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# The Fourteenth Sunday in Pentecost

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Grace and peace to you from God, who is Holy Parent, Holy Child, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rolf Jacobson, Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, writes that “Liturgical context can make all the difference in how a biblical text sounds, in how it is interpreted, and in how it may be preached.” Liturgical context can make all the difference.

The idea that liturgical context — i.e. the setting in worship in which we hear and reflect upon a given text — can make all the difference, is especially intriguing to me as one pursuing a Ph.D. in liturgy and worship.

So, what is our liturgical context today, and what text are we considering? Furthermore, how might that context influence our hearing and understanding of said text? How might we hear a text differently in the setting of this particular day’s worship?

To begin, we gather here for worship on a day that is multi-contextual. For the Church calendar, it is simply the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost. In our national life together, it is the twenty-first anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Globally, we mourn the loss of an exemplary leader, Queen Elizabeth II. And here in the life of St. Anne’s, we are marking the completion of the Sacred Ground program with a focus today on racial reconciliation and healing. So, we find ourselves liturgically at the intersection of multiple contexts which inform our understanding of the lectionary text we’ve read.

Now, as far as texts to consider in this context, I’m going to be a little bit heretical this morning and suggest for us that our main text to consider is not the Gospel reading, nor the first lesson or epistle, but rather Psalm 51.

The *New Oxford Annotated Bible* classifies Psalm 51 as a prayer of repentance and renewal. Appropriate, I think, as we think about what racial reconciliation and healing might look like in the context of Christian community. Psalm 51 pleads that God would create in us clean hearts and renew right spirits within us. It asks that God would have mercy on us, according to God’s loving-kindness, and blot out our offenses.

As “an individual petition,” this psalm is “one of the most profound of the seven penitential psalms in Christian tradition... It is attributed to David after the prophet Nathan confronted him over his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah (2 Sam 12), a reminder that all humans, even the most revered, must ask God for forgiveness.” All humans — each of us — must ask God for forgiveness. And this morning, as our opening litany of repentance reminded us, we ask God’s forgiveness for the sins of racism and white supremacy, of apathy in the face of oppression, and of indifference in the face of exploitation.

On the path toward becoming Beloved Community, this dovetails nicely with the first of four emphases put forward by the Episcopal Church and the Sacred Ground program: truth-telling. Specifically, telling the truth about our churches and race.

“Reconciliation, healing, and new life require telling the truth about the Episcopal Church’s racial composition and complicity in systems of racial justice and injustice — past and present.” You have an example of this on the front of your bulletin this morning, as we seek to tell the truth about whose land we gather on and the history of colonization. We also ask ourselves, how has our church excluded or embraced the presence and power of different racial, cultural, and ethnic groups throughout history and to this day? In the words of Psalm 51, we know our transgressions, and our sin is ever before us. This morning, in the spirit of truth-telling, we acknowledge these transgressions and manifold sins and ask that God would forgive us.

The second emphasis on the way towards becoming Beloved Community is proclamation. Specifically, proclaiming the dream of beloved community. “We gather to publicly reckon and share about the history and reality of race, and to proclaim our dream of Beloved Community through prayer, preaching, conversation and public witness.” Prayer, preaching, conversation, and public witness. These four things are necessarily held together. We are praying this morning. I’m preaching this morning. We will be having conversation after worship, just as you’ve had conversation in Sacred Ground circles over the past year. But what about public witness? What might it look like for the Church and for this community of St. Anne’s specifically to stand up and exhibit public witness against racism in our community? What would it look like for us to engage publicly in the work of racial reconciliation and healing, to move beyond thoughts and prayers to action? These are questions we still need to wrestle with on the journey toward becoming Beloved Community.

The third emphasis on this journey is formation. Specifically, practicing Jesus’s way of healing love. “We are always practicing and being formed in Jesus’ way of healing love, especially as he calls us to cross racial, cultural, and ethnic lines, to examine structures of oppression and their impact on our own and others’ lives, and to grow as ambassadors of reconciliation and healing in the world.” So, I ask you this morning, how will you grow as reconcilers, healers, and justice-bearers? What activities, practices, learning and experiences would form and transform you and this community? What would renew a right spirit within you?

And finally, the fourth emphasis on the journey toward becoming Beloved Community is justice: repairing the breach in society and institutions. “We participate in the repair and restoration of communities and institutions that struggle to flourish because of white dominant systems our churches and leaders helped to bless and build.” This is our baptismal promise, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. Two further questions are before us then this morning: what social institutions and systems most clearly bear the signs of racial injustice and brokenness? And,

how could we participate in the repair, restoration, and healing of people, institutions, and systems? In the words of Psalm 51, we pray that God would make us hear of joy and gladness, that our broken bodies and broken systems may rejoice.

Let's all pause and take a breath, at this point. These are heavy words, heavy thoughts, heavy questions, heavy truths. Some of them convicting and uncomfortable, especially for those of us in white dominant culture. But it is into the midst of these realities that today we hear the psalmist speak: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; in your great compassion blot out my offenses. Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

We ask today that God would have mercy on us according to God's loving-kindness. Have mercy on us when the sin of racism infects our hearts, our lives, our churches, and our systems. In your great compassion blot out our offenses. Wash us through and through from our wickedness and cleanse us from sin. Free us from the sins of racism and white supremacy. Create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew right spirits within us. Reconcile us to one another. Heal divisions, break down barriers. Put a new spirit within us. A spirit of love and justice.

Liturgical context matters. Texts matter. The setting of our lives and institutions matter. Today, I invite you into the way of becoming Beloved Community. And I invite you to pray with and dwell in these words of Psalm 51. In the context of racial reconciliation, of healing, and of truth-telling, join me in praying for fresh hearts and renewed spirits. The journey of repentance and renewal is not easy, but it is our calling.

So, what is the Good News today? In this context, what Good News does Psalm 51 have to offer us? Although a penitential psalm, it is in fact chock-full of Good News. In praying this psalm, we pray to a God who indeed shows abundant mercy and is full of steadfast love. We pray to a God who washes and cleanses us from our sin, including the sins of racism and White supremacy. We pray to a God of repentance and renewal who offers us clean hearts and renewed spirits.

In God's abundant love, there is mercy and forgiveness for all. God's mercy brings us joy and gladness, liberates us from sin and death, and breathes into us new life. This is the Good News of repentance and renewal offered to us today.

In closing, my prayer for us today is that God would continue to lead us all down paths of repentance, reconciliation, renewal, and healing. Again, this is not easy work, but neither are we free to abandon it. May God give each of us courage and grace as we go forth into the world and into broken systems, may God strengthen us as we speak out against the sins of racism and white supremacy, may God change our hearts when needed, and may God renew right spirits within each of us — spirits of justice, love, and mercy. Amen.