

ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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God's Redeeming Power of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

*Sermon preached at the five o'clock service, November 23, 2014
The Last Sunday after Pentecost, Based on Ephesians 1:15-23 and Matthew 25:31-46*

Well, I must confess that I'm so relieved that I'm preaching from our lesson in Ephesians and not from today's gospel in Matthew. I truly was particularly drawn to where Paul urges us to *open the eyes of our hearts so that we may be enlightened and know the hope in which God has called us...* That really said, "Yes!!" to my soul. I honestly admit that my heart did not jump at preaching on the Matthew text. I sincerely wouldn't know which group of Sheep or Goats I would fall into.

Today, as we mark the last Sunday after Pentecost and the Sunday right before Advent, we're at a turning point in the church, from the time we celebrate the appearance of the Holy Spirit fifty days following Easter all the way to Advent beginning next Sunday. We as Christians are soon to be called into a season of fasting and prayer as we await the birth of Jesus, the Christ.

As the season changes from Pentecost to Advent, our hearts become more compelled to learn what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It is a beautiful journey in our spiritual growth as Christians. As Thanksgiving is days away, many of us have become glued to our schedules and planners, to cross-check by asking "Where are we going for Thanksgiving? How many people do we have coming over? Will we have enough drinks for Aunt Bethann? Who will keep Uncle George's mouth under control at the dinner table?" We certainly know these are all very poignant questions Jesus would have asked...wouldn't he?

We may, too, want to ask ourselves what is it that God is calling us to be more and less of at *this* particular time as we make and craft our holiday plans... especially since we know that we as God's people today are under enormous attack; specifically as our country and the world await the imminent grand jury decision from Ferguson, Missouri tomorrow.

When reading today's lesson, I kept being drawn to Paul's letter to the churches in Ephesus as he wrote this epistle (Paul, who considered himself to be a "Prisoner of the Lord"), to contemplate how his message affects our life in our world today.

Fifty years ago, on June 12, 1964 a man the *New York Times* calls "South Africa's Liberator as Prisoner" was confined to a small cell, where he spent 18 of his 27 years of imprisonment on Robben Island. The floor that he would walk and stand on would be the very place he would sleep. He had a small bucket that was used for his bathroom, and he was forced to do hard labor in a quarry.

When we think about Nelson Mandela, also known as "Madiba," we look at this man's amazing accomplishments and it almost seems unreal and so far off for any of us today to have his strength, courage, compassion, steadfastness and love all during 27 years of incarceration.

A warrior for social justice and human equality, Mandela began an unforeseen, unimaginable struggle for freedom. His passion would begin to slowly liberate a nation, due to his unrelenting and wholehearted sacrifice and willingness to do whatever it took to gain freedom and equality for all people.

But what it took for him to use his time in prison to rise up to the call to action instead of dwelling on helplessness and despair is what the apostle Paul speaks to the Ephesians. Nelson Mandela didn't know that one day—after thinking, reflecting and not choosing revenge towards those who worked very hard to keep apartheid alive in South Africa—he would chose to heed an unusual and matchless faith that what would come from embracing those who were most adverse to him. This kind of faith would require a new seed to be planted on the inside—a seed of redemption, forgiveness and reconciliation, which is a process of healing that has to be deeply and authentically lived out and not merely talked about.

During his 27 years in captivity he used his time to practice the notion of equality, and he never would accept special treatment. He did the same amount of work as his fellow inmates, received the same amount of food and performed other activities to model for others that the fight for equality was real for him and that his belief in having a fair share was for all to have access to equality, no matter their education level, income or race.

Just a year after becoming South Africa's first democratic President, he attempted to calm the nerves and anxiety of the post-apartheid country where black South Africans were overzealous in redeeming their rights and white South Africans were in growing fear that they were going to be evicted from their homes into an unknown exile.

Mr. Mandela did the unthinkable and invited the wives and widows of apartheid presidents and prime ministers and other senior government officials to have tea as a way to calm the tension and anxiety that were looming in this post-Apartheid, Black President-led nation. At the age of 77, following a Rugby game, he went out onto the playing field and congratulated the Afrikaner team in their own language, *Afrikaans*....he embraced the very people who were responsible for his oppression.

In 2007, *The New York Times* posed a question to Mandela about his life and his call to fight for freedom, and asked, "How do you after experiencing barbaric torment, how do you keep hatred in check?" His response, "Hating clouds the mind. It gets in the way of strategy. Leaders cannot afford to hate.

This is a response I'm convinced the "Prisoner of the Lord," Paul, if he could speak to us today, would've used: Mandela as a modern day example of what Jesus' intention was when Paul spoke to the churches in Ephesus.

I think many times we don't believe we have what it takes to travel the "high road" of humility and choose to proactively love instead of combatively hate, to humble ourselves and not "other" a group of people even when it's been violently done to us. We often reactively feel compelled and entitled to be angry or upset and want revenge when we've been wronged. Somehow our human psyche has been subconsciously trained to react negatively instead of lovingly. We as humanity, as *God's* children, may have become complacent that oppression is something that we chose as a self-justified weapon to bring public attention to our dismay of the oppressor and at the same time gives us an unjust feeling of validation.

I cannot say that I am anywhere close to Nelson Mandela's level of dignity, humility, forgiveness and reconciliation. I grapple more often than I wish to with wanting to act and vilify the wrong doer as a means to medicate my own bruised ego or soul. But is that really good for me and for the accused? How can we really bring healing if we stay in the sense of being attacked and justify our "othering" the accuser? I mean, it just can't be all black and white when it comes to matters of the heart where we harbor lingering hurts and pains and also have the amazing capability to house a redeeming and abiding love.

Just a few days ago, the Governor of Missouri issued a State of Emergency awaiting the Grand Jury Decision in the Michael Brown case whether to indict Officer Darren Wilson for his death.

Most of the residence and business owners of Ferguson have boarded up their homes and businesses awaiting "the worst" out of the imminent decision that has now been slated for tomorrow, Monday, November 24th. The people of Ferguson are preparing as if a hurricane is impending, rather than a Grand jury decision.

Yesterday, President Barrack Obama in an ABC News interview in response to the latest development in the Michael Brown case said, "This is a country that allows everybody to express their views...but using any event as an excuse for violence is contrary to rule of law and contrary to who we are."

Our call here at St. Bart's today couldn't be any clearer: We all are accepted members of the body of Christ who are now called to pray, not just for ourselves but more so for one another. We may need to truly contemplate living a higher faith and opening the eyes of our hearts so that those of us who are here on Park Avenue and those who are part of the same body of Christ in Ferguson will be enlightened. Let us consider the words of Paul and the life lived by Nelson Mandela as they both were transformed from their imprisonment from the inside out.

We may need to reflect that enlightenment cannot come through ignorance, or avoidance, or "othering." It can only arrive when we sensitively listen with our hearts—not to what the media say or our "victim voice"—to what we as humanity are called to do as part of one body in Christ Jesus.

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