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Remarks – July 1, 2010

St. Titus Episcopal Church – Service in honor of Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray

Pauli Murray had an amazing vision of God’s Kingdom---- a Kingdom of Justice is breaking in the world. I want to lift up three features of this Kingdom of Justice, features drawn from her sermons. The first comes from Pauli Murray’s sermon, “Healing and Reconciliation” — preached on February 13, 1977, at the Chapel of the Cross Chapel Hill, North Carolina. After rejoicing for the newly achieved right of women to be ordained, she names the first feature of this justice---the RISK that comes with justice and its reconciliation:

“Every break with long-standing tradition is both a moral victory and a risk. In the first century it was a risk to accept the uncircumcised Gentiles in the primitive church. There was a risk in parting company with the Roman Catholic Church and establishing the Church of England. There was a risk in emancipating four million Negro slaves without compensation to their masters, to whom they represented a heavy capital investment, or compensation to the slaves for two centuries of forced labor. There was a risk in declaring unconstitutional state-enforced segregation. The race of that last victory was the blood of the martyrs, Black and White – in Mississippi, in Alabama, in Tennessee, in Texas, in California and elsewhere. All of us who are adults and who have lived in the South have suffered in various ways in the course of this struggle. Yet, one of the veterans of the struggle, victim of the University of North Carolina’s rejection thirty-nine years ago (1938) stands before you today in Chapel Hill, the site of that rejection, proclaiming the healing power of Christ’s love, who paid the ultimate price of crucifixion for our redemption. As followers of Christ, we are called upon to take risks, to work for the liberation of the body, mind, and spirit, to exorcise the unclean spirits that vex us and prevent us from being our true selves, created in the image of God and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven.

.....Each of us, therefore, is called upon to proclaim the Good News of God-in Christ’s redeeming love. And the Good News today, in our small corner of the planet, in the American South, is that the South is rising out of its own ashes; out of its redemptive suffering it is becoming purified; it is being healed of its unclean spirits, and its representatives..... are beginning to fulfill that beloved song now sung around the world wherever people are striving for freedom from oppression: ‘We shall overcome . . . Black and White together, we shall overcome. . . .Deep in my heart, I do believe’ that the American South will lead the way toward the renewal of our moral and spiritual strength and our sense of mission.....

It was my destiny to be the descendant of slave owners as well as slaves, to be of mixed ancestry, to be biologically and psychologically integrated in a world where the separation of the races was upheld by the Supreme Court of the United States as the fundamental law of our Southland. My entire life's quest has been for spiritual integration, and this quest has led me ultimately to Christ, in whom there is no East or West, no North or South, no Black or White, no Red or Yellow, no Jew or Gentile, no Islam or Buddhist, no Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, or Roman Catholic, no Male or Female. There is no Black Christ, no White Christ, no Red Christ – although these images may have transitory cultural value. There is only Christ, the Spirit of Love and reconciliation, the healer of deep psychic wounds, drawing us all closer to that goal of perfection that links us to God our Creator and to eternity.”

As Pauli Murray says, the first feature: working for God's justice entails *risk*.

A second feature: this risk is sustained by radical grace, or, “Forgiveness Without Limits” as Pauli Murray puts it in her sermon at the Church of the Atonement in Washington, DC, Nov. 11, 1979.) In the crises of injustice “forgiveness seems impossible to achieve if we think of it as a single dramatic act that we are called upon to perform at the very moment of wrongdoing. It is less impossible if we look upon forgiveness as a discipline, a lifelong process of continuous search for wholeness & for reconciliation in human conflict. Jesus understood that we do not have the power to forgive of our own volition. As we experience God's forgiveness of our own shortcomings, we are given the strength to forgive others.Forgiveness is putting aside any claim to retaliation and making possible the renewal of the relationship. It does not imply any relaxation of God's opposition to evil, nor does it avoid judgment....Forgiveness does not undo the past, but it clears the way to begin anew..... (As Dr. King said,) ‘Certainly one can never forget, if that means erasing it totally from his mind. But when we forgive, we forget in the sense that the evil deed is no longer a mental block impeding a new relationship. Likewise, we can never say, ‘I will forgive you, but I won't have anything further to do with you.’ Forgiveness means reconciliation, a coming together again.” Dr. King went on to say, ‘There will be no permanent solution to the race problem until oppressed men (and women) develop the capacity to love their enemies. The darkness of racial injustice will be dispelled only by the light of forgiving love.’Yes, forgiveness is costly and is not accomplished w/out pain. (look at Jesus

on the cross, forgiving his persecutors)...but whatever the pain and cost, it is thru the discipline of forgiveness that we ourselves are healed and become more whole.”

The second feature of justice: forgiveness sustained by grace.

A third feature of God’s justice has already been named by Dr. McKissick-Melton from Murray’s lecture “Challenge of Nurturing the Christian Community in Its Diversity” (March 28, 1979 at Church of the Atonement, Washington, DC): We enter into community with others based upon our new self-understanding and we struggle to transform ourselves, our church, and our society in order to actualize vision. true community is a struggle,...we may not live to see its “victories”...but struggle on we must: “In the process, we glimpse only fragmentary moments of the community that we seek and fleeting images of our authentic selves.....We are held in tension between the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet.’ We are buffeted between advancing and receding waves of fellowship and withdrawal, or reconciliation and alienation. The human lifespan is so short that we experience only tiny segments of social change in a single lifetime.”

For Pauli Murray, God’s justice is an ongoing struggle we may not see completed; it is truly a risk, but it is grounded in God’s radical grace and forgiveness, a radical generosity that sustains us in and through this ongoing struggle.

Amen.

Quotes from *Pauli Murray: Selected Sermons and Writings*, edited by Anthony B. Pinn, (Maryknoll, NY Orbis Books, 2006).