

June 21, 2020

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

Gifts of the Spirit, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister, preached remotely in the Season of Covid-19, based on Isaiah 2. 1-2

PRELIMINARIES

Isaiah's gifts of the spirit – *Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Strength, Knowledge, Piety, Wonder* (memorialized in our windows) – are the prelude and precursor, the prerequisite for Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom. The peaceable kingdom can't happen without leaders blessed, informed and animated by these gifts of the Spirit
And you, lest you wonder, *you* are those leaders.

The peaceable kingdom: There's the bit about the wolf and the lamb, the calf and the lion getting on. There is also this: a vision of humans who don't hurt each other. Imagine that. That's the prophet's vision for what our national life should be like: peaceable. No more hurting people. Well, we're not there yet.

PRAYER

SERMON

Five years ago, when June Cooper, Deb Washington, Ruth Purtilo and I were laying the foundation for what would become (G)RACE Speaks establishing our work on race into a standing committee of Council – baking this sacred work into the church's structure – we premised this work on the Gifts of the Spirit. We dared imagine a peaceable Old South Church, and a peaceable Boston, and a peaceable Commonwealth, and a peaceable nation where we don't hurt each other. Well, we're not there yet.

From the By Laws of Old South Church in Boston: *ARTICLE VIII STANDING COMMITTEES. M. The (G)RACE SPEAKS Committee Purpose and Duties. Affirming the God-given dignity of every human person, (G)RACE SPEAKS shall promote sacred conversations about matters of race within the life of Old South Church. (G)RACE SPEAKS shall foster diversity awareness throughout the church with the goal of becoming proficient at protecting the dignity of self and others. Reliance on the Seven Gifts of the Spirit—Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Knowledge, Strength, Piety and Wonder—grounds (G)RACE SPEAKS in biblical and theological language and thought. This is a Christian undertaking.*

So what do these Gifts of the Spirit do for us in the present crisis? With our nation torn asunder, with black bodies and black lives victims of both prejudice and inequalities 400 years in the making – with prejudice and inequalities baked into the very fabric of our nation – what do these gifts of the spirit do for us? Everything.

WISDOM. The quality of having experience, knowledge, the quality of being wise. To be God's church, to be the beloved community, is to be wise, as to what concerns each other. Can you count yourself wise if you have not, in the words of Michael Eric Dyson, "listened to the pain,

the hurt, and the agony of Black people”? Have you done that? Are you listening? Are you growing in such wisdom?

Are you so wise as to acknowledge, in the words of Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor: “Riots are not only the voice of the unheard, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., famously said; they are the rowdy entry of the oppressed into the political realm. They become a stage of political theatre where joy, revulsion, sadness, anger, and excitement clash wildly in a cathartic dance. They are a festival of the oppressed.”

COUNSEL. In Christian parlance, this functions as a sort of godly intuition. It means being tuned into the divine heart. Is your heart aligned with the divine heart? As God is moved to action in the face of human suffering, are you so moved? Can you say with God: “I see the affliction of my people. I hear them crying out because of their oppressors, and I am aware of their sufferings.” (Exodus 3.7) In the face of such suffering, are you, like God, moved to action?

UNDERSTANDING. Do you understand what causes your neighbor of color fear? What causes your pew-mate of color despair and weariness? Can you understand how, in this moment of reckoning, if you are *not* speaking up, if you are *not* vocal, you *are* contributing to the despair and pain, the weariness and fear, the isolation and anguish of your neighbor of color? Do you understand how white silence is experienced as violence? In the words of Newt Gingrich: “The objective reality is that virtually no one who is white, understands the challenge of being black in America.” Do you understand what you do not understand?

STRENGTH. A combination of courage and resilience. Strength is required of the one who is prepared both to do good and to endure evil. For the one – here me! – comes with the other. In 1968, the year he was assassinated, Martin Luther King Jr, for all the good he was doing, he endured evil. Dr. King endured mortal threats to he and his family, bombings, cross burning, hate mail and more. Do you have the strength, the divine gift of strength to both do good and endure evil? Because the one comes with the other. Pray to God for such strength.

KNOWLEDGE (or as in our window, Cunning). This gift of the spirit enables us to see each other with the eyes of God, enabling us to see and feel God’s love for everything and everyone God has made. Imagine seeing our neighbors – all of our neighbors, all of your neighbors – as if through God’s own eyes.

PIETY (or, in the old-fashioned sense, Pity) requires humility, the opposite of white privilege, the antithesis of white power, white supremacy, white fragility. It is only with piety that we grow in our love for those wrapped in different colors of skin, seeing them – as we pray they see us – as kith and kin, as siblings. The humility of piety opens our eyes to the words of Albert Einstein: racism is a white people’s disease. It’s like being a carrier of and vector for the novel coronavirus, without knowing it. You’re contagious, infecting everyone around you. It’s time, it’s long past time, to get tested. Self-quarantine until you to start getting well; until you test negative for racism and positive for anti-racism.

FEAR (of God) or Wonder or Awe. It is to know the glory and majesty of God. Wonder: a joyful awareness of God's grandeur. And how small we all are in comparison. It is to be whittled down to size, to experience humility, to let go of pride. Fear of God prompts us to look up, bow down, and take in the immensity and spender of it all. This gift of the spirit takes us back to the first, to wisdom. For the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. (Proverbs 9.10)

Old South Church: our neighbors and pew-mates of color are hurting, are in distress, are in danger, and are weary of the battle. They need reinforcements. They need allies to enter the fray, to stand up, show up, speak up, act up, to effect change and usher in God's peaceable kingdom where there is no hurting each other anymore.

If the Reverend Doctor William J. Barber II is right, we are (right now!) in the throes of nothing less than a Third Reconstruction. (The first two – post slavery and the Civil Rights Movement – moved the ball on the original sin of this nation, but they didn't cross the goal line; not even close). If the Reverend Doctor William J. Barber II is right, we are in the throes of nothing less than a Third Reconstruction. What we are experiencing, then, are the birth-pangs of a new and deeper justice.

In this watershed moment, in this time of national reckoning, can you give yourself to God for the remaking, the reimagining, the reconstruction of this great country, rooting today's moral revolution in Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom; a country rooted in love and law, in justice and kindness, in fairness and inequality, in reform and inclusion?

Will you get down on your knees and pray for it? Pray that God will take your minds and think through it; your eyes and see through them; your lips and speak through them; your heart and feel and bleed and pulse through it. Will you pray to become God's agent for change and justice? Will you pray – pray hard and earnestly – for Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Knowledge, Strength, Piety and Wonder?

Will you pray for these in this moment of national reckoning? Pray that God may use you and Old South Church to make this country fairer and kinder than it has ever been; to finally and fully live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

BENEDICTION

Jesus said, "You ought always to pray and not to faint." Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger, wiser, more cunning Christians. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to the great task at hand.

May the blessing of almighty God – Creator, Christ and Spirit – be with you this day and every day. Amen.