
From Beloved Community to Communities of Hope

A Small-Group Study Guide
for Engaging Reconciliation



Ministry of Reconciliation
Office of General Minister and President
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Indianapolis, Indiana

FROM BELOVED COMMUNITY TO COMMUNITIES OF HOPE;
A SMALL-GROUP STUDY GUIDE FOR ENGAGING RECONCILIATION
2009 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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“We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. And what affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.”

— Martin Luther King, Jr., 1965



Brothers and sisters in Christ,

I am so excited to present this collection of sermons commemorating a major crossroad in our collective history: the celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 80th birthday and the inauguration of Barack Hussein Obama occurring on January 20, 2009. This volume was conceived as an opportunity to mark our

place in our journey toward wholeness in this historic moment in all of our lives as Disciples of Christ and citizens of the United States of America. Indeed, we are citizens of a global community who celebrate with us our progress as a nation and our victory in faith as members of the whole family of God.

This thoughtful collection of sermons calls us to our center—the Table. It is my desire that you will gather around tables at your homes and your churches to experience deeply the messages of hope and community contained in this volume. My experience in the National Prayer Service for the Inauguration of the 44th President of the United States was buoyed by your prayers and words of encouragement. I sincerely entrust to you my gratitude and well wishes for your undertaking of this small-group study for participating in the ministry of reconciliation. I am persuaded that you will emerge victorious as we live into the biblical promise that “all of creation waits with eager longing for the children of God to be revealed.” (*Romans 8:19*)

Sharon Watkins

*General Minister and President
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Introduction

I have never been overly enamored with firsts. However, I do find fascination with first questions—those that risk being the wrong question as well as eliciting the wrong answer. I like the questions that we ask before we are jaded with concern for being right, and when we are more interested in why what appears to be obvious is sometimes not true. For example, I was thrilled to celebrate with our General Minister and President her opportunity to preach on a worldwide stage and share her gifts with the new President and his officials. She is the first woman to be asked to preach for the National Prayer Service on the day following the Presidential Inauguration. I could never have been more thrilled and happy for her and our beloved church. On the other hand, if I were a child, would I have license to ask the obvious question? What took so long? Why after 55 inaugurations was this “a first”?

We are all aware of the answers to these questions. However, it begs a larger question about timing and readiness to receive the revealing of change over time. We know that God did not give the gift of utterance or preaching to women only this year. And yet, as our new President said in his inaugural address, “the ground beneath has shifted.” There are many conditions that have precipitated this shift: a weakened economy, structures and policies that foster a few haves and a plethora of have-nots, an education system in which so many children are processed but not taught and a Church which is closing more doors than it is opening.

There have been moments of hopelessness. But we are blessed to be living in such a time as this. We are living in a time of hope and change—and not because those were the themes of our President’s candidacy. We serve a God who makes moments of phenomenal *firsts*, fresh starts on old ways of being, who grants us heightened perspective on what is possible. We serve a God of possibility, and today God stands at the door, beckoning us to take heart within his beloved community and create communities of hope.

Something extraordinary occurred on November 4, 2009. For some of us it was a logical step in our progress as a nation of many colors. For others it was a spiritual moment—a moment to discern the mystical in the mundane. This collection of sermons commemorates that moment, and the “dreamer” who infused into our shared understanding a high vision of that to which we have been called: “Our goal is to create a beloved community, and this will require a qualitative change in our souls”

I pray that within these messages and the study questions that follow each, you will find challenge and inspiration to examine your faith life in community and our mutual call to be reconciled to one another and all to God.

The purpose of this volume is to offer small groups and individuals an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which our paths toward “wholeness in a fragmented world” compel us to be concerned about the welfare of others—to the extent that we are willing to pursue justice and reconciliation for our neighbors and affirm the love of God in people from every nation, tribe and tongue, in our churches and our world. This guide is meant to be used for a six to eight week small-group study within congregations, but it will be useful to ministry partners, other forms of faith communities and for individual study. I encourage you to take the time to read the sermons and respond to the reflection questions prior to your meetings. Note that the final message is lengthier than the others, and it is recommended that you or your group commit more than a single session to its review.

Our beloved church came of age on the American frontier, filled with optimism for spiritual, economic and political freedom. This collection of sermons is filled with hope for our faith family and for our future. Together we span both the familiar and the newly forming visions of what it means to be God’s people . . . from beloved community to communities of hope!

April Johnson

Minister of Reconciliation

From Beloved Community to Communities of Hope

A Small-Group Study Guide for Engaging Reconciliation



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Harmonies of Liberty

Reverend Dr. Sharon E. Watkins

National Prayer Service, January 21, 2009

ISAIAH 58:6-12, MATTHEW 22:6-40

MR. PRESIDENT AND MRS. OBAMA, Mr. Vice President and Dr. Biden, along with your families, what an inaugural celebration you have hosted! Train ride, opening concert, service to neighbor, dancing till dawn . . .

And yesterday . . . With your inauguration, Mr. President, the flame of America's promise burns just a little brighter for every child of this land!

There is still a lot of work to do, and today the nation turns its full attention to that work. As we do, it is good that we pause to take a deep spiritual breath. It is good that we *center* for a moment.

What you are entering now, Mr. President and Mr. Vice President, will tend to draw you *away* from your ethical center. But we, the nation that you serve, need you to hold the ground of your deepest values, of *our* deepest values.

Beyond this moment of high hopes, we need you to *stay* focused on our shared hopes, so that *we* can continue to hope, too.

We will follow *your* lead.

There is a story attributed to Cherokee wisdom:

One evening a grandfather was teaching his young grandson about the internal battle that each person faces.

“There are two wolves struggling inside each of us,” the old man said.

“One wolf is vengefulness, anger, resentment, self-pity, fear . . .

“The other wolf is compassion, faithfulness, hope, truth, love . . .”

The grandson sat, thinking, then asked: “Which wolf wins, Grandfather?”

His grandfather replied, “The one you feed.”

There are crises banging on the door right now, pawing at us, trying to draw us off our ethical center—crises that tempt us to feed the wolf of vengefulness and fear.

We need you, Mr. President, to hold your ground. We need you, leaders of this nation, to stay centered on the values that have guided us in the past; values that *empowered* to move us *through* the perils of earlier times and can guide us now into a future of *renewed* promise.

We need you to feed the good wolf within you, to listen to the better angels of your nature, and by your example encourage us to do the same.

This is not a new word for a pastor to bring at such a moment. In the later chapters of Isaiah, in the 500’s BCE, the prophet speaks to the people. Back in the capital city after long years of exile, their joy should be great, but things aren’t working out just right. Their homecoming is more complicated than expected. Not everyone is watching their parade or dancing all night at their arrival.

They turn to God, “What’s going on here? We pray and we fast, but you do not bless us. We’re confused.”

Through the prophet, God answers, what fast? You fast only to quarrel and fight and strike with the fist . . .

Is not *this* the fast that *I* choose: to loose the bonds of injustice . . . to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house . . . ? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly . . .

At *our* time of new beginning, focused on renewing *America's* promise—yet at a time of great crisis—which fast do *we* choose? Which “wolf” do we feed? What of America’s promise do we honor?

Recently Muslim scholars from around the world released a document, known as “A Common Word Between Us.” It proposes a common basis for building a world at peace. That common basis? Love of God and love of neighbor! What we just read in the Gospel of Matthew!

So how do we go about loving God? Well, according to Isaiah, summed up by Jesus, affirmed by a worldwide community of Muslim scholars and many others, it is by facing hard times with a generous spirit: by reaching out toward each other rather than turning our backs on each other. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, “people can be so poor that the only way they see God is in a piece of bread.”

In the days immediately before us, there will be much to draw us away from the grand work of loving God and the hard work of loving neighbor. In crisis times, a basic instinct seeks to take us over—a fight/flight instinct that leans us toward the fearful wolf, orients us toward the self-interested fast . . .

In *international* hard times, our instinct is to fight—to pick up the sword, to seek out enemies, to build walls against the other—and why not? They just might be out to get us. We’ve got plenty of evidence to that effect. Someone has to keep watch and be ready to defend, and Mr. President—Tag! You’re it!

But on the way to those tough decisions, which American promises will frame those decisions? Will you continue to reason from your ethical center, from the bedrock values of our best shared hopes? Which wolf will you feed?

In *financial* hard times, our instinct is flight—to hunker down, to turn inward, to hoard what little we can get our hands on, to be fearful of others who may take the resources we need. In hard financial times, which fast do we choose? The fast that placates our hunkered-down soul—or the fast that reaches out to our sister and our brother?

In times, such as these, we the people need you, the leaders of this nation, to be guided by the counsel that Isaiah gave so long ago, to work for the *common* good, for the *public* happiness, the well-being of the nation and the world, knowing that our *individual* wellbeing depends upon a world in which liberty and *justice* prevail.

This is the *biblical* way. It is also the *American* way—to believe in something bigger than ourselves, to reach out to neighbor to build communities of possibility, of liberty and justice *for all*. This is the center we can find again whenever we are pulled at and pawed at by the vengeful wolf, when we are tempted by the self-interested fast.

America's *true* character, the source of our national wisdom and strength, is rooted in a generous and hopeful spirit.

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,...
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,¹

Emma Lazarus' poetry is spelled out further by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

“As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich, even if I have a billion dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people in this world cannot expect to live more than twenty-eight or thirty years, I can never be totally healthy... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way our world is made.”²

You yourself, Mr. President, have already added to this call, “If there's a child on the south side of Chicago who can't read, that

matters to *me*, even if it's not *my* child It's that fundamental belief—I *am* my brother's keeper, I *am* my *sister's* keeper—that makes this country work.”

It is right that college classes on political oratory already study your words. You, as our president, will set the tone for us. You will help us as a nation choose again and again which wolf to feed, which fast to choose, to love God by loving our neighbor.

We will follow your lead—and we will walk with you. And sometimes we will swirl in front of you, pulling you along.

At times like these—*hard* times—we find out what we're made of. Is that blazing torch of liberty just for *me*? Or do we seek the “*harmonies of liberty*,” *many* voices joined *together*, *many* hands offering to care for neighbors far and near?

Though tempted to *withdraw* the offer, surely Lady Liberty can still raise that golden torch of generosity to the world. Even in these financial hard times, these times of international challenge, the words of Katherine Lee Bates describe a nation with more than enough to share: “Oh, beautiful for *spacious* skies, for amber waves of grain, for purple mountain majesties above the *fruited* plain”

A land of abundance guided by a God of abundance, generosity, and hope—This is our heritage. This is America's promise which we fulfill when we reach out to each other.

Even in these hard times, rich or poor, we can reach out to our neighbor, including our global neighbor, in generous hospitality, building together communities of possibility and of hope. Even in these tough times, we can feed the good wolf, listen to the better angels of our nature. We can choose the fast of God's desiring.

Even now in these hard times let us

Lift every voice and sing Till earth and heaven ring,
...with the harmonies of Liberty;

Even now let us *Sing a song full of hope...*

Especially now, from the center of our deepest shared values, let us pray, still in the words of James Weldon Johnson:³

Thou who has by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us...in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we
met Thee,
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we
forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand.
True to our God,
True to our native land.

¹ Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," 1883.

² *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, selected by Coretta Scott King (New York: Newmarket Press, 1983), 21.

³ James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," *Saint Peter Relates an Incident*, 1917.

Questions for Discussion

Harmonies of Liberty

1. What does the author mean when she calls us to “center?” She suggests to the President the possibility that forces could draw him away from his ethical center. What kinds of forces can do that?
2. Dr. King is quoted here saying, “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.” Offer an example of how this is so.
3. How does this sermon speak to the legacy and promise of hope embodied in Jesus Christ and His Church?
4. In what ways do you see you or your church feeding the wolf of compassion, faithfulness and hope?
5. In what ways can you see yourself or your church feeding the wrong wolf or choosing empty religious practices?
6. If it is true that opposing energies (“wolves”) are at work in each of us, where does the believer find the peace of Christ, the “peace that passes understanding?”
7. Do you or your congregation have a vision for a “community of possibility?” What does that look like? Does it include people from “every tribe and people and language and nation?” What changes do you or your church need to make to become a church of *radical inclusiveness* that expresses love of God and love of neighbor?



Our Mission of Reconciliation

Reverend Marilyn Knott, Asst. Minister

*Crown Heights Christian Church, Oklahoma City
September 28, 2008*

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13 and LUKE 11:24-26

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) each year sets aside a day to explore our need for reconciliation, not only in the Church but in the world. That day is today. And while Christ's redeeming grace is always needed by us, it is particularly urgent on days with such matters as this one.

Reconciliation's mission, according to our church's mission statement, is to nurture the wholeness of the Church by . . .

dismantling systemic racism and other oppressive structures toward becoming a church that demonstrates True Community, Deep Christian Spirituality, and Passion for Justice. This ministry is accomplished through organizing, education, and advocacy.

Of course, none of that should be necessary, should it? We shouldn't need a special day of reconciliation. Jesus calls us to love, with absolutely no room for anything but love—no room for hate and no place for needing to be just a little bit better than someone else. Jesus not only calls us to love, he commands us to love—to love God, and to love neighbors as ourselves. The neigh-

bor might be from somewhere different than ourselves, or be of a difference race.

We'd like to think the stain of racism has been wiped clean, but a report in September 2008 from Stanford University tells us the shadow still hangs over us. The survey found that racism in and of itself would cause a reduction of 6% in votes for a black candidate running in a national election. Now that is really sad. If a person fundamentally agreed with the positions of a candidate who happened to be black, but either didn't vote or voted for the opponent solely because the candidate was white, the person would only be hurting him or herself. My mother would call it "cutting off your nose to spite your face."

We humans have a long history of doing just that. We get so caught up in our preconceived notions about this or that group, we lose sight of how precious each and every one of us is in the sight of God. Sometimes we can't even get along in our own families or our own faith groups, much less with people of varied backgrounds and skin color.

On a Saturday in January, 1984, my father suffered a heart attack. Dad had stomach ulcers beginning some 40 years earlier, which causes the production of too much stomach acid. He never had a day go by without some degree of pain—the kind of pain that can easily mask symptoms of a heart attack. He didn't realize he had one. Mom thought he seemed different; she kept trying to get him to go to the doctor. But he just kept saying, "It's just my old tum-tum." On Wednesday my brother stopped by. He took one look at my dad and said, "I think we better take you to the emergency room." And Dad went. The staff of the hospital in Stillwater assessed the situation and transferred him to the VA hospital here in Oklahoma City.

I met the ambulance and checked my father in, and then waited for my brother and mother. Soon after they arrived, a doctor told us that my dad had indeed had a massive heart attack, that his heart was damaged, and his survival depended on keeping him from having another attack.

My dad came from a *yours-mine-and ours* family—seventeen children in all. So when I got home, I called one of his sisters and solicited her help in notifying the the clan. But I called Uncle Harvey myself. Not only was Uncle Harvey one of my favorite people, he had been my dad’s best friend until about a year before. They had a falling out. As far as anyone could tell, it was over Dad’s intense admiration for a certain radio preacher and my uncle’s remark one afternoon, born of frustration, that he was tired of hearing about it. From that day they were completely cut off from one another.

The ICU had strict visiting rules. No more than two people could visit at a time, for only ten minutes, every two hours. My uncle, like my father, was a disabled vet and knew the VA hospital like the back of his hand. On the day he came, he simply walked in and walked straight to my dad’s room with no one stopping him. I do not know what either of them said, but it was the right thing. When I visited later, Dad said simply, “Harvey stopped in to see me.” It was about 12 hours later that he died.

My father completed a lot of unfinished business during his last few days but none more profound than the reconciliation with his brother. I know without question that the reconciliation between them was only possible through the grace and love of God. The simple truth is that most of us are incapable of loving at the level God calls us to love. Only the grace of God through Jesus Christ can enable that kind of loving.

With apologies to those who, I am sure, worked long and hard writing the Reconciliation Mission Statement I shared a few minutes ago, I think they got the order wrong on what a reconciling church must demonstrate. It lists, True Community, Deep Christian Spirituality, Passion for Justice. I think reconciliation can only happen if it begins from Deep Christian Spirituality.

What are the characteristics of a Deep Christian Spirituality? Our scripture lesson this morning gives us some clues:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourself. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who emptied himself and was obedient to God to the point of death.

Be in such close communion with God that God can work within you. It is not just a matter of totally emptying oneself. It includes inviting God to fill the void, letting God come in. Remember the story Jesus told in our first scripture reading from Luke 11. Let me share it with you again in this version:

When a corrupting spirit is expelled from someone, it drifts along through the desert looking for an oasis, some unsuspecting soul it can bedevil. When it doesn't find anyone, it says, "I'll go back to my old haunt." On return, it finds the person swept and dusted, but vacant. It then runs out and rounds up seven other spirits dirtier than itself and they all move in, whooping it up. That person ends up far worse than if he'd never gotten cleaned up in the first place.

Jesus is inviting each of us to be the person God created us to be—all of us were created to be conduits of God's love. Until we empty ourselves of all the clutter that distracts us we cannot truly be ourselves. God's filling that void enables us to be the *us* that God knows we can be.

Now that I think about it, perhaps the writers of the mission statement did have the correct order—putting True Community first. Where do we learn about the love of God? From our parents some would say. But sadly this is not always the case. Most of us, I would suggest, learned how to love God and our neighbor from sharing in a community of faith, like this church.

I did come from a loving family. I was also mightily affected by the ministers and Sunday school teachers who helped shape my life. Dr. Fred Keller was a history teacher at Phillips University who served my little hometown church on a part-time basis for many years. I was not aware that he was a history teacher. One Sunday, when I was about eight, I said, "Dr. Keller, do you know where the Declaration of Independence was signed?" He said,

“Well, Marilyn, I think it was in Philadelphia.” To which I promptly replied, “No, it was signed at the bottom of the page.” He roared with laughter and said, “I think you are right” and patted me on the shoulder. The next Sunday he brought me a copy of the Declaration of Independence with all the signatures at the bottom of the page. I still have it. Dr. Keller also baptized me. He nurtured a lifelong love of history in a little girl, at the same time nurturing her likeness as a child of God.

That brings us to the third area in our quest for reconciliation—a Passion for Justice. The symbol of a woman blindfolded and holding scales that are in balance, this offers a proper picture. When justice exists, our interactions with others are aligned so that no one is oppressed and no one is the oppressor. The Hebrew Bible takes justice seriously. Justice is realized when relationships among people reflect a right relationship with God. Moreover, while the prophet Micah tells us to do justice, as does Jesus, the scripture indicates that whether we do justice or not, God’s justice will prevail. Psalm 103 expresses this well, “The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.” The prophet Amos (5:24) declares, “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” While we may try to put barriers in the path of justice, in the same way we place dams on rivers, there is no dam that can hold back God’s justice. Not only are we called to do justice in whatever way we can, we are also called to get out of the way when the river starts to flow. And if we do not move, we will find ourselves being swept downstream by the swirling, rolling justice of God.

Reconciliation cannot, in the final analysis, be separated into three components. It is a single process. We must live in True Community with all of God’s children. To do that, we must develop a Deep Christian Spirituality, which we cannot do alone but only through the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. And finally we must seek God’s righteousness in our lives and for others by doing justice, and not being an impediment to that justice. Let us ask ourselves, are we acting with this person or persons on this occasion or that, in full

alignment with the righteousness of God? What happens on the personal level affects wider and wider levels, and finally the whole world. We are the Body of Christ when we are intentional about allowing God to set our mission for us. Let it be so.

Questions for Discussion

Our Ministry of Reconciliation

1. In the sermon, what made reconciliation between the author's father and uncle difficult? What acts were necessary before their separation could be overcome?
2. Do you feel that racism in America has decreased in recent years? Knowing that racist attitudes continue to exist, what does this say about how one should live?
3. Why does the author conclude that the Disciples Mission Statement's listing, *True Community, Deep Christian Spirituality* and *Passion for Justice*, are in the right order? Can you think of community that is not *true*, or Christian Spirituality that is not *deep*, and if so, what are they like? Finally, why does she suggest that these three can be boiled down to a single thing?
4. How are we sometimes impediments to justice? Think of examples of God's justice occurring in spite of us.
5. Are there opportunities now for reconciliation in your life or your community?

We Celebrate the Victory

Reverend Dr. Timothy M. James

Administrative Secretary of National Convocation

*Sermon preached at Abundant Life Christian Church, Los Angeles
Inauguration Sunday, January 18, 2009*

1 JOHN 5:3-5

This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.
(NIV)

SPIRIT OF THE LIVING GOD, fall afresh on me, Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me and use me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.¹ Even now Lord, let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.² This is my prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.

“Oh what a Mighty God we serve!” What a great time it is to be a child of God! What a great time it is to be a member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)! What a great time it is to be an American! We praise God that Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins will be preaching for the Prayer Service on Wednesday morning, January 21st, for President Barack Obama. I am honored to be here to celebrate the victory with you. But you know, like I know,

this victory is not the end of it. We may surely look back and see how far we have come. We have come a long way—yes we have, but we still have a long way to go.

Millions of people are converging on the nation's capitol to witness the inauguration of America's 44th President, Barack Obama. There will be celebrations, adulation, pomp and circumstance. As a nation and as a people, we have every right to rejoice and be glad. For truly God has done great things for us and is worthy to be praised.

The cartoon in the *Indianapolis Star* on the morning of November 5, 2008 showed a caricature of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Lincoln Memorial holding a newspaper with the headlines reading "OBAMA WINS!" What an amazing victory for the United States in general, and for African Americans in particular. It was awesome to see how this presidential election was watched and celebrated in so many different parts of the world.

Obama won on a platform for change and hope. But great challenges await him. Our economic crisis, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, high and staggering unemployment, a poor education system, and so much more await the newly elected President. He was clear to point out that he cannot solve the nation's problems or address the problems of this world alone or on his own. He is asking for the continued help and support of all those who voted for him and even every American that he has been elected to serve. He is calling on all of us to be a united front of concerned and responsible citizens.

But what has been a compelling component in President-elect Barack Obama's character is his faith in God. He did credit his former pastor, Dr. Jeremiah Wright, as the preacher who led him to Jesus Christ. And that brings me to our text for today, 1 John 5 3-5: "Who is it that overcomes the world?"—or, *who is it that gets the Victory?* "Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God."

We all may thank God for the faith to believe. This scripture passage speaks to us of love and obedience to the commandments of God. What is all so marvelous in this text is that God gives us

what we need. God gives us the strength and the power to obey. This faith is special in that it tells us Who we believe and the benefits of the relationship.

It is true that faith in Jesus Christ, God's self-revelation, brings men, women and children into close and intimate relationship with God. This gives us the opportunity to pray with trust and confidence, "Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." It is this kind of faith that lets us know we have a right to be here, that we can all get along and God has a purpose for our lives. This faith informs our confidence to know that with God all things are possible. How is this? Because God in Christ Jesus promised never to leave us alone and that God can do anything but fail. Oh, what a blessed gift we have in our faith. This faith is a victorious faith because it gives us the assurance that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. God shares with us and cares for us through the work of the Holy Spirit, who abides with us each and every day. This faith enhances our prayer life, because no one understands like Jesus. He is a man of sorrows and acquainted with our grief. He knows all about our struggles, and He knows just how much we can bear. And because He knows, He is able—oh yes He is!—to carry us through.

What was it at the center of the Civil Rights Movement that served to keep hope alive? It was faith and worship. It was in the Black churches where the meetings, rallies, prayer services, and sermons of freedom, equality and liberation came forth. There is where we saw faith in action. This faith informed a people that you can overcome: the world, Jim Crow, segregation and discrimination. In Christ Jesus we are all overcomers. One of the major theme songs of the Civil Rights Movement was, "We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome someday. Oh, oh, oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome someday."³

Throughout the struggle of African Americans striving for freedom and equality, the church has been an ever-present reality. It is true that in some cases and instances, some Black churches and leaders were conciliatory and accommodating, but thank God, it was not the whole church. In his historic narrative *Before the May-*

flower, Lerone Bennett, Jr. lifted up seven gifts of the Black Church to the African American community:

- The church was one of the only safe havens against white power.
- The church strengthened the Black community; it planted the seeds of Black relevance for generations. (“I am somebody!”)
- The church taught Black power and liberation, preparing leaders, teaching reading, writing, speech and strategizing.
- The church taught political economics and developed Black banks and insurance companies.
- The church provided the motivation to survive and endure the pain and struggle for freedom.
- The church preserved the gifts of the rhythm and the songs of the spirituals, now gospel music, and gave us (the most misunderstood person in America)—the Black preacher
- The church sowed the seeds of revolution, instilling within the minds of the people the dangerous idea that there was something or someone higher than the white man at work in history.⁴

With faith in God and the persistence of the church, the people believed that God is on the side of truth, justice and right. Martin Luther King, Jr. would say that, “We are marching for truth, we are demonstrating for justice and going to jail for the right.” And as we observe this celebration, we declare that it was all worth it. As Christian citizens, let us be diligent to pray for our President and public officials, and do what we can where we are to make America a better place to live. We may be proud also of our Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) connection to the inauguration through the participation of our General Minister and President, Dr. Sharon E. Watkins.

Faith is the victory. Our victory in this life and for the life to come is established upon our faith in Christ Jesus. We thank God for the faith to believe.

Allow me to close with a statement by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from the book, *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.; Selected by Coretta Scott King*:

So I say to you, seek God and discover Him and make Him a power in your life. Without Him all of our efforts turn to ashes and our sunrises into dark nights. Without Him, life is a meaningless drama with the decisive scenes missing. But with Him we are able to rise from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope....

Love yourself, if it means rational, healthy and moral self-interest. You are commanded to do that. That is the *length* of life. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. You are commanded to do that. That is the *breadth* of life. But never forget that there is a first and greater commandment, "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy mind." That is the *height* of life. And when you do this you live the complete life.⁵

Thank you Dr. King. Our scripture says, "This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith." (1 John 5:4) Faith is the key that unlocks heaven's door. Faith in God, it is said, is God's power at work in you. It is definitely true that with faith in God you have the power to be more than what you are. For by faith Jesus can do, and will do, within us far more exceeding and abundantly, above all that we may ask or think. It is amazing what faith in God can do. And what God has done for others, God can do for you! God bless you!

1. "Spirit of the Living God," Text and music by Daniel Iverson, 1935, Birdwing Music (ASCAP), *African American Heritage Hymnal*, 2001 (GIA Publications: Chicago, IL) p. 320.

2. Ps. 19:14 (KJV).

3. "We Shall Overcome," Traditional hymn adapted by Horton, Hamilton, Carawan, and Seeger, 1963, Ludlow Music, Inc., found in *African American Heritage Hymnal*, p. 542.

4. *Before the Mayflower; A History of Black America* by Lerone Bennett, Jr., 1982 (Johnson Publishing Company) p. 287.

5. *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Selected by Coretta Scott King, 1983 (Newmarket Press: New York) p. 64.

Questions for Discussion

We Celebrate the Victory

1. The drawing of Dr. King at the Lincoln Memorial holding up a newspaper with the headline “OBAMA WINS!” is a remarkable image to consider. In various ways Barack Obama’s election fulfills the dreams of so many. Say what it means for you. What does it mean for African Americans (young and old)?
2. “Who is it that overcomes the world?” John asks. Seeing the powerful opponents the President faces daily, one’s hope can be severely tested; one despairs that urgently needed changes are possible. How can faith effectively speak to power? As members of a community of faith, are there things you can do now to encourage positive change? When faced with impossible odds, how does the Christian still overcome the world, claim the victory?
3. When one thinks of the centrality of the Black Church during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, we recall it with great pride and gratitude to God. What is the church’s role today in the midst of ongoing inequality and racism? Do you think the church can be too political, too polarizing, or in this respect too “worldly?” Are there times when the church is about more than social justice?
4. The preacher quotes Dr. King as saying that without God “life is a meaningless drama with the decisive scenes missing.” When we celebrate victories, when we endure in the midst of struggle, when we sing songs during sorrow and adversity, what role does faith play? What can you do because of your faith in God that you couldn’t do without it? Write one or two things you would like to have happen, and how you might help.

Dawning Light

Reverend Lina McCrae

Central Christian Church, Indianapolis

January 18, 2009

1 SAMUEL 3:1-10

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN IS BEST KNOWN as someone who prays with prisoners on death row. A member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, she wrote the book *Dead Man Walking*, which was made into a major motion picture. She is an advocate for abolishing the death penalty as well as the founder of an organization called Survive, a support group for the families of victims of violence.

Given the outward role of public and outspoken advocate that Helen Prejean has taken on, it got my attention when I read a quote of hers that said: “Never leap ahead of grace, but wait for grace and quietly follow with the gentleness of the spirit of God. This means that I don’t ever have to get cerebral and lay out an elaborate blueprint about how events should proceed. Nor do I have to try to coerce things into happening or push for answers . . . I simply wait and watch for grace to unfold like the petals of a flower.”

Simply wait and watch for grace to unfold . . .

I find that on a normal day I can live in that space for about six minutes at a time! On the weekend it can stretch to a few hours, and on vacation I might go several days without trying to coerce

things into happening or pushing for answers. But as someone who, like so many of you, feels that all is not *entirely* well with the world, that there are a *couple* of things that need to be happening, a *few* issues like torture and poverty and mental illness and child abuse that require some attention . . . for people like us, the idea of waiting and watching for grace to unfold is, to say the least, challenging.

I feel a similar kind of challenge in our reading from 1 Samuel this morning. It doesn't seem challenging at first. It's kind of a sweet story.

The young boy Samuel is dedicated to God before his birth by his mother Hannah, so grateful—because she was barren, and the Lord gave her a son. She sings a song of praise to God that resonates hundreds of years later in Mary's song of praise for Jesus that we call "the Magnificat." This young boy who ministers in the temple under the old priest Eli and hears a voice in the night calling his name, "Samuel, Samuel." He thinks it's Eli calling him and runs to him and says, "Here I am, what do you need?" Eli sends him back to bed, but Samuel hears the voice again and again. Finally it dawns on Eli that this is *God* calling Samuel, and the old priest counsels the young boy about what he should say if he hears the voice again. And sure enough, Samuel hears his name being called, but now he knows who it is that's calling, and he responds, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

The sense of passing the torch from the old to the young, the enthusiasm and obedience of Samuel, the way in which this miracle baby is growing into his destiny as a leader of Israel: all these things really make for a nice story. However, it becomes *challenging* if you know something of the context, like if you read on and learn:

- That God is about to overthrow the current administration for corruption—because Eli's sons are greedy and disobedient, have been stealing and lying with prostitutes, have demeaned the people they were supposed to serve, treating them and their beliefs with contempt

- That the word of the Lord spoken to Samuel is a word of judgment
- That he will be called to speak truth to power, starting with his father figure, Eli

The other reason this story represents a challenge for me personally has to do with the place I first remember hearing it. I lived in Mexico City in the mid-80s, right out of college, and part of that time I worked with an organization called GATE, which stood for Global Awareness Through Experience. What we did was set up and facilitate 10-day courses, we called them “immersion experiences,” for groups of people from the U.S.—mostly church people who wanted to get an idea of what life was like in the developing world.

Generally the groups would hear lectures in the mornings on the church in Mexico, or Mexican history, economics or politics, and then in the afternoons and evenings we would go out and visit people. We’d meet with poor people living in slums, with squatters and refugees from Central America, with church groups and children. We’d talk with them, worship with them, and learn something about their lives.

The director of the program was a Roman Catholic sister named Stephanie, and when each group arrived fresh from the U.S.—on the first night, the first time we sat in a circle together—Stephanie would read the first ten verses of 1st Samuel 3. We would sit in this new and foreign place, having an inkling that our hearts were about to be broken open, but not knowing just how, and we would hear our *own* names being called and ourselves responding, with some fear and trembling, “Here I am, Lord.”

The purpose that God has for our lives does not always burst forth in momentous clarity. Sometimes it is more like *light dawning*. We hear the voice a number of times, calling our name, calling us out of something or into something. It may take a while to realize that it is *God* who calls our name. We may need help from wise people around us to orient us to the voice and purpose of God. We may need to listen to our lives for quite some time. But

God's purpose remains steadfast—God's will for a world of justice which allows love to flourish, a world where all the parts work together for good and where no one is excluded.

From ancient times down through the modern era, God has been calling people's names, and they have been waking up to God's purpose. Many of those names we know, and many more have been forgotten.

I recently learned about Edmund Dene Morel, who lived in Liverpool, England in the 1890s. After a childhood on the edge of poverty, he left school at fifteen to work to support his widowed and ailing mother. A few years later he took a position as a clerk for Elder Dempster, a shipping line that was contracted to carry all the cargo between Belgium and the highly profitable colony of the Congo. It was big business; every few weeks a new steamer arrived in Belgium filled with rubber, ivory and other products. King Leopold II of Belgium (just to review our European colonial history) had laid claim to a territory, the Congo, that was seventy-six times the size of Belgium itself, which he ruled through a private army as his own colony.

Edmund Morel was in his mid-twenties at that time, and as a bright, hardworking young man, he was given the task of traveling to Belgium once or twice a month to supervise the arrival and departure of ships on the Congo run. He saw the Congo as having a great future, and praised King Leopold for his foresight in acquiring the territory.

But as Morel took on the new task, he began to see that the records he had carefully compiled for his employer did not conform to the trade statistics announced to the public. He discovered that thousands of rifles and cases of ammunition were regularly being shipped there, and he asked what the armaments were used for. He discovered that the amount of rubber and ivory greatly exceeded the amounts indicated in the Congo government's returns. And most disturbingly, he discovered that the rubber and

ivory were being extracted through forced labor—in other words, slavery.

There was nothing particular in Edmund Morel that made him an obvious choice to stand up to King Leopold's apparatus of exploitation. He didn't seem to have much use for religion, and he only stood to lose by exposing the violence of the Congo regime. Nevertheless, the *light* dawned in his life, the *call* came, and he refused to remain quiet. First he confronted his boss and then turned to writing, becoming in essence the greatest British investigative journalist of his time. Along with others, he launched what is now considered the first mass human rights movement, eventually forcing King Leopold to give over his personal colony to the Belgian state.

As we enter into this week as a country, I can see God's purpose working through our history as a dawning light. Tomorrow we honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a man who embodied the Christian values of dignity, justice, sacrifice and love in the face of hatred and oppression. And on Tuesday an African American will assume the Presidency of our country—a historic moment, as we are being reminded countless times.

I'm not talking right now about Barack Obama the man, whose priorities and policies you may or may not agree with. Personally I'm excited about him, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the 97-year-old woman in Holly Springs, Maryland, raised on a tobacco farm, who voted for the first time in her life in the May primary. I'm talking about being part of a country that enslaved African Americans, and part of a church that for too long was silent about racism.

For us in this community, made up of Democrats and Republicans, and maybe a few Socialists and Libertarians, it's a moment to recognize the faithfulness of a God who will not allow God's purpose to be forever thwarted. It's a time to celebrate those moments in history when as a people we recognize and respond to a

voice that has been calling our name again and again, a voice that has been saying, “No more racism. An end to bigotry. Every human has dignity. Every human being has worth.” We have not reached the promised land of reconciliation; there is still much work to be done, but we are growing up as a people.

While driving one morning this week, I listened to the confirmation hearings, actually to Richard Lugar’s opening remarks about Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State, and I found myself weeping—not because I’m especially enamored with Lugar or Clinton, or *any* one political official in particular, and not because I believe the political system will solve all our problems.

I was weeping out of a longing for the world that God longs for, and a longing for leadership that will work toward that world. I think there’s *holiness* in our longing, that God calls us *through our longing* and through the tears and laughter, smiles and shouts that give expression to our longing.

The purpose of God dawns, and we do not see the whole picture. Thank goodness! Helen Prejean also has said that God “gives us a tiny little penlight to see what is coming next,” not a searchlight (or we might totally freak out!). But we give thanks to God for the dawning light, and for the world it reveals. Amen.

Questions for Discussion

Dawning Light

1. Read again the opening quote by Helen Prejean. Does this image of faith that is *humbly waiting for grace* ever come into conflict with one's passion for justice? Or passion in general?
2. Do you agree with the author that we are growing up as a people? In what way?
3. We know that God can call people in countless ways, not just the way Samuel is called. How do you think God has called you, or may call at some future time?
4. The author states, "The purpose that God has for our lives does not always burst forth in momentous clarity." Why do you suppose this is the case?
5. Have you ever thought of longing as an attribute of Christians? What shows there's a "holiness in our longing?" Are there longings for shalom in your life or your church's life?
6. If there has been a time when you heard or saw God's purpose dawning in your life, where were you and what was going on when this occurred? Is there is a purpose dawning in your church or community? Are there opportunities of "unfolding grace" for you, your church or community?



Learning to Be Faithful

Anti-Racism, Pro-Reconciling

Reverend Cynthia McBride

*First Christian Church, Bloomington, Illinois
Newsletter Article, September 8, 2008*

GALATIANS 3:28

THE FOUR PRIORITIES OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (Disciples of Christ) are:

- Becoming a Pro-reconciling/Anti-racist church
- Transforming 1,000 current congregations and
- Forming 1,000 new congregations by 2020
- Developing leadership to realize these new and renewed congregations

Why work to be “anti-racist” in this day and age? As Martin Luther King Jr. Day nears, it is worth celebrating our nation’s progress. The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution legally abolished slavery in 1865. The 1964 Civil Rights Act outlawed racial segregation in schools and public places, provided equal voting access to American citizens of any race, and laid ground-work for equal employment opportunities. Our next President, Barak Obama, will be inaugurated on January 20, 2009. He makes history as the first African American elected to the executive office.

In spite of progress worthy of celebration, a disproportionate number of people of color continue to live in poverty in our country. Blacks and Hispanics have a higher unemployment rate and lower median household income than other ethnic groups. Roughly half of all prison inmates are black, though this group is only 13% of the U.S. population. Opportunities for education and meaningful work with dignity continue to be affected by the color of one's skin.

In our own community disparities exist, though perhaps unnoticed by some. Attend an educational awards ceremony at our local schools and notice the faces of students receiving recognition. In my nearly 10 years of ministry in Bloomington/Normal, I've not had to preside at a single funeral for the victim of a stabbing, shooting, domestic dispute, drive-by or gang related event. (Thank the Lord.)—but I suspect that not a single one of my African American clergy colleagues serving a predominantly black congregation could say the same.

Injustice. Inequality. Racism. It is as real as the saltiness of tears on a mother's face. A young black man dies and the world barely blinks. It's announced each night on the news in cities across the country, but unless it's your son or daughter, your nephew or neighbor—do you even notice? Does your breath stop or your pulse race? It's not *your* loss—just another tragedy for *one of them*—but that's the crux of the problem. God has not made His children to be *us* and *them*.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (*Galatians 3:28*)

Read Luke 10:25-37 this week and think what it means to love our neighbor. Why are we a “Pro-Reconciling” Church? Because there is still work to be done as God's people, *for* God's people.

Questions for Discussion

Learning to be Faithful

1. The sad inequities of race cited here are well known to us. How does the election of Barack Obama to the presidency provide an opportunity to improve this tragic situation? How does his election reflect the legacy and promise of hope embodied in Martin Luther King, Jr.?
2. In this brief sermon we are told that the fourth priority of the Disciples is “developing leadership.” In what ways do you suppose leaders such as Dr. King and President Obama, for example, were encouraged as young men to develop their leadership skills? What are some ways the church can be about the task of developing leadership for the future?
3. Are there ways you might share in which you, as an individual or as a group, are “learning to be faithful?”
4. Do you see disparities in the representation of people of color or others in your community? Can these disparities be addressed, and if so, how? Likewise for disparities in education.
5. In what ways does faith inform how we look at lines of separation that cause us to live as *us* and *them*?
6. Reflect together on Luke 10:25-37 and look with fresh eyes at the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

Celebrating Barack Obama ...and Rick Warren, Too

Reverend Tim Tiffany

*University Christian Church, San Diego, California
January 18, 2009*

ROMANS 14:1

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

MATTHEW 7:1-4

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye?”

WE STAND AT AN AMAZING INTERSECTION TODAY. From behind us, nudging us, are the dreams of an American prophet-preacher, pointing toward a day of reconciliation. Ahead of us lays the arduous work of rebuilding the American Dream, a task we have placed in the hands of the first Black American President. The intersection of the dreamer and the doer is a mystical moment, an “I-didn’t-believe-I’d-live-to-see-it” moment. Isn’t it just a grand and amazing time to be alive?

But there is a greater work than the rebuilding of the American Dream that must begin today. The task before us as Christians is to lay aside rancor and division, quit beating up fellow Christians and take up the work of *shalom*, of honoring one another, of treating others as we want to be treated. Our first passage this morning simply says, “Don’t jump all over fellow believers every time they do or say something you don’t agree with.” Jesus then speaks in Matthew about “a holier-than-thou attitude,” something which has a tendency to come back at us in terrible ways. We remember that simple little saying, “When you point one finger at someone else, three other fingers point back at you.” Jesus tells us it’s true.

And yet recent weeks have seen Christians pointing fingers at other Christians, standing in judgment of others, self-righteously assuming that one side must be all right and the other side all wrong. First, it occurred following the California vote on Proposition 8. Then again when President-elect Barack Obama announced that Reverend Rick Warren of Saddleback Church would offer the invocation at his Inauguration. Judgment was swift. One pastor in Oregon said, “My blood pressure is really high right now. Rick Warren does some really good stuff, and in some areas that I have admired his ability to build bridges between evangelicals and mainline religious and political figures...but he is also very established in the religious right and his position on social issues like gay rights, stem cell research and women’s rights are all out of the mainstream, and are very much opposed to the progressive agenda that Obama ran on.”

And when it was announced that Rev. Warren would be delivering the keynote address at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration, another pastor weighed in: “

[Warren’s] absolute confidence in the truth of traditional marriage makes him blind to any other truth that transcends tradition. How convenient it is to forget that slavery, sexism and war all have longstanding precedence in tradition, but

tenuous validation in truth. If Barack Obama or the King Center had selected Reverend Jeremiah Wright to speak at these auspicious occasions, more than a few persons would have become agitated to the point of having their heads explode. Why? Because many would have seen Reverend Wright's selection not as an invitation to dialogue, but as an affront to their national solidarity and their personal dignity (though Reverend Wright has not stood publicly against equal rights for any American). Apparently, anger about America's historic and current racism is totally unacceptable, while denial of equal rights based upon sexual orientation is not only to be tolerated, but given center stage.

I was invited to join local clergy in signing on to a statement rejecting Warren's selection for the Inaugural Prayer. I declined. Not because I think Rick Warren is right. I don't. I happen to think he is dead wrong about the advancement of a social gospel, dead wrong about a woman's right to choose, dead wrong about stem cell research, dead wrong about Proposition 8. And with all that against him, I believe Rick Warren—and Barack Obama—are my brothers in Christ. This morning's texts from Romans 14 and Matthew 7 put it plainly: "Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do, and don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with—even when it seems they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment."

Stand up if you want the kind of treatment that women pastors receive in churches that refuse to recognize their ordination or allow them to preach? Stand up if you want the terrible judgment that has rained down upon Eugene Robinson, the Episcopal Bishop in New Hampshire, because he happens to be gay? Stand up if you want to receive the harsh and judgmental statements that have been slung at Rick Warren? It's my bet that none among us today would want to stand up and walk in their shoes. We do not want to be treated with anything but respect.

I have lived through the time of people being accused of being Communists and losing the right to work. I remember the Black children killed in a Birmingham Sunday School class and civil rights marchers attacked by snarling dogs. I have seen the terrible days during and after the Vietnam War when *hawks* and *doves* shouted epithets at each other and called each other un-American. I have seen students gunned down by fellow Americans. And I continue to see and hear the harsh personal attacks on people who may be pro-life or pro-choice, who have differing viewpoints about the war in Iraq or gay rights.

And before you think that such things can't happen here at University Christian Church, ask Pauniece Dozell about some of the welcome she received as one of the first people of color to attend this church. Or ask your brothers and sisters who have been verbally abused for their "incorrect" stand on Proposition 8. Or ask me when I have judged President George W. Bush for being strong on opinions and weak in the faith department. It can happen here; it does happen here.

The divisive and abusive language of believers against believers is nothing new. It is part of our American Civil War when churches split over the slavery issue. It was part of the raging battles of the Reformation of the 16th Century when Protestants and Catholics divided over issues now long forgotten. It went on when early scientists were excommunicated from the Church for believing that the earth revolved around the sun or that the Earth was round. And it can be found in the first decades of the Christian Church when Paul and Barnabas had such a strong argument over whether to invite along John Mark on their next mission trip that they went their separate ways. (Acts 15:36-40) It has been going on for centuries. And it must stop!

If we are to witness to a radical new community, then we must do more than *talk* about it. We must *be the community* that we envision. Love must be genuine and deep, compassionate and caring. Learning to disagree in love must be on our agenda every day. We can feed the hungry and take our children on mission

trips of service and mercy. We can offer sheltering arms for those battling drug and alcohol abuse and sing the beautiful hymns and songs of the faith, but if we batter one another when we disagree, nothing will flower here at University Christian Church.

Voltaire, the author and philosopher of the 18th Century who often wrote and spoke out against religious intolerance, said, “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” George Bush, I don’t agree with a word you’re saying. Rick Warren, I don’t agree with a word you’re saying. But I will defend to the death your right to say it. Because if I seek to silence you, I will have no defense when someone seeks to silence me! Radical inclusiveness demands that we make room for those with whom we differ completely. And only through radical inclusiveness can we build a new and better world in companionship with Jesus Christ.

In 1961, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon that would find its echo in the speech at the Lincoln Memorial two years later. Near the end of the sermon Dr. King called on his hearers to be maladjusted. He spoke with his usual passion when he said:

Let us be maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth, who could look into the eyes of the men and women of his generation and cry out, “Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Pray for them that spitefully use you.” I believe that it is through such maladjustment that we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man’s inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice. That will be the day when all God’s children, black...and white...Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the Old Negro spiritual, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”¹

Let’s commit ourselves to becoming maladjusted missionaries of Jesus Christ, spreading a wild and crazy gospel that embraces

the opponent, loves the enemy and welcomes with open arms the brother or sister in Christ with whom we differ completely.

Someone has said, “If it is to be, it’s up to me.” That’s partly true. If it is to be, it’s up to me—and we, and Rick Warren, and Barack Obama, in the power of Jesus Christ. Make it so!

¹“The American Dream,” Commencement address, Lincoln University, June 6, 1961

Questions for Discussion

Celebrating Barack Obama...and Rick Warren, Too

1. This heartfelt sermon is a meditation upon, and a result of struggle with, the question of how we should treat our fellow Christians with whom we strongly disagree. The event provoking the question is Barack Obama's invitation to a minister, a well known and outspoken social conservative, to offer a prayer at his inauguration. If the question were an easy one to answer, there would not be nearly so many different churches. What do you think are the effects of Christians "quarreling over opinions?" On the other hand, what do you think are the effects of a faith community's decision to avoid "divisive and abusive language of believers against believers?"
2. When and where have you heard divisive and abusive language, and were you moved to "decline the invitation" to participate in it? Have you heard this language used to describe people of color in your church and community?
3. We know Christians who hold strongly traditional social views and Christians who seek dramatic changes in almost every aspect of society. Some embrace all things scientific while others oppose much scientific discovery as "unbiblical." Some respect the rational, others the mystical or magical. Some insist on a strict moral code while others seem more relaxed about it. How can sincere faith give birth to such radically different notions among followers of the same Christ?

4. All communities, even faith communities, are mixtures: of true and false, wisdom and ignorance, sin and saintliness, spiritual and material, arrogance and humility, selfishness and selflessness. What does this suggest about what it means to be the Body of Christ?

5. The pastor asserts that we must lay aside our differences, divisions and in-fighting in order to “take up the work of shalom, of honoring one another and of treating others as we want to be treated.” Describe a church where this happens, where one can disagree while honoring each other’s differences.

“We the people, in order to form a more perfect union”

Barack Obama

*Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
March 18, 2008*

TWO HUNDRED AND TWENTY-ONE YEARS AGO, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America’s improbable experiment in democracy. Farmers and scholars; statesmen and patriots who had traveled across an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787.

The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation’s original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.

Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution—a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty, and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.

And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States. What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part—through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk—to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.

This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this campaign—to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America. I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

This belief comes from my unyielding faith in the decency and generosity of the American people. But it also comes from my own American story.

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners—an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

It's a story that hasn't made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one.

Throughout the first year of this campaign, against all predictions to the contrary, we saw how hungry the American people were for this message of unity. Despite the temptation to view my candidacy through a purely racial lens, we won commanding victories in states with some of the whitest populations in the country. In South Carolina, where the Confederate Flag still flies, we built a powerful coalition of African Americans and white Americans.

This is not to say that race has not been an issue in the campaign. At various stages in the campaign, some commentators have deemed me either “too black” or “not black enough.” We saw racial tensions bubble to the surface during the week before the South Carolina primary. The press has scoured every exit poll for the latest evidence of racial polarization, not just in terms of white and black, but black and brown as well.

And yet, it has only been in the last couple of weeks that the discussion of race in this campaign has taken a particularly divisive turn.

On one end of the spectrum, we've heard the implication that my candidacy is somehow an exercise in affirmative action; that it's based solely on the desire of wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap. On the other end, we've heard my former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, use incendiary language to express views that have the potential not only to widen the racial divide, but views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation; that rightly offend white and black alike.

I have already condemned, in unequivocal terms, the statements of Reverend Wright that have caused such controversy. For some, nagging questions remain. Did I know him to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of course.

Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial while I sat in church? Yes. Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely—just as I'm sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagreed.

But the remarks that have caused this recent firestorm weren't simply controversial. They weren't simply a religious leader's effort to speak out against perceived injustice. Instead, they expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America; a view that sees the conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam.

As such, Reverend Wright's comments were not only wrong but divisive, divisive at a time when we need unity; racially charged at a time when we need to come together to solve a set of monumental problems—two wars, a terrorist threat, a falling economy, a chronic health care crisis and potentially devastating climate change; problems that are neither black or white or Latino or Asian, but rather problems that confront us all.

Given my background, my politics, and my professed values and ideals, there will no doubt be those for whom my statements of condemnation are not enough. Why associate myself with Reverend Wright in the first place, they may ask? Why not join another church? And I confess that if all that I knew of Reverend Wright were the snippets of those sermons that have run in an endless loop on the television and You Tube, or if Trinity United Church of Christ conformed to the caricatures being peddled by some commentators, there is no doubt that I would react in much the same way

But the truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man. The man I met more than twenty years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith, a man who spoke to me about our obli-

gations to love one another; to care for the sick and lift up the poor. He is a man who served his country as a U.S. Marine; who has studied and lectured at some of the finest universities and seminaries in the country, and who for over thirty years led a church that serves the community by doing God's work here on Earth—by housing the homeless, ministering to the needy, providing day care services and scholarships and prison ministries, and reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS.

In my first book, *Dreams From My Father*, I described the experience of my first service at Trinity:

People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend's voice up into the rafters.... And in that single note—hope!—I heard something else; at the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories—of survival, and freedom, and hope—became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black; in chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a means to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shame about...memories that all people might study and cherish—and with which we could start to rebuild.

That has been my experience at Trinity. Like other predominantly black churches across the country, Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety—the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger. Like other black churches, Trinity's services are full of raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor. They are full of dancing, clapping, screaming and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear. The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelli-

gence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America.

And this helps explain, perhaps, my relationship with Reverend Wright. As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me. He strengthened my faith, officiated my wedding, and baptized my children. Not once in my conversations with him have I heard him talk about any ethnic group in derogatory terms, or treat whites with whom he interacted with anything but courtesy and respect. He contains within him the contradictions—the good and the bad—of the community that he has served diligently for so many years.

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.

These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.

Some will see this as an attempt to justify or excuse comments that are simply inexcusable. I can assure you it is not. I suppose the politically safe thing would be to move on from this episode and just hope that it fades into the woodwork. We can dismiss Reverend Wright as a crank or a demagogue, just as some have dismissed Geraldine Ferraro, in the aftermath of her recent statements, as harboring some deep-seated racial bias.

But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now. We would be making the same mistake that Reverend Wright made in his offending sermons about America—to simplify and stereotype and amplify the negative to the point that it distorts reality.

The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through—a part of our union that we have yet to perfect. And if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care, or education, or the need to find good jobs for every American.

Understanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point. As William Faulkner once wrote, “The past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past.” We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.

Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools; we still haven’t fixed them, fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today’s black and white students.

Legalized discrimination—where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or fire departments—meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persists in so many of today’s urban and rural communities.

A lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one’s family, contributed to the erosion of black families—a

problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened. And the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods—parks for kids to play in, police walking the beat, regular garbage pick-up and building code enforcement—all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continue to haunt us.

This is the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up. They came of age in the late fifties and early sixties, a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was systematically constricted. What's remarkable is not how many failed in the face of discrimination, but rather how many men and women overcame the odds; how many were able to make a way out of no way for those like me who would come after them.

But for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn't make it—those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations—those young men and increasingly young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future. Even for those blacks who did make it, questions of race, and racism, continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways. For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or around the kitchen table. At times, that anger is exploited by politicians, to gin up votes along racial lines, or to make up for a politician's own failings.

And occasionally it finds voice in the church on Sunday morning, in the pulpit and in the pews. The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Reverend Wright's sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour in American life occurs on Sunday morning. That

anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity in our condition, and prevents the African-American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change. But the anger is real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.

In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience—as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything, they've built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

Like the anger within the black community, these resentments aren't always expressed in polite company. But they have helped shape the political landscape for at least a generation. Anger over welfare and affirmative action helped forge the Reagan Coalition. Politicians routinely exploited fears of crime for their own electoral ends. Talk show hosts and conservative commentators built entire careers unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice and inequality as mere political correctness or reverse racism.

Just as black anger often proved counterproductive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle class squeeze—a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices, and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests; economic policies that favor the few over the many. And yet, to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns—this too widens the racial divide, and blocks the path to understanding.

This is where we are right now. It's a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years. Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naive as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy—particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.

But I have asserted a firm conviction—a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people—that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.

For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances—for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man whose been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means taking full responsibility for own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

Ironically, this quintessentially American—and yes, conservative—notion of self-help found frequent expression in Reverend Wright’s sermons. But what my former pastor too often failed to understand is that embarking on a program of self-help also requires a belief that society can change.

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright’s sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It’s that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country—a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black; Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old—is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know—what we have seen—is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope—the audacity to hope—for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds—by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations. It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper.

In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world’s great religions demand—that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother’s keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister’s keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.

For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism. We can tackle race only as spectacle—as we did in the OJ trial—or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina—or as fodder for the nightly news. We can play Reverend Wright’s sermons on every channel, every day and talk about them from now until the election, and make the only question in this campaign whether or not the American people think that I somehow believe or sympathize with his most offensive words. We can pounce on some gaffe by a Hillary supporter as evidence that she’s playing the race card, or we can speculate on whether white men will all flock to John McCain in the general election regardless of his policies.

We can do that.

But if we do, I can tell you that in the next election, we’ll be talking about some other distraction. And then another one. And then another one. And nothing will change.

That is one option. Or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, “Not this time.” This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. This time we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can’t learn; that those kids who don’t look like us are somebody else’s problem. The children of America are not those kids, they are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a 21st century economy. Not this time.

This time we want to talk about how the lines in the Emergency Room are filled with whites and blacks and Hispanics who do not have health care; who don’t have the power on their own to overcome the special interests in Washington, but who can take them on if we do it together.

This time we want to talk about the shuttered mills that once provided a decent life for men and women of every race, and the homes for sale that once belonged to Americans from every religion, every region, every walk of life. This time we want to talk

about the fact that the real problem is not that someone who doesn't look like you might take your job; it's that the corporation you work for will ship it overseas for nothing more than a profit.

This time we want to talk about the men and women of every color and creed who serve together, and fight together, and bleed together under the same proud flag. We want to talk about how to bring them home from a war that never should've been authorized and never should've been waged, and we want to talk about how we'll show our patriotism by caring for them, and their families, and giving them the benefits they have earned.

I would not be running for President if I didn't believe with all my heart that this is what the vast majority of Americans want for this country. This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected. And today, whenever I find myself feeling doubtful or cynical about this possibility, what gives me the most hope is the next generation—the young people whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change have already made history in this election.

There is one story in particular that I'd like to leave you with today—a story I told when I had the great honor of speaking on Dr. King's birthday at his home church, Ebenezer Baptist, in Atlanta.

There is a young, twenty-three year old white woman named Ashley Baia who organized for our campaign in Florence, South Carolina. She had been working to organize a mostly African-American community since the beginning of this campaign, and one day she was at a roundtable discussion where everyone went around telling their story and why they were there.

And Ashley said that when she was nine years old, her mother got cancer. And because she had to miss days of work, she was let go and lost her health care. They had to file for bankruptcy, and that's when Ashley decided that she had to do something to help her mom.

She knew that food was one of their most expensive costs, and so Ashley convinced her mother that what she really liked and really wanted to eat more than anything else was mustard and relish sandwiches. Because that was the cheapest way to eat.

She did this for a year until her mom got better, and she told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she joined our campaign was so that she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too.

Now Ashley might have made a different choice. Perhaps somebody told her along the way that the source of her mother's problems were blacks who were on welfare and too lazy to work, or Hispanics who were coming into the country illegally. But she didn't. She sought out allies in her fight against injustice.

Anyway, Ashley finishes her story and then goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign. They all have different stories and reasons. Many bring up a specific issue. And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he does not bring up a specific issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, "I am here because of Ashley."

"I'm here because of Ashley." By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children.

But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the two-hundred and twenty one years since a band of patriots signed that document in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins.

Questions for Discussion

A More Perfect Union

1. Many have fought through the years, Obama says, to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time. Where is that gap made obvious for us today?
2. Mr. Obama declares, “This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this campaign—to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America.” Do you have a sense that you are continuing a long march of those who came before us?
3. He contends that we will perfect our union when we understand that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes. If this is true, why do you think it is? What is the problem he’s addressing?
4. “I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents,” says Obama. How does this change his perspective? How is this also true from the Christian’s perspective?
5. Mr. Obama says that some believe the support he has received is “an exercise in affirmative action; that it’s based solely on the desire of wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap.” What might be a better example of reconciliation attempted cheaply rather than shouldering its actual cost?
6. Is white racism endemic, as Reverend Wright’s sermon suggests, or is it something that can be defeated, ended? If so, what will it take to end it?
7. In his eloquent defense of Reverend Wright, Mr. Obama attempts to explain why the minister said what he did. What reasons does he offer?
8. Mr. Obama lists the basic inequalities over the years for African Americans as including these: inferior schools and the resulting

achievement gap, the difficulty of owning property and acquiring mortgages and business loans, exclusion from unions and police and fire departments, and thus the impossibility of amassing wealth to bequeath to ones children, and poverty. What advances have been made against these long-standing inequities? Do you see these ending in your lifetime? To what are Christians called to witness in the face of injustice?

9. He suggests that anger and bitterness are not always helpful in solving problems and bringing about needed changes. Have you observed this to be true? Share an example of healing or how you think the healing of anger and bitterness can occur. To put it another way, is true reconciliation possible, or is it just a piling up of empty phrases?
10. He asserts his conviction that working together we can move beyond old racial wounds, and that we have no choice but to do so. That it means embracing the past without becoming victims of it. Are there persons or groups you think of who are already doing that? If so, what lessons can be learned from their experience? If not, where should it begin?
11. Education is so often lifted up as a key ingredient in any future success for communities, regions and the nation as a whole. He declares that crumbling schools are stealing the future of America's children of all colors and races. How does this get changed? Are there things your church can do that it isn't doing? How can individuals support education in their communities?
12. He concludes his address with a story about a young white girl named Ashley, whose mother desperately needs expensive health care. She has sacrificed much to help her mom and was working for the Obama campaign in hopes that, if elected, he could help fix the health care system. At a roundtable discussion, everyone is asked why they are supporting the campaign. An elderly black man answered the question by saying, "I'm here because of Ashley." As Christians, we know this is exactly what Christ would say—what in fact He is saying for all of the Ashleys and their moms in today's world. Are there places we need to be where we can stand in Christ's place? Where we can be reconcilers?