

Building Upon a Firm Foundation

A sermon preached by the Rev. H. Gerard Knoche, bishop of the Delaware-Maryland Synod, at the 2008 Synod Assembly Opening Worship, June 19, 2008

Texts: Isaiah 28:14-17; 1 Corinthians 3:10-17; Matthew 7:24-29

I was raised in a white ghetto. The only people of color I knew were Dorothy, our maid, and Carl who took care of the farm, and Brownie who was a handyman on Saturdays at our house. Dorothy made sticky buns to die for. She and Carl and Brownie were loyal to the family, and the family was loyal to them. But they never ate at the same table with the rest of us, nor even used the same toilet. I didn't know their last names until I was a teenager. In a high school of 1500, I don't remember there being one African American student, and certainly no faculty. And I thought that this was the way things were meant to be.

Then came the '60s, and I was off to college in the midst of the civil rights struggle. My blossoming Christian faith taught me that all are equal in God's sight. For years I had sung a song in Sunday School without it having any effect on my behavior: "Jesus loves the little children / All the children of the world, / Red and yellow, black and white, / They are precious in his sight. / Jesus loves the little children of the world." Now people I knew were losing their lives so that it was not just Jesus but some of his followers who lived as if that song were true.

The first person of color to eat at our dining room table was Matthew. He lived on my floor at Yale Divinity School. He was from Nigeria, and I gave him a ride to Washington on Thanksgiving break with some others who were spending the weekend with me. We got to Baltimore at supper time, and so he ate with us. My mother was polite, but not pleased. The first people of color to swim in our pool were campers from a YMCA day camp to whom we donated our facilities. Now my parents have died, and we rent their house to a Caribbean family from Dominique. What a change 60 years has brought!

Now I tell my story not because I am proud of it, but because it shows the foundation that was laid for me in regard to race relations. It was the cultural foundation of that period, but anyone who lived through the race riots and marches of the 60's knows that it was a foundation of sand, that, when the whirlwind of folks calling for justice came, was easily blown down. All it took was a black preacher who was a phrase-maker like Martin Luther King, and I knew that the Christian faith was on the side of equality for all people, regardless of race, culture or class. Jesus' invitation to the table went out to all. So should mine. If I do not build on that foundation, my house will ultimately tumble.

Surprisingly, the second lesson tells us that even if we have the foundation right, we will still be judged on how well we build upon it. So often we focus on whether or not we have salvation, whether we have been justified by grace, and do not think about the judgment that will come to believers. This judgment is not about salvation, but about rewards in heaven for work done building upon the foundation of salvation given to us by Jesus Christ. The lesson says : "No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw - the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed

with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward.” God is concerned not just that we have been saved, but with what we do with the salvation that is ours.

That means all of us as Christians will be judged on the basis of what we have done about our own racial attitudes, the racial attitudes of the church, and institutional racism, also known as “white privilege” in our society. Now the ELCA has tried. From the beginning, 10% of all groups in the synod were to be people of color or people whose first language was other than English. Some of what they tried, I resented at first. The main speaker or worship leader at every regional or national event was a person of color - or even better, a woman who was a person of color. We faithful white pastors, who often had a lot more experience to share, were passed over. But then the African Americans would say they have been passed over for centuries.

When I became bishop, I discovered that the problem had not gone away. One church opposed going under synodical administration because “the synod might send us a black pastor.” Another church had ushers tell a family coming for the first time that they might be more comfortable in the Baptist church down the street. Our minority membership isn’t anywhere close to the percentage it is in the general population of our synod.

On the other hand, strides are being made. St. James on Liberty Road and St. Timothy’s in Dundalk, both largely white congregations, called a person of color as their pastor. Eight churches just completed a year’s learning in multicultural worship thanks to a grant from the Calvin Institute in Grand Rapids. Project Connect, a program funded by the Lily Foundation, has brought a number of people of color to begin the candidacy process. Somehow we seem to have grasped the fact that if the people around the table at the heavenly banquet are to be from “every people, tribe and nation,” then we’d better be gathering those folks around the Lord’s table here as well.

So the task before us is clear. Be sure that the foundation upon which we are building our life and the life of the community is none other than Jesus Christ in whom there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave or free, but all are one in him. And then build faithfully upon that foundation, not with wood, hay and stubble, but with precious jewels and stones. Under these two banners we can address racism in us as individuals and in the church and in society.

When I was in Cologne, Germany, I visited the tall cathedral that rises up so magnificently out of the town square. Mass was being celebrated, and although I knew no German, I could figure out where in the liturgy we were. When it came time to commune, I took my place in line and ended up kneeling next to a young man in African garb, who had on his right a very elderly Asian woman. The person on my left was in native dress of Central or South America. We all were given bread by a German-speaking priest. As I got up to leave, I thought to myself, this surely was a foretaste of the feast to come. May it be so in our congregations.