

A Sermon to St. Peter's Church, Episcopal
Sunday, June 19, 2022
Rev. Elizabeth Fortenberry Bebber

It's such a joy to be with you all today. Thank you, Fr. Furman— and thank you St. Peter's Episcopal— for your witness in Greenville, your partnership with United Ministries, and for the opportunity to worship with you this morning.

Let's begin this morning with a prayer from former Archbishop of South Africa, Desmond Tutu: *"Come, Holy Spirit. Fill the hearts of thy faithful people and kindle in them the fire of thy love. Send forth thy spirit and they shall be made, and thou shalt renew the face of the Earth. Amen."*

As I've been preparing to gather with you this morning, my heart and mind have gone in many directions. Today is Father's Day. Today is Juneteenth. We are in the midst of Pride month. And our nation is in great pain and conflict— another shooting, a national trial, significant Supreme Court decisions, to name a few. As we bring ourselves to this place this morning, we bring all of that with us. And I invite you, I invite us, to place ourselves and all that we carry into Jesus' embrace— holding us, comforting us, and helping us to clarify what's most important.

I'll be preaching this morning in reflection on today's Gospel lesson from Luke 8. A man named Legion encounters Jesus. We're told that Legion is tormented by his own demons and is not only living outside of town but is living in the tombs, the place of the dead. Jesus asks the man his name, casts the demons out of him, and instructs him to go home and tell everyone what God has done for him. And we're told that the man goes home— and tells everyone what *Jesus* has done for him. He's had a personal encounter with the one who was prophesied to bring light to the darkness— Jesus— who has invited this man, named Legion for those things within him that tormented him, this one who was living in a place reserved for the dead, and invited him back to life. It's a salvific experience— and his life will never be the same again.

And that's what Jesus does— he brings light to the darkness and brings people from death to life.

From the moment this man first encounters Jesus, we're invited to consider what Jesus has to do with the forces that occupy and control us. Here, we see Jesus confront the powers that seek to *destroy* human life— those things that prevent this man from living fully and freely as one who is created in God's image. Here, we see real Jesus' power that has the ability to liberate this man from the forces that seek to kill him.

Luke's gospel passage shows us how Jesus has come to challenge and cast out every power that prevents us from living fully and freely as human beings created in God's image. For some, Jesus' invitation to deliverance is frightening. For others, it's too demanding. And for many, it's too costly. But for those who have experienced the healing and freedom through Jesus' liberating love, they know that it is in fact Good News.

In my role as the Executive Director of United Ministries, a 52-year-old nonprofit in the West End of Greenville, I have the privilege of intersecting with the participants who come to us for services and the community around us who helps to make our work possible. Our mission is to serve and empower individuals and families on the transformative journey to self-sufficiency. A significant number of the people we work with are just one paycheck, or one significant life-hiccup away from being in crisis. Life has been hard for many of them, and they often show up weary, distrusting, and overwhelmed. Our staff and volunteers spend a lot of time with our participants on goal setting, offering access to the tools and resources needed to achieve economic and psychological mobility and well being.

And in all of that, while the goals are important and the tools and resources matter, the most important thing we can offer as we are working with them is that of *dignity and belonging*. To be told that their lives matter, that they are welcome, and how important it is to be seen as people who are still capable of and carry goodness and love within them. We sometimes refer to this as our “secret sauce”-- although it really isn’t a secret because it’s the baseline which guides our work and our interactions. It’s the thing we want our staff and volunteers to show up with in every appointment and exchange we have with our participants.

The reality is that for many of the people who come to United Ministries, simply put—life has not been kind. Some have been born into a generational cycle of poverty— and in fact on average over 90% of our participants each year begin working with us while living below the poverty line in Greenville County. For a family of 4, that’s under \$28,000 a year. Yes, we all make choices, but being born into a situation that sets a child up for life-long struggle is a whole different reality. And for many of the people who come to United Ministries, accessing support in a time of need while also being empowered to take the lead in their journey of economic mobility is key.

One participant, Natalia, first came to United Ministries in 2012 to prepare for the GED exam. Our Adult Education staff learned that she and her family were also struggling financially. As Natalia worked with our Adult Education staff to prepare for the GED, United Ministries paid her electric bill for a month and helped her find affordable car maintenance assistance so she could predictably get to her new job after passing the GED exam.

Four years later, Natalia again turned to United Ministries for assistance. Her marriage had become emotionally abusive, and she used her tax return to pay rent for a new place for her and her children. After a few months, the money ran out. United Ministries welcomed Natalia and her children into our Emergency Shelter program. After four weeks, they were able to move into one of our interim houses in partnership with Homes of Hope, and continue working on longer term goals. Natalia secured a position at a local law firm and her supportive boss encouraged her to pursue further education. Natalia is finishing a paralegal degree and aspires to be a lawyer with a practice focused on families and children.

Natalia is also working with a United Ministries financial counselor to grow her savings plan and budget as she prepares for home ownership through Habitat for Humanity. In fact, her wall raising took place at the Bon Secours arena just a few weeks ago! We are proud to walk alongside Natalia, and others like her, as they reach their long term economic and psychological mobility goals – or, as Natalia has said, seeing things that were once only dreams become a reality.

Our work at United Ministries is influenced and shaped by factors at both the individual and community level, and the work to maximize economic mobility in Greenville requires efforts on both levels. At the community level, the degree of economic mobility available to individuals is largely determined by systemic factors that collectively reflect the level of equitable access that all community members have to resources and opportunities, such as the availability of affordable housing and employment that pays a living wage.

There are strong ties between economic mobility and racial equity and we as a community can only reach our economic potential through resolving entrenched, often systemic and structural racism. Greenville County, and especially the city of Greenville, is thriving—but not for all residents. In fact, Greenville County is worse than almost every county in the nation for helping poor and minority children out of poverty and up the economic mobility ladder. For example, social and economic conditions and policies lead to inequitable involvement with the justice system, with people of color and people of low income experiencing disproportionate outcomes at every point of interaction with the system.

Church, we as a community must continue showing up, raising awareness around these issues, and working to affect change that will benefit all members of the Greenville community. Let us remember that Jesus has come to challenge and cast out every power that prevents us from living fully and freely as human beings created in God's image—and work to change how those powers affect the lives of our neighbors.

I recently joined a small group from Greenville to visit the Northside Development Group in Spartanburg. This organization was developed about 11 years ago with a few people from various areas of community life came together to determine what could be done in an area of town that had increasing crime and a declining quality of life for its residents. The Northside was once home to the sprawling Spartan Mills, at one time the biggest mill in the entire state. Over a decade later, the Northside Development is known as the most creative, complex, and collaborative initiative in Spartanburg's history, resulting in over 400 acres of purchased land that has, for the last 10 years, been redeveloped in the interest, first and foremost, of the community who lived there.

The Voyagers were one of the first groups convened in the Northside redevelopment efforts. They're a group of community members who serve as the elders of that area. Decisions about what is developed, who it's for, and who is involved are made by the Voyagers. In the last decade, they have served as the gatekeepers for developing truly affordable, mixed-income housing that is both multifamily as well as single family homes, an early childhood center based on best practices for over 150 infants-4 year old

children, The Cleveland Academy of Leadership, a public school for Kindergarten through 5th grades and a first class community center with two indoor pools, a basketball gym, walking track and other fitness areas— to name a few. Additionally, they have moved the downtown farmers market to the Northside, are redeveloping an old hourly motel into neighborhood retail space, and creating and expanding the Butterfly Creek Greenway, a walking and biking path connected to downtown Spartanburg providing both foot traffic access and exercise for residents.

Seeing the Northside community and hearing from its residents was inspiring and an incredible representation of *what is possible*. No one claimed that it had been easy or that they were sharing about this work in order to run a victory lap around all they've accomplished. Rather, they shared about what they had imagined, who they listened to, and the steps they took to bring about important change. They shared about the hope that they held out in front of them before they could see it realized— the moral imagination that they carried as they dreamed of what could, and needed to be.

Dr. Willie Jennings, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale Divinity School, says that we must have hope while doing the work of justice. However, “if we understand hope as an individual endeavor, we’re not understanding hope. For Christians, hope is centered in the faith and hope of Jesus. The fabric of hope is the life of Jesus himself. Hope means *shared* life, and it is also a crucial part of the architecture of a new sense of belonging. Hope, then, must be understood as a *shared work of participating* in the life of Jesus in the Spirit. This sense of hope must be understood not as private gestures of wish fulfillment, but work that must be engaged in at the sites of despair that join people together.”

In the Old Testament, so much of the prophets' work when it comes to hope is centered around holding *moral imagination*. Moral imagination is “the ability of the prophet, in the midst of the chaotic experiences of human life and existence, to grasp and share God’s abiding wisdom and ethical truth in order to benefit the individual and common humanity.” Holding out the hope of moral imagination is to be keenly aware of what’s going on in the world but at the same time to go beyond lamenting brokenness and calling us toward a vision of restoration and wholeness.

For example, moral imagination is the ability to look at a boarded-up house with the roof falling in and instead see a home that’s been restored and repaired for the family who was living there. Moral imagination moves us from looking at resource disparities between our neighborhoods to envisioning equity in their place. Moral imagination empowers us to see possibilities beyond what politicians have told us our choices are, beyond what history has shown us we’ve tried, and on to new creations that take into account the hopes and dreams of those most impacted by injustice.

What are the right things that are calling for your attention? Who and what are the things that are inviting you to wait and watch and work— and to not give up?

Rev. Dr. Traci Blackmon, executive minister of Justice and Local Church Ministries for the United Church of Christ denomination, says that the promise of salvation through

resurrection reminds us that whenever God liberates, when God fulfills the hopes we carry, there is always a “so that”-- it’s not just that we say “I’m saved!” but that we ought to live our lives from the framework of “We’re saved so that we can boldly go to city council and tell our elected officials we need resources invested in our neighborhoods, such as what that little group of citizens did in Spartanburg over a decade ago. God has liberated us from being held back by the evil forces of apathy and complacency so that we can see another reality and have confidence that we can make the needed changes.”

Jesus comes to challenge and cast out every power that prevents us from living fully and freely as human beings created in God’s image– including how we see and understand the possibilities for others, especially those who are bound by the demons in their midst. May we hold hope as a shared work of participating in the life of Jesus in the Spirit. May our sense of hope be connected to and engaged in the places of despair that truly join people together for the good of others and the good of the world.

Amen.