

Realizing Beloved Community

REPORT FROM THE HOUSE OF
BISHOPS THEOLOGY COMMITTEE

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Foreword

By Michael B. Curry

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

John 13:34–35

I *s e pluribus unum*, “from many, one,” possible? Is the vision of one nation under God from many diverse people, with liberty and justice for all, possible? The phrase is a traditional motto of the United States. It is emblazoned on the Great Seal of the country. It is a statement of who we say we aspire to be as a nation, a society, a people. But is it possible? Is success for the American experiment in a multi-racial, pluralistic, egalitarian, democratic society possible? Is it possible for this to be a country in which “there is plenty good room for all God’s children,” as Africans enslaved in this country once sang?

The question is not one simply for the United States. It is a question for the whole human race. Dr. King often said it in this way: “We must learn to live together as [sisters and] brothers, or we will all perish together as fools.” That is not simply a quaint religious question. It is one of ultimate urgency.

I am a follower of Jesus of Nazareth because I believe his way of love, embodied in his Spirit, his life, and his teaching, shows us the very way and heart of the God who the Bible says “is love.” In so doing, Jesus has shown us God’s way of life. He has shown us the way to live in right relationship, reconciled with the God who is our Creator, with each other as the children of God, and with all of God’s creation. He has shown us the way to the kingdom of God, the way to live in the rule and reign of God, the way to live as the family of God, the beloved community. In that, I believe, is hope for the planet and the human race, for that is what God had in mind when God first said, “Let there be light.”

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In 1927, James Weldon Johnson composed seven poems that were based on the sermons of enslaved African preachers in antebellum America. He published them under the title *God's Trombones*.¹ The original sermons were part of the oral folk tradition of slaves. One, "The Crucifixion," for example, picturesquely retold the story of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Another, "The Exodus," recounted the crossing of the Red Sea, and another, "Go Down Death: A Funeral Sermon," told a story of the crossing of a woman named Sister Caroline from this world to the next. These poems captured the imaginative insight of untutored and unlettered bards who spoke of a transcendent hope through a wisdom not born of this world. Of these sermons and spirituals, and the spiritual tradition they reflect, Howard Thurman once wrote: "By some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insight the slave undertook the redemption of a religion that the master had profaned in his midst."²

Nowhere is this more evident than in the first sermon-poem in the collection, "The Creation." In this poem, the preacher-poet retells the story of the creation of the world as told by an ancient Hebrew poet in the first few chapters of the Book of Genesis. It begins with these words:

And God stepped out on space,
And he looked around and said,
I'm lonely—
I'll make me a world.³

Here is one of those "creative spiritual insight[s]" of which Howard Thurman spoke. Think about it for a moment. The social universe of the slave was a hostile one, with the enslaved person stolen from their homeland, carted to an alien land as cargo, defined *de jure* as less than human, bereft of freedom, and with no earthly hope of anything better. Yet the preacher-poet, living in such a hostile social universe, grasped that God who created did not create them or anyone to be a slave—or a slave master. God's plan and purpose in creation is a loving, liberating,

and life-giving one. The creation was made to be the context of communion and community between God, God's human children, and all of God's creation. Communion of the beloved is the point of it all.

If I may borrow from the vows of Holy Baptism in the Book of Common Prayer, racism is a manifestation of "spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God." It is an evil that will "corrupt and destroy the creatures of God." It is one of the fruits of "the sinful desires that draw you from the love of God."⁴

To say it another way, racism is a cancer that, left untreated and allowed to spread and mutate, can hurt, harm, and destroy communities, societies, and the children of God. I say that as a survivor of both colorectal and prostate cancer. There are three dimensions of my own journey that may be helpful here—diagnosis, treatment, and ongoing monitoring and care. When the doctor told me that I had cancer, it wasn't the diagnosis I wanted to hear. The treatment was sometimes not easy to bear. And continued monitoring has been an ongoing and necessary part of my care.

Diagnosis, treatment, and ongoing monitoring and care are all critical dimensions of the healing process. The medical team that cared for me did not do any of those things to hurt or harm me. To the contrary, they had to do those things to help and heal me. In like manner, the healing of the cancer of racism requires honest diagnosis, real intervention and treatment, and continued monitoring and care. That's not easy. The diagnosis of the disease of racism may at times be hard to hear. The course of the treatment, the healing work, sometimes may be difficult to bear. The necessity of lifelong monitoring and care always stands as a reminder that while the victory has been won, the ongoing work of vigilance and healing is never done. But here is to be found the hard and holy work of love that can help us and heal us.

I am so grateful for the leadership of Bishops Tom Breidenthal and Allen Shin, and to the members of the Theology Committee who have spent the last five years working on this book. I'm thankful for

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their work, but ever more thankful that they have done and are helping us all to do the work of diagnosis, treatment, and lifelong care. This is hard and holy work, not to hurt or harm, but to help and heal. This is the hard and holy work of love that can lead us to something close to the realization of the beloved community of God.

This is a reflection of God's dream in creation and the goal of the kingdom and reign of the God who is love for which Jesus taught us to labor and to pray:

Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done,
On earth,
As it is in heaven.

So let us join hands, with our God and with each other, across all of our differences, varieties, and diversities. Let us join hands as the children of the God who created us all, and let us pray and labor for a world that more closely reflects the beloved community of God. So:

If you cannot preach like Peter,
And you cannot preach like Paul,
You just tell the love of Jesus,
How he died to save us all.

There is a balm in Gilead,
To make the wounded whole,
There is a balm in Gilead,
To heal the sin-sick soul.⁵

The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry
*The 27th Presiding Bishop and Primate
of the Episcopal Church*

Notes

1. James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976; first published 1927).
2. Howard Thurman, *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insight of Certain of the Negro Spirituals* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1969; first published 1945), 36.
3. Johnson, *God's Trombones*, 15.
4. *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), 302.
5. *Lift Every Voice and Sing II: An African American Hymnal* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1993), 203.

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Introduction

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.

1 John 4:7–9

Beloved community embodies the incarnate love of God in Jesus Christ, who was born of God's love and was called "my Son the Beloved" by a voice from heaven. Beloved community is the way of life to which he called his followers as he taught the disciples at the Last Supper to love one another. Thus, the vision of beloved community is intricately connected to the church's historical self-understanding and its ministry of Communion. This is the most important gift the church has received from God in Christ, and is, thus, central to its vocation as it strives to embody the self-giving love of Jesus Christ on the cross. By the sheer grace of God and through our participation in that grace, we as the church strive to live the way of love as Jesus has taught so that everyone will know that we are his disciples. This book is a compendium of the papers of the House of Bishops Theology Committee submitted on the topic of beloved community and its related issues.

The House of Bishops Theology Committee is called by the presiding bishop to carry out theological study and reflection on a significant issue in the common life of the Episcopal Church. In recent years the committee has dealt with issues such as open communion and same-sex relationships. The charge of this committee was to support Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's call to advance the cause of beloved community. Building beloved community and racial healing have been the central themes and foci of his ministry since his election

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in 2015. Bishop Curry’s vision and passion for beloved community are captured by one of his many talks on this topic:

Beloved community is not a fairy tale; it’s not a fond hope that will never be realized. It’s the only hope, and it’s the real hope. Beloved community—becoming beloved community—is what God intended from the very beginning, and it’s what God won’t stop until God realizes it.¹

His sermons and talks have greatly increased the groundswell of support for working on matters of racial justice and reconciliation church-wide that emerged with clarity and urgency from the 79th General Convention. This, in turn, has energized grassroots movements and conversations on racial justice and healing during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd. Thus, the work of this committee is also a timely response to the growing sentiment for racial healing and racial justice in the church.

Chaired by the Rt. Rev. Thomas Breidenthal, the Theology Committee had its organizational meeting in May 2017 in Chicago and began an initial exploratory conversation and study. Committee members agreed to study beloved community from three aspects—narratives, historical documents, and theology—and accordingly formed three subcommittees. When the committee met again in January 2018, they quickly realized that the biggest barrier to becoming beloved community is the sin of white supremacy. Although white supremacy is not the only grave sin that the church must address, it is the most salient and pressing issue it faces in the historical context of the United States, and it is a deeply entrenched and pervasive obstacle in our common life. Thus, the committee members agreed that confronting it is the first step toward building beloved community. The committee worked urgently for the subsequent two-and-a-half years even as it faced the deepening crisis of the pandemic, and submitted a lengthy report, titled “White Supremacy, Beloved Community and Learning to Listen,” to the House of Bishops’ online gathering

in September 2020. The timing of this report was providential, as the world was witnessing the eruption of racial conflicts and violence in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. The United States was forced to reckon with the historical reality of white supremacy and racism against African Americans and other people of color.

The report has been rearranged into two chapters for this book. Chapter 1, “White Supremacy and Beloved Community,” studies the nature and history of white supremacy and explores the theological, scriptural, and liturgical framework for beloved community as a concept and as a goal. Chapter 2, “Beloved Community: How We as the Episcopal Church Learn to Listen,” considers the importance of listening as a way of building beloved community. We need to listen to scripture, to the patristic writings, to our liturgical formulae, and to the stories of the silenced, both in the past and in contemporary society. This study is only the beginning, the first step to understanding the historical pervasiveness of white supremacy in our culture and society and to building the beloved community of Jesus Christ through telling and listening to stories. It is the committee’s hope that the readers of this book will explore further the rich list of references and resources contained in Appendix 2.

In its May 2020 meeting, the committee identified reparations as the next significant issue related to beloved community. After the 2006 General Convention passed several resolutions on racial justice and reparations, some dioceses began working on the issue of reparations. By the fall of 2020, dioceses and organizations in the Episcopal Church had made significant progress regarding reparations in their local contexts and ministries. With Bishop Breidenthal’s resignation as chair of the Theology Committee at the end of October 2020, the presiding bishop appointed Bishop Allen Shin as chair, who, in turn, invited the Rev. Dr. Altagracia Pérez-Bullard to be the theologian co-chair of the committee. In its meeting in January 2021, the committee began working on the issue of reparations as it is related to beloved community. The committee divided itself into three subcommittees

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again—theological study, narratives of reparations, and the study of the doctrine of discovery. In the light of the earlier study of white supremacy, the committee agreed that the doctrine of discovery had to be considered as an important historical and theological issue, one that is intricately connected to white supremacy and a significant obstacle to the vision of the beloved community.

Reparation is a matter of faith, and thus a theological imperative. Reparation is a baptismal call, rooted in scripture, tradition, and the Christian identity as followers of Jesus. The baptismal renunciations and adhesions provide a theological and liturgical framework for the Episcopal Church to make reparations for the evils of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and white supremacy as a step toward forgiveness, reconciliation, and the building of beloved community. Faith communities, therefore, are compelled to sustain a program of reparations that denounces the realities of a sinful past and acknowledges the impact and effects on the present, while transforming present systems and structures to construct an equitable and just future. The report, “Reparations and Beloved Community,” was presented to the House of Bishops in September 2021 as an urgent call to the church to take on this important work.

A sampling of four reparations projects was compiled and written up in January 2022 for the report to the House of Bishops in March 2022. They are contained in Appendix 1 of this book. They are by no means an exhaustive list of examples, as many dioceses and local entities in the Episcopal Church have taken up this important project in recent years. The committee regrets that the limitations of committee membership, time, and other resources did not allow them to gather more stories and examples of reparations from around the church and in local communities. It is the hope of the committee, however, that there be someplace where more stories of reparations can be compiled and shared online by a designated office of the Episcopal Church Center.

“The Doctrine of Discovery and Beloved Community” was the last remaining paper, which was finalized in January 2022 and reported to

the House of Bishops in March 2022. It makes up Chapter 4 of this book. The call to reparations lies entangled with the pattern of recognizing land as a commodity and dividing, conquering, amassing, and controlling land. The name given to this terrible pattern, which has been etched into the lives and history of many peoples, particularly the Indigenous/Native peoples of this land, is “the doctrine of discovery.” The chapter explores the history of the doctrine of discovery in connection with white supremacy and the European imperial and colonial expansion. Christians are to live as those knit together in a “single fabric of destiny,” as Dr. King expressed it—kin of one another, inhabiting this good earth as those who cannot do without one another, and seeking the welfare of other above self. This is the gracious call and command of our Savior, Jesus Christ. This call is urgent; the time is now.

The committee expresses its gratitude for the support of the presiding bishop during the five years of this project and to the House of Bishops for receiving the reports. The committee is also grateful to Church Publishing for agreeing to print these reports as a book to be made available more widely to the whole church.

Note

1. “Bishop Michael Curry—Becoming Beloved Community,” YouTube, posted by St. Luke’s, Salisbury, October 20, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFMsi0mhHqs>.