

Lent Two

March 12, 2017

O God be in my mouth as I speak for you and fill this place with your great grace, that we may leave this place less of what we used to be and more of what we ought to be through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you, I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

*“and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”.*

As a priest, there are certain lines in the Bible that I wish got better PR.

Or at least there are verses that I believe all Christians across denominational lines should get to know better.

The verse above comes from the book of Genesis, God is saying to Abraham that through him all the families of the earth shall enjoy the blessings of God.

This was a favorite verse of the late John Claypool, a well- preacher and theologian.

John was the long-time rector of St. Luke’s in Birmingham and after retirement from parish ministry, he spent several years teaching at the McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University.

That an Episcopal rector taught theology and homiletics at a Baptist seminary should not be surprising to those who know a little bit about John’s spiritual biography.

John’s first call to ministry was in the Southern Baptist Church.

John was a popular preacher and teacher in the sixties and seventies. He ever had his own radio show and was an early supporter of the Civil Rights Movement.

As his life and ministry progressed John found himself to be at odds with his own theological tradition.

In 1986, he was ordained in the Episcopal Church and this was his spiritual home until his retirement in the late 90's.

But God has a sense of humor and John returned to his original theological tradition before his death, teaching at a more liberal Seminary in his original Baptist tradition.

You could say that the *Cooperative Baptist Fellowship* had finally caught up to him or maybe his own theological tradition had been, to paraphrase our Gospel this morning, *born again*.

John loved the verse from our Old Testament lesson about how our mission as a church was to be a blessing to all God's people and our world.

And I heartily agree with John's perspective. This was and is the primary mission of the Christian church. And this mission of blessings, forgiveness, and reconciliation stretches all the way back to the beginning of creation and comes directly from the book of Genesis.

It started when a loving God saw that all he had created was good.

And this God so full of love and compassion, told a childless couple, Abraham and Sarah, that through their family, this God would bless all the families of the earth.

I was reminded again of this great mission of blessing last weekend when I was serving as a Vestry retreat leader for Fr. John Herring's current parish, St. Peters in Rome, Georgia.

Many of you remember Fr. Herring. He was sponsored by our church for ordination and before his call to the priesthood, he led our youth ministry and acolyte programs

Now, one of icebreakers I use with vestries, to get the conversation going, is to ask the church's leaders to share their spiritual journeys.

I want to know what led them to St. Peter's or in a broader sense what brought them to the Episcopal Church.

While about half of the group were cradle Episcopalians, many of the leaders in Fr. Herring's church came from other Christian traditions.

And while I have always been a firm believer that in my sermons, I should never throw a particular church or theological tradition under the bus.

There was a consistent message around the table that they were drawn to the generous and embracing love of our Episcopal tradition.

They found something in our church that was missing from the tradition they knew growing up.

Many of these men and women talked at length about the rejection or pain that came from knowing that because they were gay or because they came from a tradition that did not affirm women in the ministry, they knew that their gifts, their desire to serve God would not be valued.

Because of who they were, they were not going to be able to be that blessing to others that God was calling them to be.

It was moving for me to hear those stories and to know that the people of John's vestry could be honest, and vulnerable to one another about the pain or alienation they had once felt from God and their church.

Words fail to describe how grateful these men and women were to have found acceptance and a spiritual home for themselves in our Episcopal Church.

I could tell how much they loved their church in the way they spoke about it.

In each personal story, their faces lit up when they got to the part about finding St. Peter's.

It was as if they had been searching for something, something they might not have been able to put into words...

But after the pain of leaving their spiritual homes, they were a bit like the prodigal son or daughter when they found St. Peter's and the Episcopal Church. They had truly come home

Because of who our church strives to be, these men and women were relieved to know that they were indeed part of Christ's body.

They were now part of a church that didn't reject them, treat them as second class citizens, or just make them feel they were not valued as a human being created in God's image.

They had in fact finally found a community where they along with everyone else could be that wonderful blessing to others spoken of in the book of Genesis.

This is the good news of the Gospel. It is a message that our fractured and divided world desperately needs to hear.

One of the phrases that came out of our retreat was the deep and abiding desire that St. Peter's was a place that "all were welcome".

For Fr. Herring, that Christ-like welcome was important for his church and it should be important to each of us, that sit here this morning.

One of the strengths of our Anglican tradition is that we take seriously our baptismal covenant, those powerful words that we hear every time a child or an adult is brought to our church to be bathed with the living waters of God's love.

Will you will truly respect the dignity of every human being as you seek Christ in all persons loving our neighbors as ourselves?

Do we see that as our mission, our purpose to be that incredible blessing to others?

Black, white, male, female, gay, straight, conservative, liberal, Falcon fans and yes, even one or two fans of that team in New England.

At St. Martin's, we are called to provide a home for all God's people, especially those that have ever felt alienated from God or rejected by their denomination.

We are called to remind people that God loves them and that through the Christian lives that we live, we can all strive together however imperfectly to be a blessing to all people.

At St. Martin's Church, we have this great mission. We have this great purpose.

And I want to challenge you this morning to embrace that mission, to be a blessing to all the families of this earth, to work for justice, to work for reconciliation, and to have the courage to share God's love with all God's people.

In you, and me, all the families of the earth should and will be blessed. AMEN