

Repairing the Breach

Diocesan Convention 2024

Isaiah 58

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October 19, 2024

*Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.*

- Isaiah 58:12

Good morning. Thank you all for taking time to be here with me and with all of us today, together. I very much appreciate you offering your time in this space.

Thank you also to my colleague Bishop Eugene Sutton the retired bishop of Maryland. Bishop Sutton, your words and your leadership in pioneering an Episcopal Diocese's grappling with the legacy of slavery and embracing financial reparations as a way of embodying the Gospel and transforming our communities is inspiring. I won't lie, it's also a bit terrifying.

Five and half years ago, the bishop search committee asked each of the four final candidates to put together a short video they could use to introduce us to the people of this diocese. In my video, I talked about learning from young people, being worried about aging buildings, the power of vestry meetings that begin with 45 mins of bible study and prayer and then I also said, that:

'I find myself dreaming [of] sacred conversations about race. Where I acknowledge my sin and where I and the church make amends and repair, reparations so that we might move toward reconciliation and if we were to do these conversations, have these conversations with vulnerability and sincerity that we might be a model for the secular world.'

That was my longing, before I even knew you. And here we are together, today venturing toward Holy Ground, living out a hope and a dream. But it's maybe not an easy dream...

As a person who happens to be white, every time I speak to a person of color about race, racism, slavery, equity, diversity, inclusion and any of the other topics that vaguely touch on race, I am convinced that I will say something stupid, or hurtful, or massively ignorant. This fear of mine is not without some basis in reality. So, sometimes I shy away from the topic.

So, the idea of building a convention theme around *'repairing the breach'* and beginning diocesan wide conversations on the lasting legacy of slavery and red-lining in Southeast and South central Michigan is terrifying.

But I remember a story my good friend, Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows, who is the bishop of Indianapolis and the first black woman to be a diocesan bishop told me. As she tells it, she was visiting a predominantly white congregation in her diocese and in the course of her conversation with them, during her Q&A at coffee hour, someone said, "Bishop it is so hard to talk about Racism, we are really, really tired of talking about it." To which Bishop Jennifer replied, "I hear you. And it's even harder and more tiring to keep experiencing racism..."

We have been, bit by bit addressing and doing our level best to understand more about racism and the legacy of slavery that is in the cells of the soul of our country. When I was seated in our cathedral, my first Sunday there, I preached on this topic. In our first Lent together Sister Veronica Dunbar and I lead our first book study on the sin of racism. You will remember that Spring of 2020 as the COVID virus spread through the world, Mr. George Floyd was murdered by Officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis. The week after his death we had more than 200 people on a zoom call addressing racism. Following that, after congregation after congregation embraced Sacred Ground Curriculum exploring race. More than 18 people from our diocese participated in an two year seminary program on Anglican Social Justice.

On the anniversary of Mr. George Floyd's murder we led an international service of prayer which included people from across our nation as well as our siblings in the Anglican Church of Canada.

In the Fall of 2020, I asked the Rev. Sister Veronica Dunbar, Sister V, to join my staff as our missioner for Spirituality and Race. Sister V for these last four years has been leading retreats, book groups, study sessions and congregational gatherings inviting all of us to do the soul healing work of wrestling with the legacy of slavery, in our country, our church and in our diocese.

In the Spring of 2021 I convened a group of eight people lay and clergy, white and black, to interview the various Episcopal entities who have engaged in a serious process of reckoning with the legacy of slavery and responding with financial reparations. I charged that group to do deep-dive interviews with people from the Dioceses of Maryland, Texas, and Rhode Island as well as faculty and staff from Virginia Theological Seminary and the Episcopal Church Center. The goal of the interviews, was to explore the processes of the various groups, discern best practices and to learn of their mistakes and missteps. I know that in a process such as this we are bound to make mistakes, my goal is that we avoid previous pitfalls and instead make new mistakes!

All the while our Advent and Lenten book studies have continued with robust groups of people participating and individual congregations are doing their own intentional work, including connecting with indigenous peoples.

This past February, led by Sister Vee, 45 of us from our diocese and a few people from the Dioceses of Chicago and the Great Lakes went on a Civil Rights pilgrimage to Montgomery and Birmingham, Alabama. In a few minutes you will see a video, offering some reflections from that transformative journey.

We as a diocese, have slowly, morning by morning as the psalmist writes, been exploring the legacy of slavery. I invite us now to enter into a period of deeper learning and greater engagement with this original sin of our country. In a time when the world is fraught, and rhetoric is heated and polarities are being stoked by political candidates, I invite us, followers of Christ, to be the people who do not look away, to be the people who wade in with each other and begin to learn from one another, to hear each other into speech, with a vulnerability and sincerity, that will create space for God's Holy word to be heard.

My longing is that eventually the people, the congregations and the institutions of the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan come together to make a significant financial contribution that enables us to create pathways of hope and healing in our broken and divided world.

I believe particularly in this divisive time we, the people of the Diocese of Michigan are called to be the ones who embody Christ's love to our world.

Friends, it is my greatest joy to serve as your Bishop. Thank you so very much for calling me. Now as we watch this video, I invite you to enter into a pilgrimage of reckoning and longing for something more in our land, this United States of America.