principles and enterprises which define us and bring us closer to our creator in preparation for our final homecoming.

We are glad you are here to share in this glorious occasion and to taste the fellowship which we enjoy and hope cultivate to entice many who have wandered to rejoin our humble family of pilgrims who want nothing more than to do God's will.

To this end, we search out our common roots. Too long has history taught us that peoples and communities have been defined by others - despots and tyrants who have more interest in their own schemes and greed than for the welfare of humankind.

SO let us turn to scripture and to our Book of Common Prayer to rediscover those reminders of why we are a people dedicated to one another, to our communities, and to the "work we have been given to do". And I will tell you why I am proud in this day and age to be an Episcopalian and a part of the Anglican Communion worldwide.

The journey begins in community. God's word tells us: "Let us now praise famous men (and women), those admired of their generation..." Ecclesiasticus 44

We come this day "surrounded with so great a cloud of witnesses" that we have but to look on those who have gone before, and on those who are with us still, at the legacy of their dedication, and on the example they have given, to find faith at work. Behold the lives of Dr. Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King, Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, and in more modern times Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, not to mention enlightened leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Bobby Kennedy - all dedicated to the principles of freedom and dignity which were still being defined and clarified as they lived and struggled with forces which would maintain old schemes of injustice.

This awareness informs both the individual journey and a corporate consciousness.

Do we share the wonder and frustration of Micah? In this passage, God make His priorities quite clear: " Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Micah 6: 1-8

But more personally we ask ourselves, "What does it mean to be Christian?" It means:

To practice the saintly and zen art of emptying one self...

To walk and to be born in each moment of life as though new and unique

To meet every person - even those we have known a long time - as though you have never met, just as we welcome each new morning, and to share the Good News of what we have found of God in our own lives.

To expect that each person will give us the same opportunity to prove our self before assuming or condemning another.

And in community, to revisit each assumption, practice, regulation, law, and habit to see that it is fair and just and faithful to the principles of our faith.

As we see, a personal journey alone is not enough, if we have heard the message from the ancient past of Micah and from the not so far distant past of Dr. King.

We are also to make sure our communities and institutions share and reflect these core principles so that each person can have the opportunity to reach the fullness of life in his or her own faith and witness. Sometimes even faith communities fail to see the discrepancies of their own shortcomings. Even the Church has often missed the mark, committing some fallacies and

travesties of her own throughout history: viz. the Crusades, Indulgences, witch trials, etc. even so far as to occasionally condoning the execution of civic or religious leaders and the support of practices not grounded in Holy Scripture and clearly repugnant to the Word of God.

Does the date April 16, 1963 recall anything to you. I believe it represents, perhaps, the most recent public indictment \ of the Church practicing the evils of omission in history as several religious leaders, including the Episcopal Bishop of Alabama wrote:

We the undersigned clergymen are among those who, in January, issued "an appeal for law and order and common sense," in dealing with racial problems in Alabama. We expressed understanding that honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts, but urged that decisions of those courts should in the meantime be peacefully obeyed...

Just as we formerly pointed out that "hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions," we also point out that such actions as incite to hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems. We do not believe that these days of new hope are days when extreme measures are justified in Birmingham...

We further strongly urge our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham. When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.

Bishop C.C.J. Carpenter, D.D., LL.D., Episcopal Bishop of Alabama
Bishop Joseph A. Durick, D.D., Auxiliary Bishop, Roman Catholic Diocese of Mobile, Birmingham
Rabbi Milton L. Grafman, Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham, Alabama
Bishop Paul Hardin, Methodist Bishop of the Alabama-West Florida Conference
Bishop Nolan B. Harmon, Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the Methodist Church
Rev. George M. Murray, D.D., LL.D, Bishop Coadjutor, Episcopal Diocese of Alabama
Rev. Edward V. Ramage, Moderator, Synod of the Alabama Presbyterian Church in the United States
Rev. Earl Stallings, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama

To which Dr. King replied:

"You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may wonder: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all"

"Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distort the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and awful. Paul Tillich said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? Thus it is that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong."

But even the church has grown since 1963. If you turn in the Book of Common Prayer to page 304, you will see an addition from the 1979 revision that is unique.

[Recitation and Discussion of the Baptismal Litany]

Now we can be explicit about our core principle, about why the church failed so many times in history to be faithful to the words and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Today, in the midst of social upheaval I am proud to be an Episcopalian. I know the church often learns the hard way, often forgetting herself in the heat of the battle. But the Truth is there, it confronts us every day: in the Spirit which has been given to us: Each of us faces the challenge of setting self aside to find the pearl of great price. Each of us are called to be Saints in various ways to varying degrees which is why this old hymn is so popular among children and adults alike:

I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true,
Who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew.
And one was a doctor, and one was a queen, and one was a shepherdess on the green:
They were all of them saints of God and I mean, God helping, to be one too.

They lived not only in ages past, there are hundreds of thousands still,
The world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in hops, or at tea,
For the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too.

It is time to recapture the child in all of us and to work to be like the Saints who have gone before - Remembering "at all time and in all places" that this work begins when we learn to "Respect the dignity of every human being" or as Jesus said, "Love God and Love your Neighbor, on these two Commandments hang all the law and the prophets".

AMEN