

A Sermon Delivered by
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The current focus of our Adult education unit is that of race, and the way we come to terms not only with racism, but all the “isms” that plague us today in our pluralistic, diverse and multicultural society. Nowhere is this seen more dramatically than in the Episcopal Church; which is why I suppose I have hung in with the institution, kicking and screaming, after nearly 40 years of ministry. The need for responsible, indeed sacrificial, changes to deal with the various “isms” we face in the world, has never been more apparent than now. Even the mainstream media are noting what is going on in our dioceses and churches, and collectively; the talk-radio hosts, the TV pundits, the news columnists, and the so-called “opinion-makers” are astounded.

Let me cite an example of this. It demonstrates how those of us who call ourselves Episcopalians have become “wounded healers,” a phrase first introduced by Henri Nouwen, and now widely viewed as a construct that helps us to understand the value of “servant ministry.” Here is a report from the Times-Picayune published in New Orleans, just 2 weeks ago. While it is self-explanatory and makes reference to Hurricane Katrina, it clearly has relevance for us here at Saint Peter's in the work on racism, antiracism, and institutional racism; all topics that we are trying to understand more fully in the adult education unit.

Jerome Smith and Bishop Jenkins. They are an unlikely pair, chatting up people on porch stoops in the poorer neighborhoods of New Orleans: Bishop Charles Jenkins, 57, the son of white, rural north Louisiana and pastor to 18,000 south Louisiana Episcopalians, and Jerome Smith, 69, black and rumped, son of Treme, a former Freedom Rider from the civil rights movement.

Before Hurricane Katrina, in the days when Jenkins says he was focused more on the well-being of his predominantly white church than his predominantly black city, they might never have crossed paths. But

since Katrina, they have forged a relationship in which Jenkins, now deep into a profound personal and spiritual transformation, said he has come to love and rely on Smith. Smith, a sometimes fiery activist in whom Jenkins sees a gentle soul, has become one of the bishop's principal guides into New Orleans' poor African-American culture, a landscape Jenkins said he previously glimpsed but did not understand.

"He's my mentor," Jenkins said recently. "It is a good day whenever Jerome Smith comes by." But Smith is only one symbol of the journey of Charles Jenkins, and by extension Jenkins' Diocese of Louisiana, since Katrina.

Broken, but resolute three years after the storm flooded Jenkins' home and nearly destroyed his city and diocese, the bishop is both damaged and transformed. He is damaged in that he lives, medicated, with a formal diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. He said the condition is worsening, so much so that after nine years in office he has announced he will retire as 10th Episcopal bishop of Louisiana by year's end. And he is transformed in that he is no longer entirely the man, the priest, or the bishop he was before the storm.

Jenkins is exploring a new dimension to his Christian vocation. Its shape is still evolving. And Jenkins acknowledges his journey of discovery might be halting, and even occasionally off course. "I don't know if I'm on the right road, but I think I am," he said recently. "I know that God is with me on that road. And I hope that in trying to please him, I do. I'm searching for God. And also searching for myself."

Fundamentally, Jenkins has embarked on a personal re-educational quest in which he seeks to see the city through the eyes of the poor. And that education inevitably yields a new personal mission: to work for citywide racial reconciliation and for purging the social injustices Katrina laid bare. Before the storm, "I thought Christianity and priesthood were primarily about the cult, the ecclesiastical institution," Jenkins said. "And doing the actions correctly -- holding my fingers correctly at Mass, for example, or not wearing brown shoes when celebrating the Eucharist. I thought that it was getting all those institutional things right. "But I was missing the larger picture of the dignity of humanity and the world for whom Christ died."

And so developed a new mission - In the spring of 2007, with that

personal transformation well under way, Jenkins preached that new mission-imperative to his recovering church. He said he feared less what might happen to his damaged diocese than what might not happen -- that his community of 54 congregations might shirk the need to confront social evils Katrina had exposed. The Episcopal church's new mission, he told them, would be not merely to dispense charity, like the New Testament Good Samaritan on the Jericho road, but to remake the road itself and fashion a just civil society -- what the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. famously called "the beloved community." "Let me be clear," the bishop told a meeting of Episcopal clergy in the fall of last year. "I do not want much -- just a revolution."

Whoa. Say again. What did the bishop tell his clergy?

"Let me be clear," he said, telling a meeting of Episcopal clergy in the fall of last year. "I do not want much – just a revolution."

Apparently what the bishop had in mind was a revolution of values.

OK - back to the text.

With willing hands from new leaders he recruited for the new mission, Jenkins has restructured the diocese in service to that new goal. The diocese launched the Jericho Road Housing Initiative, which has built 17 low-cost homes in Central City and has property to build 49 more.

It has hired people like Joe Blakk, an African-American rapper, and Shakoor Aljuwani, a former Muslim, former atheist, recent Episcopal convert and community organizer, to work with poor people across the region, teaching them how to help themselves. Before the storm, "we never would've had a community organizer on the bishop's staff to begin with. And it certainly wouldn't have been someone with Shakoor's background," said another newcomer Jenkins hired. In late 2007, Jenkins himself joined a predominantly black activist coalition that resisted, unsuccessfully, plans by federal officials to raze four sprawling public-housing complexes and replace them with mixed-income developments.

Jenkins' transformation actually began two or three days after Katrina

hit New Orleans and filled the city with water, as well as the plight of tens of thousands of stranded residents that horrified the world. Having evacuated from New Orleans, he was alone at a friend's house in Baton Rouge when the televised images of exhausted evacuees begging for help at the Morial Convention Center torched his soul, driving him to his knees in prayer. What he saw, he says now, was not merely suffering resulting from decades of social and economic inequality. He saw sin itself: malignant, writhing evil, freshly troweled up from the soil of his very city; social sin, which, for all of his theological sensitivity, he had only dimly sensed. It nearly broke him. In the language of the Christian mystic St. John of the Cross, he entered his "dark night of the soul."

"I was overwhelmed. Absolutely. I knew that I did not have the mind or heart or spiritual depth to make an adequate response to what I saw happening to us," he said recently. "I began to weep. I moved toward despair." After that trauma, Jenkins set out on what he and those close to him describe as a spiritual journey. As many do, it began with personal contrition. The toll was not only spiritual, but psychological. When Katrina struck in 2005, Jenkins and his wife, Louise, lost their new home in Slidell, after having slept there only four nights. They are back in the house, but in the storm's aftermath, Jenkins became an evacuee, a FEMA number, and a Road Home applicant.

Then the need for Medical help arose. For months, Jenkins, who possesses a dry, devastating wit, has been open with his flock about his struggle with post-traumatic stress. As he told a gathering of his diocese nearly two years ago: "I am under the care of a specialist and I am on medication. The decision to retire followed a few weeks later.

Now a time of new life has emerged. Under Smith's guidance, Bishop Jenkins is learning the ways of a new culture -- new perceptions, new appreciation of how the world works for those who are poor. He is even learning slightly altered values. The value of open hospitality, for example. "Jerome Smith has taught me so many of the little ritual acts of human dignity," Jenkins said. "He's taught me to say, 'Hello, how ya doin'?' ... You say it that way in the community and people say, 'Whoa, who is that dude?'" Jenkins chuckles at the memory of calling Smith from an Episcopal meeting in Utah. "I called Jerome from the House of Bishops. He said, 'What are you doing in Salt Lake City?' "I said, 'I'm standing out here on the sidewalk, saying hello to white people and making them nervous.'

Wounded healers; servants of Christ.... Like Bishop Jenkins it could well be we are all called to enter some dark nights of our own souls, and seek the religious transformation that will put us in touch with the human condition ...as it really is. This is not good news in the usual sense, as found for example in the Gospel of prosperity, rather it is good news about the gospel of liberation and freedom to follow the truth, and to seek justice – believing in the dignity of every human being, as we are instructed in our baptismal covenant.

So I encourage you to reflect on Bishop Jenkins transformation, on the mission and work of the Episcopal Church, and the vows and commitments we have all made to honor God. Sometimes it takes a hurricane to get our attention, other times it is the still, small, quiet voice within. Whatever it is for you, I simply ask you to consider all this

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CREDITS:

NEW ORLEANS: An Episcopal Bishop's Epiphany By Bruce Nolan,
The Times-Picayune, January 17, 2009