

Morning Prayer Sermon Text from the 48th Annual Diocesan Convention of the Central Gulf Coast

February 16, 2019

Josh Wimberly, Redeemer, Mobile

It is such a privilege to be here before you today. My name is Josh Wimberly and I am a member of The Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Mobile, AL. If you haven't visited with us, we hope that changes soon. I am honored to speak with you this morning and I hope this message resonates with the overall theme of this convention: Life Together.

You know, it doesn't take much for us to look around and see a broken world. Maybe we are even wise enough to contextualize our own brokenness nested in all the overwhelming circumstances the world gives us. No one owns suffering, but boy does it often feel like forces beyond our control determine outcomes for us, our families, our churches, and our communities; outcomes that strain our identity and sense of self-worth. Yet, somewhere in our core being as individuals and communities, we find the resilience, the grit, to carry forward with hope as a Christian body. This hope is our life together.

But, many challenges confront us. Poverty and economic disparity, family and community violence, war, increased numbers of suicides and poorer mental health outcomes, disease and disability, environmental disaster; not to mention the corresponding oppression and injustice confronted by those groups on the margins of these contemporary problems. These issues and the corresponding racism, ageism, heterosexism, classism, etc.; along with their intersections in our social structures challenge my personal call as a follower of Christ. I propose that they also challenge our church.

But, how is our life together supposed to shape our shared Christian identity and journey? When society appears fraught with division and disagreement, how is our call as a church meant to provide refuge, reconciliation, transformation, and renewal? What does truth, reconciliation, and forgiveness look like in a world that yearns for it so deeply? I don't pretend to have the answers, but I do think this call is our contemporary mission; one we must meet with vigor, humility, and an openness to ecumenism. And it must start with Jesus!

Jesus as Healer of Individuals and Communities

I've known Jesus for awhile, but I met Jesus the Healer at my former Church, St. Thomas, in Birmingham about 12 years ago. I didn't know this Jesus at that point in my life, but a late-stage cancer diagnosis at age 30 brought me to an understanding of how community, church, and the sacrament of healing plays a central role in shaping our life together. Weekly, a small group of us met to share the sacrament of Anointing, followed by Eucharist. This intimate gathering became a reflection, to me, of how we might engage in the world to bring healing where it is most needed. I still don't know what that looks like for you, but I know that as I continue my cancer journey to this day, filled with uncertainty and an eventual outcome I may not desire, I am comforted by the notion that my hands must get dirty in this world with the work of healing. We cannot lay hands from a distance. We cannot pick and choose who and what circumstances are worthy of God's grace. God's wish and desire for us, our families, our church, our community, and our world is healing and wholeness; and we cannot do this alone. We must heal in communion with one another.

Because, you see, Jesus came to fulfill promises of a new Covenant. The theme of Jesus ministry that revolved around challenging social norms was not simply a message of personal transformation, but also social transformation and healing. The call for the realization of the Kingdom of God here on this earth.

According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

The hard work and heavy lifting of reconciliation and renewal is the business before us. The Jesus movement in service to and with others, transforming our definition of community further towards inclusion. Developing spaces for community building and engagement with an appreciation for the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. A knowledge and a faith guided by an eternal connection to an ever unfolding creation story.

Eucharist in Community

You know, I wasn't kidding when I said The Episcopal Church of the Redeemer hopes you visit with us. Of course we will welcome you anytime you can make it, but I have a special invitation for you to join us on any Wednesday night. Ms. Cecilia Archer, a church member and middle school student, expanded our understanding of Eucharist in community by proposing a new ministry years ago. A pay-what-you-can endeavor that brings our current church members into service and solidarity with many food insecure members of our Mobile community. Witnessing the Holy Spirit's work in this ministry, not to mention the work of our church members, has given our church a renewed sense of identity as "church." I've personally witnessed it expand members' understanding of community. Cecilia's challenge to our church to expand the bread and body of Christ beyond the walls of our sanctuary, into our fellowship hall, and outward toward our community in service has offered us the opportunity to challenge our norms and deepen our respect for fellowship with others. Inviting people to seek nourishment, fellowship, hospitality, and healing. We lay our dirty hands in healing upon those who need it through a meal. We do hope you will join us!

So, in conclusion, depart from here knowing that our life together is one marked with hope. Not ease of path. No smooth winds and easy sailing. It will be difficult. It will be challenging. But, something good awaits. If you take risks to share God's love in evangelism, service, and an openness for all that's sacred; you might be surprised what you find. Renewal. Reconciliation. Healing. Forgiveness. Before you know it, the load lightens its burden, and the Kingdom of God doesn't feel so far out of reach.

Amen.