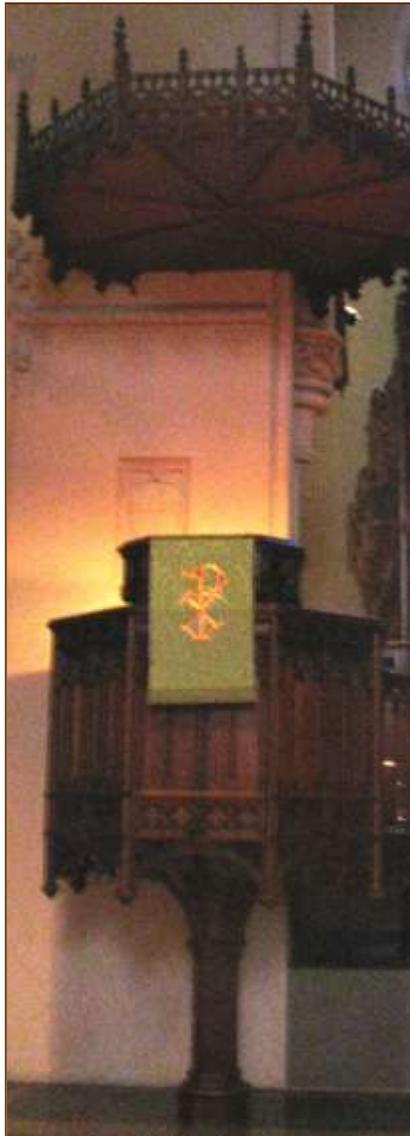


February 23, 2014  
Commemoration of Black History Month

# Sermons

*from a church with a conscience*



“What Do We Tell Our Children?”  
by  
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*What would it mean at this critical moment in human affairs did we in the churches show growing graces and services! A church with a conscience out in front of its age and outdistancing its own best past, in a sense of responsibility for an entire world, in its stand for economic justice, in its demand for, and illustration of, mutual honor and fellowship among races – a church with members whose convictions and characters were ahead of their contemporaries, so that it pulled them forward and lifted them Godward! Then both we on the inside and those on the outside would be in no doubt that Christ is alive and in the midst of His churches and is using them to guide and inspire the world.*

Henry Sloane Coffin,  
preaching at the Church of the Covenant,  
June 11, 1944

## **“What Do We Tell Our Children?”**

**Deuteronomy 12:28**

**Romans 12:1–2; 9–18**

It has been an amazing February! We have been intentional about recognizing Black History month and for me, it has been a privilege to share this pulpit with three prominent “preaching and scholarly” ladies who shared their stories and preached the gospel. We heard about the importance of understanding our commitment to being diverse because it is what makes us God’s Beloved Community. We were reminded of the lifesaving role that many “mourning and wailing women” played in our ancient- past even up to our present day history. We heard the confessions of a Black woman who challenged us all to be hard core in our belief to stand up for justice and the rights for all.

These messages contained challenging and encouraging words for us . And when I prayed about what could be added to these messages and preached about, my thoughts and inspiration led me to think about our community, you, Covenant and how we have had a history of being a church that has made a commitment to stand, support, and even protest for the cause of human rights and justice.

You made a commitment to embrace diversity and as a result of this intention, you have had a great influence upon the lives of our children and youth who have been raised in this congregation and because of this action, you have taken on the challenge since the 1950’s to become more diverse. YOU - Covenant had the audacity to become an inclusive community by integrating this membership during the turbulent Civil Rights Era. Now all of this has influenced our lives as well as our children and youth who have been raised in this community.

Because of this WE are always being challenged to be more tolerant and more accepting of one another **and** honoring each other’s uniqueness. It is also amazing that you called me, an African-American woman, twenty-two years ago, to focus my ministry on the children and youth of this congregation. Me, a Southern woman who grew up in the Southern culture, but Presbyterian! What were you thinking? What was God thinking? What could I tell these children who were mid-western, an integrated group of rosy white and pecan brown faces?

I remember when Jim Dowd told me during my first year on staff that I had to make pastoral visits to each family who had children and youth. I hesitated at first. I had just experienced living on a seminary campus in the mid and late 1980’s where I was the only American woman of color on campus for four years. During

my first year as a student, I was ignored and not spoken to by many of my classmates. I did return recently as a Trustee and preached on campus. I shared with the present student body this story and challenged them to think “diversity” in this day and age. They were so apologetic.

So during my first year here, I was hesitant to also visit members because one of the first hospital calls I made to one of our shut ins was a discouraging one, because the woman thought I was her maid and hairdresser. I never told anyone this story before, but I had to overcome the fear of being rejected because of the color of my skin. And so the home visits began and the amazing Spirit of God’s hospitality drew me into our Covenant families and love and joy grew between us. All of the wonderful years of experiences we have shared have formed us into such a loving family!

And twenty-two years later we can see through our youth and young adults the results of our efforts, results of the nurture, care, support. The gospel lessons we have taught them, the mission experiences we have intentionally exposed them to, and our efforts to model the “beloved community.” Today we give thanks for the connections that still remain between our church and the young adults who are living and working and serving all over the world. We have eighteen who are presently in college, seven high school seniors who will be graduating this year, and ten confirmands who will be joining the church in June. We give thanks for **all** our fabulous youth and children who represent YOU parents and grandparents many who are the 2<sup>nd</sup> and even 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> generations who still come faithfully every Sunday.

**So What do we tell our children about who they are ?** We first ask them to tell us who they are and we ask them to whom do they belong? We embrace their individual ethnicities and races. We honor their family heritages and encourage them to tell their stories. Sometimes we hold hands and affirm each other. We try to support each other at school events, social outings and over meals in their homes. We are faithful to one another when times are hard and when we lose loved ones or struggle through times of emotional or physical illnesses. Sometimes we ask them to reflect upon how as a Christian they are expected to treat one another.

It was my home church that taught me in a rudimental, basic way as I look back upon it now how I was expected to treat my neighbor and even a stranger. I remember every Sunday standing during the Sunday school hour and reciting with all of the children and youth the Ten Commandments and during church reciting the Apostle’s Creed. Some of us here might recall that we did do a lot of

memorizing of creed and commandments. So we knew that we were commanded by Lord God to love God our Creator, to love our neighbors, even those we did not know, to honor our parents, and not to steal or to kill. Pretty straight forward commands/rules we were expected to follow.

We also learned from the Gospel lessons that Jesus expected us to love even our enemies, and to turn the other cheek when we were confronted by someone who was hostile towards us. And in Paul's letters we were told to hate what was evil and hold onto what is good pray and bless those who even persecuted us. And that is what helped me as a child of the Civil Rights Movement to participate in the nonviolent, sometimes dangerous protests during that time. As a little girl who was walking home alone one day from piano lessons these scriptures helped me ("Bless those who persecute you..") as I kept walking through a crowd of children and their parents in the Sears & Roebuck parking lot while they surrounded me and shouted the "N" word to me over and over. And as a college student ("Bless and do not curse them") I stood with classmates on the town square the day after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated while KKK members sat in their cars and pointed guns at us.

These were the experiences that our generation of the 60's experienced firsthand. It was our families, our close knit segregated communities and churches, that prepared us by teaching us to obey the laws of our faith traditions that were established by the Creator God who formed the world out of nothing, out of chaos and brought order and meaning to our lives. For we believed that one day **we** who were even descendants of slaves would finally participate with **everyone** – God's rainbow people in a diverse and inclusive world and yes in a beloved community such as this one! **In these day we ask ourselves how can this community of believers help our youth and children learn to become tolerant of the differences- racially and culturally between our neighbors?**

Our 21<sup>st</sup> century youth and children see our world as diverse. But in our culture we are still struggling with old myths, old stereotypes and old fears that try to separate us. This month's *Presbyterians Today* magazine is titled "**The Face of Diversity.**" (You can find a copy of it in the church library.) All of the articles are addressing the issue of how our church is attempting to wrestle with not being a segregated church anymore. One of my dear clergy friends, Sterling Morse wrote an article, "Diversity and the Goodness of God." He writes:

*"We live in a world where it seems people and nations are retreating in a defensive posture to neutral corners- all out of fear. There is talk of exclusion, borders,*

*separation, even violence and war. How might we, as people of faith, trust enough to the Holy Spirit to refuse to walk in fear and instead begin to honor the differences and potential we see in each other?"*

*"Living in diversity doesn't just happen. It requires the willingness to regularly bump up against other's differences- Often it involves sturdy resistance that over time gives way to open arms of loving embrace. Diversity is good and it provides us with opportunities for community. . ."*

In these days we talk with our 21<sup>st</sup> century youth about the culture around them and the challenges, the intolerances, the prejudices, the divisiveness, the unfair treatment they see between families, between races and cultures between global governments. We challenge them to pray for those who are being attacked. We encourage them to be good stewards and neighbors. We tell them that they are called as followers of Jesus Christ to "rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. To contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers" (Romans 12)

It has been our intention to expose them to different experiences outside of their comfortable lifestyles that are culturally different from their own. For the past 20 years, we have taken them on mission trips every summer to different regions of this country and to Mexico. Our youth always go willingly into these sometimes unimaginable poverty stricken, depressing situations, and act out the words of the Apostle Paul. They always expressed such humility, contributing to the needs of others. They rejoiced with others and they would sometimes weep with others.

Always contributing to the needs of the saints whether it was repairing houses in the hollows in Appalachian mountains; or by the devastated Mississippi Gulf shores where Katrina hit; or on the breezy South Dakota plains where the youth cleaned off the mass graves where the Wounded Knee massacre happened; or where they played with boys and girls in New Mexico; or where they planted gardens in the neighborhoods around Warren; or where they fed the hungry in Chicago, Savannah, **or continue to do so** once a month here in Cleveland; and where they walked 9 miles on a country road in Georgia to commemorate all of those children who had to walk those same miles round trip to attend school daily because the state would not provide them schools or buses.

I remember one of the few times when they saw such stark poverty in a small border village in Mexico near El Paso, Texas. Many were caught off-guard by a group of begging children in their midst. I saw for the first time our youth visibly weep openly because of what they saw. We were all in shock. Later they reflected

upon that experience and how their lives were transformed by that scene and have shared how it has helped to shape who they are today.

Finally, we must continue to tell our children that we have a vision (yes a vision statement) that through the moving and shaking up the Holy Spirit challenges us to live in God's inclusive love, a vision that will always embrace them, encourage them and help equip them to work, to do justice within the community and throughout the world. **This is what we help our children see!**

So as we welcome today to this community of faith this baby girl, Penelope Maude, we have made our commitments and promises to her today to tell her the Good News of the Gospel, to help her know all that Christ commands, and to surround her with our love and to strengthen her ties to God's household. May she grow in her faith and hear all that we will tell her about who she is and to whom she belongs, and how she can be inspired and empowered to one day serve and do justice in the world! And so I ask you to continue to respond by reading together responsively this amazing litany of Creation and Faith:

### **A Litany of Creation and Faith**

In times to come, our children will ask you:

"Why did the Lord our God ask us to obey these laws?"

**Response: We will tell our children:**

**Once we were slave people and now we are free.**

**Once we were no people and now we are God's people.**

On that first morning God called us.

**God called us from nothing.**

Out of nothing came being.

**Out of darkness came light.**

Out of chaos came order.

**Out of nothing came life.**

On that first morning God called us.

**This morning God calls us to be the people of faith in the midst of meaninglessness.**

In the midst of meaninglessness

**God calls us to meaning.**

Out of brokenness

**God calls us to wholeness**

Out of divisiveness

**In Unison: God calls us to community.**

*Ann Weems*



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*Convinced of God's grace, the Church of the Covenant strives to be a caring and compassionate congregation, welcoming all people regardless of age, race, national origin, marital status, gender, affectional orientation, and mental or physical ability.*