
Is It Enough to Get into Heaven or Should I Work on Getting Some of Heaven into Me?

A sermon by the Rev. Ricardo Bailey

My dear sisters and brothers in the Lord:

I read an article on CNN.com by John Blake entitled, “Why I Am Tired of Hearing About “That” Civil Rights Movement.” The title caught my eye because just last week we had the dedication of the Center for Civil & Human Rights right here in Atlanta. I know about it because I was at the dedication ceremonies with my students. I had prepared them for the dedication in my Summer School course that I am teaching at Westminster. I was intrigued by the title and I was ready to immediately pre-judge the author and his work without looking into “why” he wrote what he wrote and expressed what he expressed.

It has now been 10 times that I read that article online and every time I read it, I must say that I agree with it in many ways. To sum it up, the author is not saying that the historical implications of the Civil Rights Movement are not relevant anymore, he is saying that a new language and a newer and relevant approach to looking at and explaining the deeper sociological, political, spiritual, and emotional implications of the Civil Rights Movement is needed and is necessary.

To further add to the summary, there should be more substance to the whole scope of the story than refusing to give up a bus seat in December of 1955 and the deliverance of one of the greatest oratorical pieces in the modern world on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in August of 1963. There was so much more to Rosa Parks and to Dr. King than just that. There was a whole lot of ideologies to discern and a lot of people who also gave their lives—they were young and old, black and white, northerners & southerners, Christian and non-Christian, rich & poor, known by many and unknown by more.

I mention all of this today so that we can have a contextual source to what it is that the Apostle Paul is saying to us in our second lesson this morning. The reading is taken from Paul’s Letter to the Church in Rome and it speaks to the Romans and to us in this Cathedral today about the “power” of sin and the even more powerful reality of Liberated Sanctification! That’s right Church, Liberated Sanctification—I should get that term patented and if it becomes popular I can pay three sets of college tuition with it!

My friends, we are lying to ourselves if we think that we are more powerful than the concept and reality of sin. This is not a doomsday prophecy, but it is the truth because if we were that powerful, then we all would not be in this Cathedral this morning, we would be having chicken wings, mimosas, and nachos! However, we all are here because we know that without prayer, without an active relationship with Jesus and without the power of God’s Holy Spirit to guide us not solely to “come” to the Church, but for us to BE CHURCH to one another!

The way that sin can be empowered and grow right before our eyes is when we as Christians do not check ourselves and one another so that in genuine charity we can be the “Beloved Community” that we always hear said and talked about on the social level. Before the concept of the “Beloved Community” was even articulated by Dr. King, Dr. King had a context for what that community would look like and sound like and that context came from Jesus of Nazareth and the work of the Apostles.

If you look through history, especially at the Civil Rights Movement, you will see that most if not majority of the segregationists were what people would describe as “good Church-going Christians.” Look at Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor of Birmingham, Alabama (who happened to be an Episcopalian). He was famous for ordering that the police dogs go and attack the young marchers in the park across from the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. He also ordered that the water hoses—an image that was recorded and shown to the entire world—be sprayed on the young demonstrators. Or, you have the example of the then Governor of Alabama—George Wallace (another outstanding Christian)—who was famous for saying in his inaugural address: “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever!” So, in reflection do I look at these men with contempt and disgust? Not at all. I look at them as being the victims of sin just as much as you and I are.

Bull Connor and George Wallace are responsible for their words and actions. These men are responsible and accountable for what they did not do in a time in which they could’ve been defined for what they could’ve done. But, let us take away the convenient mantle of judging these men and look at ourselves. Sin gets power and affirmation when good Christians do not stand up for what is right. Let me ask you a question. When was the last time that the crowd you are around prompted you to say what you said and to do what you did?

We all have had the moments of criticizing the child and emotionally condemning the child because he or she comes from parents that we really don’t like. We all have shared in talking about the co-worker who is new to the office and to the office culture. Because he or she do not do the work the way we do it – or the way that we feel the work “should” be done, we gather in an office and player-hate on that individual. We all have had the moments of the new person in our midst who doesn’t dress the way we dress or smell the way we smell. We gather in our group and talk about that person, not knowing the damage that we do when we don’t do the right thing and confront the issue with the person at hand.

Let’s face it. We all have been active cooperators in sin in some form or fashion. So, you may ask, “Well, Father Bailey where is the message of grace in all of this? I did not come to Church to be reminded of the wrong I’ve done! I’ve swept it under the rug and God has given me a new lease on life. Father, I am cool!” I would say “GLORY HALLELUJAH! Thanks be to God that you are in that eternal state of Grace!” But, I know that if I do not remember that God is calling me not to solely get myself—get it Church—MYSELF ready for Heaven... God is calling me and you—THE CHURCH to let Him place Heaven into our hearts right here and right now!

Can you imagine if our prayer was that God would let us live out our Kingdom-identity right here and right now? We would not be afraid of change! We would not be afraid of the other new person on the job! We would not participate in the individual participation of a wider social sin! We would stand up and be counted not to be defined by the crowd but we would be a new creation because we would not be conformed to this world but we would be renewed by the transformation of our minds so that we can discern God’s will to KNOW what is GOOD, what is PLEASING and what is PERFECT!

God’s intention for all of us back then and right now is for you and I to be good to one another. God wants us to love each other just as He loves us. Our history as citizens of the United States of America has not been the most picture perfect, but it has been a story that has been written as “a volume” that speaks about the potential of what we hope to be and the promise of what we will become. Fifty years ago on the weekend of June 21-22 in 1964 James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—three young men whose work of registering Black folks in Mississippi to vote was met with the resistance of some people at a time in which the sociological concepts of racism and fear abounded in their hearts—were killed for what they believed in. However, I still believe in the potential of America.

1963 was also the year in which on September 15, four little girls named Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair were murdered by racist men who most likely thought that the killing of these four children would cause a movement for equal rights under the law of this land would come to an end. However, the martyrdom of those four little girls—not too far in age of my own daughters—reminded us just how much some folks still followed the crowd and did not stand up with renewed minds. But, even after all of that, I still believe in America.

I believe in America because when I pull out my Federal Reserve Note and look at the back of a five dollar bill or that of a 20 dollar bill, over the White House & over the Lincoln Memorial is the inscription, “In God We Trust.” I believe in the United States of America because someone had the good sense to remind all of us that without God and our faith in Him,

then we cannot stand! The next volume for what our beloved nation can be and will be is being written right now. Where will you stand?

“But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord!”

“O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife.
Who more than self their country loved
And mercy more than life!
America! America!
May God thy gold refine
Till all success be nobleness
And every gain divine!”

(3rd Verse, 1913 version – America the Beautiful)

God bless you Church and an early HAPPY BIRTHDAY AMERICA! Amen!