

A Sermon for Diocesan Convention

The Rt. Rev. John McKee Sloan - February 21, 2008

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart

be acceptable in your sight, *

O LORD, my strength and my redeemer."

The priest of the church I grew up in started every sermon with those words; for me it meant it was time to sit down and be still as I could for what seemed like a long, long time. I expected to be bored, and so I was. For my Dad, it meant it was time to start the timer. He would raise his left hand over his head, to clear his wristwatch from his sleeve, and to let the rest of the congregation that he was keeping the time. Just as I expect, and hope, that someone among my clergy sisters and brothers has started the clock this evening. I know I got several suggestions about how long this sermon ought to be this evening.

Here I am, speaking to the Convention of the Diocese of Alabama as your newly-consecrated Bishop Suffragan. Most of you have never heard me preach; and I expect you're a little curious to find out if I have anything to say. I think how this sermon goes will sort of determine whether or not you will look forward to hearing me again, as most of you will, whether you want to or not. This sermon will determine for many of you whether you expect to hear something worth your while next time you hear me preach, or whether you expect to be bored. So we've all got a lot riding on the next twenty three and a half minutes. (Give or take eight or ten ...)

I am convinced that what is needed for us to be better Christians is not that we know more, but that we believe what we say we believe. We already know everything we need to know - Jesus said, "The first commandment is this: Hear, O Israel: The Lord your God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these." It's right there in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 12. And it's in the Book of Common Prayer, on page 351. Please understand: I am in no way opposed to learning, Lord knows all of us have plenty that we need to learn. But I do believe we all know what we need to know, we just need to do what we say we ought to do. We just need to believe, really believe, what we say we believe.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." Do you believe that? Can we trust that? Do you believe Jesus loves you in the same way that His Father loves him, with a love that is perfect and absolute? Can we believe that you and I, as sinful and silly and scared as we are, could be invited to abide in the eternal love of God through Jesus Christ?

When I was in college, I was very involved in the Diocesan camp and conference center in Mississippi. There I met a man named Jimmie Lee Washington, who cut the grass and took out the trash and could fix almost anything with a coat hanger and some duct tape. Unhampered by any sort of education, he was one of the wisest men I've ever known.

I was dating a young lady who was in a pretty snooty sorority at Ole Miss, and I was feeling a little unsure of myself, and I told Jimmie Lee about it. It was the mid-seventies, and I was making a statement. I'm not sure really what the statement was, but it involved wearing jeans or overalls to class, and old tennis shoes or flip-flops. I was at Mississippi State; it didn't seem like a big deal at the time. I don't remember all the details now, but I think my crisis began when the sorority girl suggested that I might want to change clothes before I came to see her again. She suggested that I could wear khaki pants and an Oxford cloth shirt, and I told her I didn't have those things, and she made some suggestions about where I might be able to purchase some, and I told her I didn't have money to waste on frat boy clothes, and it sort of went downhill from there. So instead of going to see my girlfriend at Ole Miss, I went to Camp to go fishing.

Well, of course I told Jimmie Lee all about it. We were out on the lake there at Camp, the sun was going down and the mosquitoes were starting to find us. He let me talk until I was done, and then he said, "Ain't nobody no better than you." I liked that; I thought he was saying that I was somehow remarkable, and even superior, and I think he probably read those thoughts in my reaction. He could tell I was going from deflated and discouraged to puffed up and cocky, so he said, "And you ain't no better than nobody else."

Then he asked me if I believed what he'd said. I told him that I liked the first part: "Ain't nobody no better than you," but the second part was a little disappointing: "And you ain't no better than nobody else." He told me that both of those ideas had to be true, or neither of them could be true. I looked skeptical, and he told me that it's in the Constitution. When I continue to look skeptical, he quoted it to me. Actually it's in the Declaration of Independence, and something that we claim to hold dear: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." This was before most of us knew that women are created equal, too.

I argued with him, the way college kids will, and told him that it was a nice idea, but that clearly some of us are born rich, some poor, some black, some white, some gifted and intelligent, and some burdened with disabilities and difficulties. He told me that in God's eyes, we're all the same, that God loves all of his children the same. When I asked him how that could be, he asked me if I had any brothers or sisters. I told him I have a brother and two sisters, and he asked me which one of us was our mother's favorite. I told him she didn't have a favorite. He said that surely she prefers the one who's caused the least trouble, or the one she agrees with, or the one who's done the most for her. I assured him that my mother doesn't have a favorite child. He said God doesn't, either. Then he said, "And God loves you more than your Mama."

I believe that, and I invite you to believe it as well. "Ain't nobody no better than you." "You ain't no better than nobody else." "And God loves you more than your Mama."

I grew up in Vicksburg, Mississippi, among the ghosts of the Civil War. While other kids were playing Cowboys and Indians; we played Rebels and Yankees. When we grew weary of defeating General Ulysses S. Grant and the imaginary Yankee invaders, we would declare war on each other. When I was a kid, we could make a war out of anything. All you needed was a couple of boys and something to throw at each other. We threw acorns, sweet gum balls, pine cones, spears made out of cane, anything we could pick up. But the best was dirt clods, of which there was rarely any shortage. Our mothers warned us that we were going to put out somebody's eye some day. This is the story of how they were almost right.

My brother played baseball. He was good at it, he enjoyed it. Mom and Dad went to his games, of course, and that meant dragging me and my sisters along. Mom would give us each enough coins to buy a Coke and some candy - Pixie Sticks every time, but after the coins and the goodies were gone, it was could get pretty boring.

One night the pitcher from my little league team was also at the game, also there because his big brother was playing, also there under protest, and also bored. I didn't really like him, because my brother had told me the only reason he was the pitcher was because his father was the coach, and that didn't seem fair, but he was the only other kid there that I knew. I don't think he particularly liked me, either. It's hard to play with a kid you don't really like, so it was a relief to both of us when we agreed that we'd have a war.

It was a dirt clod war, and I was pleased with myself that I maneuvered myself so that I was uphill of the other kid. My brother and some of the older boys had showed me several times that it's a real advantage to be throwing downhill instead of uphill. At first it was sort of fun, and then I think the other kid got tired of me lobbing dirt clods down at him and trying to make the sounds of mortar fire. It turns out he wasn't the pitcher just because his father was the coach, he also had a really good fastball, which connected with my face just under my left eye.

I had never seen so much blood. I was wearing a white T-shirt, which quickly became mostly red, and forgetting all dignity and pretense of macho, I ran to find my Mama.

She took one look at me and said, "Oh, Kee." (Actually, I have a whole collection of sermons which feature my mother taking one look and me and saying "Oh, Kee.") She tried to clean it up some, but I kept bleeding, and they decided she'd have to take me to the hospital. That made it much more painful, and much scarier for me. I remember being scared to death that I was going to have to have stitches.

On the way to the hospital, Mom was trying to drive, and to make sure that I was keeping my Dad's handkerchief pressed against my eye, and to take my mind off of what was going on. By this time I'd stopped crying, but I was still sobbing in that peculiar way we do after we've cried hard. There was a bridge that went over a set of railroad tracks, a big brick bridge that separated the south end of town from the north. Mom and Dad always told us to hold our breath over that bridge; mostly I realize now just to be able to enjoy a moment of silence in a car filled with four children. We came to that bridge, and Mom said "Hold your breath" the way she always did, but I couldn't, because I was still sobbing after all that crying. When I looked over at her, I saw her cheeks puffed out - she couldn't do anything else for me, so she was holding her breath for me.

It's hard to imagine being loved more than that, it's hard to think I deserve to be loved so much. And God loves us more than that, more than our Mamas. None of us deserve that, of course: thank God we don't get what we deserve. We talk about the love of God as eternal, beyond our understanding, absolute - but do we really believe it? We know what we need to know, we just need to believe what we say we believe.

We are all children of one Father in Heaven, and that makes us, all of us, brothers and sisters. We're not loved and treasured because we have earned it, because we deserve it, but because we are God's children. I don't deserve it any more or less than you; you haven't earned it any more or less than I or anyone else. Every one of us is broken, sinful, incomplete, cowardly, lazy, and selfish. And every one of us is cherished by our Father God, who became human so that He could laugh and cry, live and die as we do, and so that we could all know that we are loved, beyond what we deserve, beyond what we can understand.

In a little bit, if I ever stop preaching, we will continue our worship as we renew our Baptismal Covenant. These are familiar, well-used words, words we're used to saying at baptisms and confirmations. The answers are printed out for us, but let me invite you to think about what you'll say you're going to do.

"Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?" The answer is familiar: "I will, with God's help." I want to assure you of God's help. We're not asking whether God will help us do these things; we're asking whether we have the will to do what we say we're going to do. We know we can't do these things without the help of God, but I'm afraid we don't know, don't *really* know, that with God's help, we can

"Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?" "Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of Christ?" With God's help.

"Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" With God's help.

We have the help of God Almighty to do the work we've been given to do. In order to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our minds, and with all our strength, we first have to know and trust that God loves us, more than our Mamas. In order for us to love our neighbors as ourselves, we have to see them as sisters and brothers. Ain't nobody no better than you. You ain't no better than nobody else.

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be acceptable in your sight, *

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