

Conference on The Black Church and Human Sexuality

Worship Service
November 15, 2000
6:30 p.m. at
The Jefferson Street Missionary Baptist Church

Call to Worship & Devotion Devotional Leaders

Minister: I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.

Congregation: The Lord is thy keeper; the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.

All: The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil; he shall preserve thy soul. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and forevermore.

Commencement Hymn "O, For A Closer Walk With God" Congregation

Invocation Minister in Charge

Greetings & Fellowship Hour

Selection Choir

Litany of Truth Rev. Arlene Hunter-Griffin, 2nd Year M.T.S. Student, Vanderbilt University Divinity School

A LITANY OF TRUTH

LEADER: As women and men we come seeking a reality to which God calls us. We come to refute untruths about human relationships, sexuality, to challenge injustices, to confront oppressive structures that bind us, and to affirm our life in Jesus Christ. We, therefore, are called to declare the following truths:

LEADER: IT IS NOT TRUE that African American women and men experience life as oppression and not as free human beings.

ALL: THIS IS TRUE that men and women are created in the image of God, co-workers with God in caring for life, in struggling for liberation of humanity and for a world that respects each one's dignity.

LEADER: IT IS NOT TRUE that the community is being robbed of the talents and gifts of African American youth by a violent drug culture and preventable terminal diseases.

ALL: THIS IS TRUE that we are born to love and serve each other in freedom.

LEADER: IT IS NOT TRUE that women and men remain divided by sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism.

ALL: THIS IS TRUE that all women and men are called to be in solidarity with each other's struggle for dignity and justice, to learn from one another and challenge one another as sisters and brothers to build genuine community.

LEADER: IT IS NOT TRUE that the Black churches must become a safe refuge for millions of African American women and their children abandoned in poverty, broken families, and those living with HIV/AIDS.

ALL: THIS IS TRUE that the whole people of God are called to challenge the root cause of social abuse, poverty and the poor health of the entire community.

LEADER: IT IS NOT TRUE that women should not accept rape and incest, battering and humiliation, as the fate of women.

ALL: THIS IS TRUE that Jesus Christ has come into the world to heal the broken community between women and men, to restore persons' sense of self, dignity and inclusion.

LEADER: IT IS NOT TRUE that young African American girls and boys should be given the opportunity to learn who they are, to reach their fullest potential, and to express their authentic self without fear or reappraisal.

ALL: THIS IS TRUE that everyone is called to respond to the gift of life and to the needs of each other with all our hearts, all our souls and all our reason.

LEADER: IT IS NOT TRUE that women and men can live in mutual and just relationships, respecting one another's integrity and personhood.

ALL: THIS IS TRUE that God the Creator has given us the responsibility and trust to care for all of creation in humility and faithfulness, to work and to love as co-creators of God.

ALL: Holy Living God make us by your grace the winds of justice, by love the strength of community, and by hope the flames of peace in the world. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Selection

Choir

Introduction of the Speaker Rev. Dr. Forrest E. Harris, Sr., President, American Baptist College

"Whosoever..."

John 3:16*

Alton B. Pollard, III
Emory University
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Director of the Program of Black Church Studies and
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There is a church in a neighborhood nearby, the sort of church one is likely to see in virtually any city in the United States of America. Devoid of distinguishing features, at least to the casual observer, it is a relatively modest structure of stone and wood and glass tucked away in a community of modest wood and brick homes. Inside the entrance, a few feet down the hall on the left are the doors to the pastor's study and to the administrative offices of the church. Directly in view, just a few footsteps straight ahead, is the sanctuary. There hanging on the far wall is a bold and powerful visual statement visible to any and all who enter. It is a contemporary painting, a breath-taking portrayal of a hauntingly familiar human figure. There is something about the face in the portrait that is darkly radiant and altogether inviting, despite the fact its features are masked by shadows that tell no demographic tale, that reveal not the faintest clue about hair texture or length, fullness of lips or nose, eye tint or shape. The subject is adorned in flowing garments of amber, orange, purple, brown, and green. Set against a geometric backdrop of three-dimensional quality, however else one chooses to describe it - a stained-glass window, a luminous prism, a kaleidoscopic canvas, a shaft of light radiating hope and possibility - the figure in the picture looms larger than life itself. The person is standing. Waiting. With arms outstretched. With hands held out. With heart open wide. With holes the size of nails visible in each palm. And writ large across the portrait in a rainbow of letters is a single word - "WHOSOEVER."

They are the silent and most silenced members of our community: The despised and rejected ones, the people who have come to know and believe that they have been betrayed, denounced, and abandoned by almost everyone and most especially by the Church, their church, the Black Church. For these persons, whose stories and struggles have everything to do with matters of human sexuality, there is the terribly urgent ache to know - to know why it has happened, how it has happened, and why it continues to be this way - the Black Church born of struggle, that nurtured and empowered a people, and affirmed their absolute sense of worth, whose social legacy is community, solidarity, justice, and freedom; is a church that today cannot bring itself to accept sexual difference, sexual diversity, sexual identity, sexual equality, sexual love. A church that would rather dwell in dysfunctional relationship with itself than embrace the entire community of the faithful; a church unable to celebrate the gift of its kith and kin who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and (so-called) straight. A church that is woefully insecure and

inarticulate when it comes to matters of human intimacy, suffers from sexual repression, and is profoundly ill at ease with the erotic. A church that is at the same time all too willing to sanction its own misguided sexual politics, and even more eager to pronounce judgment on same-gender loving relationships. A church that, not so surprisingly, is suffering a decline in active membership, in relevance, and in influence. The Black Church is in trouble; the faith is in trouble; our society is in trouble; our souls are in trouble. Today, the Black Church in America stands at the crossroads once more. How will we respond?

Our focus this evening is on the most famous and, perhaps, most beloved text in all the biblical record. I well remember reciting John 3:16 in the language of the old King James Version during my childhood days in Sunday school and many of you probably do too: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Of course, no biblical or cultural exegete worth their salt would suggest that the KJV is the best translation today. No matter, the passage is so deeply engrained in our memory, so mundane, so familiar to us we're sure we already know what it means before we ever read or hear it. It turns up at sporting events, at the moment when photojournalists train their lenses on the endzone, home plate, ringside, or courtside for all the world to see. Like today's WWJD wristbands and key chains, it is instantly recognizable as Christian shorthand, a religious cliché, a slogan popularized by men who wear rainbow-colored Afro wigs, and who carry cardboard placards and signs. For still others, it is a magic formula of sorts, a missionary mantra, the code number for salvation, a password possessed only by proven believers. And by the time all of us have finished with these words, if we even bother to say the words anymore (for many the reference itself is enough), they have become an empty banality, a sounding brass, tinkling cymbal. We've heard them before, and so, we never really hear them at all.

When I ask myself, as I often do, what it is that I hope to accomplish as a student of religion and life, and as a minister of the gospel, I sometimes think that I would gladly settle for just being able to plumb the depth of meaning found in a single text, yea, even a single word. In that third chapter of the sixteenth verse of the Gospel of John resides one such word for me, a word so subversive, so dangerous, so disturbing it has been disavowed or abandoned by most segments of the church, and all but ignored by recent biblical scholarship. This word is sidestepped, avoided, buried, somehow forgotten in a text that is a fervent favorite of traditionalists but finds few post-modern takers. The scholarship on John 3:16 is unclear. Its critics are at cross purposes. It has no exact counterpart in any of the other gospels. There would seem to be little to commend its canonization to some. Yet if we have the courage to attend to the core of the heart of this verse there is a word that fires the human imagination and leads to the radical depths, Whosoever. Whoever. Everyone. Everybody. "Whosoever," Jesus says, says it to Nicodemus, to all of us.

In the African American church we have long said the same thing that Jesus said, only with some typical cultural improvisation we have said it: "Whosoever will let her or him come." Sunday after Sunday it remains the custom, without respect of denomination, for black congregations everywhere to "open the doors of the church after the sermon, to extend the invitation to meet Jesus, to renew one's commitment to discipleship, to come

forward for special prayer needs, to become a part of the community of saints, to receive all the rights and privileges pertaining thereof, to make this your "church home." It is a centuries-old tradition, dating back to the time of our forebears enslavement in this land, when African and New World sacred views met, and seekers came to the mourner's bench, surrounded by the Elders, the Deacons, the Mother's Boards, the Prayer Warriors, in hopes of hearing Jesus call her or his name. Even now, I can hear someone singing, "I told Jesus it will be alright if he changes my name." I can hear someone else testifying, "I got a new name over in Zion, and it's mine, mine, mine." Yes from the very beginning, ritual membership in the "household of faith" affirmed every individual's experience as the key that unlocks the door to communion. In the giving and receiving of the right hand of fellowship, black folk came to understand their God-given rights as a people to have, hold, and express a profound sense of themselves in their embodied humanity, inclusive of their sexuality. To this very day the great invitation remains unchanged. Jesus says there is no test of eligibility, there are no qualifications for fitness. Every child of God has equal access to this spiritual life; no person lies beyond the pale, The enabling words of the old Negro spiritual have it right, "I've got a right, you've got a right, we've all got a right to the tree of life."

Now what I would like to suggest in connection with the great invitation is that somewhere along the way the Black Church lost its way. In the transition "from slavery to freedom" we began to establish social, cultural and theological tests for inclusion in the body, neglecting the divine criterion of "whosoever" in the process. When I think about the tough, hammered-out, often brutal experiences which we have endured as a people, how "through many dangers, toils, and snares we have already come;" when my soul looks back and wonders "how we got over," I know it was the hand of the Lord, I know it was God who made a way out of no way. Yet when I am brought face to face today with the implications of the great invitation; and when I engage the unjust economic, physical, and socio-political realities around me, of this I am equally sure: the work of God's church is far from over, it has only just begun

As a once disinherited people, we have known something about chains and fetters and being locked away. We have known what it is to be sold down river, about plantations and overseers, slave drivers and patty rollers, the KKK and Citizen's Councils, rapings and lynchings, Jane and Jim Crow. We are also acquainted with far more recent cruelties, with official policies, customs, and institutions that work to subdue us behind stone walls and iron bars and railroad tracks and tracking systems and glass ceilings and media lynchings and gentrification and gerrymandering and annexation and annihilation. We know about police crackdowns and crack houses and road blocks and cell blocks and lockdowns and indecency and detention and "law and order" and perjury and the impeachment of our humanity. But we have also come to know far more than we are willing to admit, and more than we care to discuss about other equally painful realities, powerful prejudices, searing hatred, legal pogroms, social indignities, moral revulsions, derisive fears directed at persons and groups solely or largely for reasons of sexuality and/or gender. We know about patriarchy and misogyny and sexual violence and emotional and physical humiliation and sexual harassment in the workplace and sexual impropriety from the pulpit to the pew to the public square. We know about hierarchies of power and "special rights" polemics and sexism and heterosexism and homophobia and hate crimes and gay-bashing and lesbian-bashing and HIV disease, dis-ease and

death. We know about the suffering and rejection and alienation and exclusion and subordination and condemnation and devaluation and discrimination of those who live on the margins of the marginalized, who are the very oppressed of the oppressed, who are the sexually battered and abused and sick and dying, who are lesbian and gay and bisexual and transgender and straight, who are our sisters and brothers and partners and friends, who are we ourselves. We know, we know, we know because we who claim to be the church have betrayed them.

God knows all this of course, knows that even at our best humanity, no less the church, only sees through a glass darkly. We, all of us have had shadows, echoes, dreams, those odd moments in our lives, glimpses of something dimly seen or dimly heard, a far country, a sense of something deeply hidden within. We hear a voice, unlike any other voice, for it speaks to us audibly and distinctly and without sound - and it is all the more powerful for being without sound - "whosoever." We listen to the sound of the genuine, the movement of the spirit, the eruption taking place in our heart, if only for a whispering moment, and then we start to move without really knowing what to believe either about the voice or about ourselves. And yet we go, for the truth of the matter is we already know what the voice has to say: We have not been willing to risk ourselves without reservation. We have not offered the world very much at all in the way of visionary leadership. We have not been in empathetic relationship, compassionate connection, or moral solidarity, one to another. We have not been faithful to others, to ourselves, or to our God. We have not seen plainly enough the One we need most to see.

The longing is so rich. The hunger is so deep. The need is so vast The pain is so great. "Whosoever," Jesus said. I am so glad for that word. For it is the only answer I know for people who want to find out whether or not God - and the Church of God - is indeed accepting of all. It is a word that calls out, rings clear, breaks through, shines forth, gives life. It is a word to gladden the heart, set the captive free, make the blood run hot, and quicken every pulse. It is a word without conditions, unrestricted, universal, and unreserved. The indelible figure in the painting, in the sanctuary awaits, with arms outstretched both needing us and reaching out to our need. From a distance, the face is no more than mere shadows and yet something within us cries out hallelujah, yes, and amen. As we approach, we can see the face plainly now and we know it. For in that face is seen everything that the world is looking for and more. In that face is found sweet redemption and release, reconciliation and fulfillment, validation, sanctuary, and empowerment, faith, hope and love. In that face is found embodied existence, same-sex acceptance, heterosexual affirmation, the celibate's preference, gender equality, a love supreme. Whether half believer, inadequate believer, non-believer, or true believer, in that face is mirrored our own inner world. In that face is the whole of creation. In that face is the reflection of God's presence. In that face is the imago dei, that is, the joy of we ourselves. In that face is the promise of our human interconnectedness. In that face is the rainbow people of God. Church, in that face and in that word and in that name we have been given our model, our moral, and our mandate. Jesus says whosoever is welcome here. We are all of us one. That means you are accepted. I am accepted We are accepted. All are accepted. All women and all men, all gays and all straights, all children and all nations, all colors and all cultures, all conditions and all convictions, all creeds and all communities - for all time. Whosoever. Come. Home. Ashe. Amen.

* Sermon preached at the Jefferson Street Missionary Baptist Church for the Kelly Miller Smith Institute and Carpenter Program in Religion, Gender, and Sexuality conference on The Black Church and Human Sexuality, Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Nashville, TN, November 15, 2000.

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Remarks

Benediction