

## ***“The Search for the Faithful City”***

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Let me take the liberty to salute my friend and colleague, presiding Bishop C.E. Thomas with whom I have been friends now for several hundred years. And also my brother Bishop Bass of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. He and I pastored together several years ago in the City of Angels, and so I feel very much at home with these two brothers here to cheer me on.

My brothers and sisters who are here at this very important convocation, I accepted this invitation when it was issued to me by Rev. Ronald Nored, and I wanted to come and to be with you and also to see Rev. Nored's work and ministry about which I have heard and read a great deal. And when he invited me, not only did he tell me I was coming, he also told me what I was to speak on.

And I do profoundly respect people who give me subjects. I always at least refer to them. Now having made my reference to it, I will tell you what it is and proceed to say what I plan to say.

The subject he gave me was “The Search for the Faithful City,” and I am going to allow that to be the subject of my speech. I may or may not get back to it.

“The Search for the Faithful City.” I take it that this is what you are about in this whole convocation, a conversation about the search for the Faithful City. I believe that the search for the faithful city begins with a clear vision of what a faithful city is. We love to quote Proverbs. “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” I like to say it the opposite way. “Where there *is* vision, the people prosper.” And so, we must begin with that vision, and what I would like to do is to put some content in the vision. To leave that nebulous word, “vision” hanging out there with no content in it would be unfair.

The search for the faithful city begins with a clear vision of a faithful city, and the first content in that vision has to be that it is inclusive. It must be multiracial, multicultural, inter-faith, inter-denominational. It must speak to the individual, the organization, the institutional life of the community. It must talk about wholeness for its citizenry: Mind, body, spirit must all be addressed. It must embrace those who are in the struggle for equity in our society, as I call the race, class, gender, age struggles the equity struggles of our time. And many of us wish they would go away, but they are not. Every generation is going to renew the effort to achieve equity until it is accomplished.

And this vision must be inclusive enough to have a sense of balance between bread and roses, the necessities and the ambiance, the technology and the spirituality, and love must be its motive and justice its means.

So the first content in a clear vision of a faithful city is that the vision must be inclusive. Not only must it be inclusive, then it must be indigenous. You can't borrow a vision from Atlanta, paint it Alabama and stick it here. You've got to build your vision out of your own history and to fulfill your own hopes. And that indigenous vision must address the pain in your own town and the possibilities in your own town.

Therefore, when we talk about an indigenous vision, we're talking about a vision that speaks to the issue of housing and how do we get quality housing that is both quality and affordable? How do we do education which is both excellent and accessible? How do we do employment that not only rewards but also fulfills? How do we build neighborhoods that are diverse, safe and drug-free? How do you health care that makes all the people well, not a few of the people wealthy? How do you transportation

that delivers, is convenient and doesn't pollute? How do we do public service that is efficient, economical and equally distributed to all the people? How do we make government the servant to the people, rather than people the servant of the government?

So, in my experience, budgets are the chief instruments of policy. All our magnificent rhetoric will not take us one step forward unless we confiscate the budget.

I ask pastors and churches, "Now we've had a million dollars worth of change. How many dollars have you moved in your budget?" "None." So, we must make budgets the instruments of policy that bring dignity and decency to our communities.

The vision must be inclusive. It must be indigenous. And then it must be instructive. Any vision worth its salt will inform our decision-making and will instruct our behavior. I suspect, if we could get a psychological analysis, that all the people with deviant and antisocial and perhaps demonic behaviors act that way because they have no vision in their lives to instruct their behavior. The vision must be instructive so that we insist on accountability. It must influence public policy. It must inspire the people to keep trying, and it must instill a sense of hope. And most of all, a vision must be inspiring.

When I lived in Washington, Congressman Ron Dellums from Oakland used to talk about the sense of "futurelessness" in the inner city of Oakland. And I used to say that he must have invented that word to confuse me. Then I was reading more recently Cornel West's magnificent little volume on *Race Matters*, where in the chapter on Nihilism and the Inner City, he talks about the hopelessness as being one of the primary causes of the pathology in that community. And I began to understand why Dante, the medieval writer, put this inscription before the portals of hell: "Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here."

But we have a theological solution. James Moffatt, the British Biblical scholar in his

*Interpretation of Romans* says that being in hell is to stew in one's own juices. Just parenthetically, have you ever had to simmer in the mess you've made? That's what Moffatt says is to be in hell. It becomes hopelessness when there is nobody to get you out. And we claim the hope that we have somebody who will come along and get us out. So, our vision as a faithful people in search of a faithful city must include that theological dimension, that if we trust him and are faithful to him and obedient to him, he will come get us out of our own juices.

So, if you are going to search for a faithful city in Birmingham, begin it with a vision which will cause the city to prosper, that is inclusive, that is indigenous, that is instructive and that is inspiring.

Now the second component as I suggest to you how you search for the faithful city called Birmingham is that all of your assumptions and language must be faithful. You must really assume and believe that persons can change and be changed. It's only when you bring the dimension of faith to the table that you can stand there and affirm and declare, debate, advocate and defend the assumption that people can change and be changed. Nobody else believes that but us. And if we leave that out, there's not much future.

That neighborhoods can change and be changed. That institutions can change and be changed. That systems--Lord, have mercy--systems, infrastructures can change, that attitudes can change and be changed, that churches, excuse me, yes, that churches can change and be changed. That budgets can change and be changed. And that definitions can change and be changed. I say that with all sincerity because I tell you in my lifetime I have discovered that whoever makes the definition has already forecast the outcome. So you wonder why the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? The rich bought the definitions. And I wonder why I have to fight the same fights my father fought, and now my children are fighting the same fights I fought. It's because the racists make the definitions.

And so our language must be positive and redemptive and faithful. We must talk about, “improve, enlarge, enhance, expand, equality, equity, fairness, justice, concern, care, compassion and commitment,” and then we can get to the real words of faith, “renew, redeem, transform, even resurrect.”

And if your city is like all the other cities I have lived in, there are some parts of it and some people in it who need, not renewal, they need resurrection. The office building which I occupied when I lived in Atlanta was on Auburn Avenue, and Auburn Avenue had been declared a historic area. With that historic label, you couldn't do anything to your property without clearing it with the commission. People on the commission had never been on Auburn Avenue. So the big sign out front announcing my office fell and brought some of the front down. And in order to put it back up, I had to get an architect to draw a plan that said I was going to put it back just like it was and take it to the commission. And I did, and I did my little shuffle so that I could get what I wanted. I said, “Oh, wonderful commission, you do such great work. Now please approve my plan.” And they did. I said, “Now that you have approved my plan, may I say something else?” I said, “Auburn Avenue does not need to be preserved. It needs resurrection.”

The third step in this journey is that we must intentionally, deliberately, consciously, conscientiously, and consistently work at building relationships across all the lines we have drawn between us. And then we have sanctified these distinctions with theology. We have rationalized them with sociology, and we have internalized them with psychology. So, the lines are there. We must find a way to break them down and wipe them out. Across racial lines--and I don't need to give anybody in Birmingham a lesson on racial lines. It was from a jail here that a certain letter was written, wasn't it? It was here that some kids got killed in church. Race? No, I don't need to talk to you about that. You need to talk to me about that. Gender. Class. Age. Neighborhood. Denomination.

Faith group. Culture. Across vocations. World views.

People don't understand that one of the cleavages between white churches and black churches is that white churches were part of the culture and black churches were the counter-culture. And it is hard to marry a mainstream culture with a culture that was developed to counteract it. And we must work at getting past that line, because it is wide and the paint appears to be indelible.

So, vision. Language. Relationships. And then we must practice the faithful use of power. First of all, I want you to abandon your fear of the word “power.” Somebody got it. All I want is my share. There is a direct relationship between your dignity and self-respect and how much power you have over the decisions that determine your life. So, we must faithful in the use of power. Which means that we must allow new leadership to emerge that does not bring with it as much baggage as we carry. Let me say that one more time. (I can say anything I please because I am leaving town first thing in the morning.)

All of us, the church to which I belong, the city in which I live, probably the congregation to which you belong and the city in which you live, is suffocating under the choke of leadership that has grown both tired and obsolete. So, we need as a faith community to purposively empower and enable the emergence of new leadership that has no baggage and owes no heavy debts they've got to pay. That means we can begin to effect what I call the real transfer of power. I was in Atlanta for four years, and it was the four years that paralleled former President Carter's Atlanta Project. Now the Atlanta Project spent between \$35 and \$50 million to accomplish practically nothing--because you cannot change the neighborhood, you cannot change the city, you cannot change the character of a community, until you participate in the transfer of power from the powerful to the powerless. You can spend \$50 billion in Birmingham, but if you don't empower the people you spend it on, you will be back next year needing an-

other \$50 billion. The victims and the marginalized must be empowered.

So, change the definition and who makes the definition and why they have made it, and move it from “they” to “we” and from “I” to “us.” I have always been offended by the interpretation of the American economy where they say, “Let the market decide.” Are you serious? “You mean you’re going to let the market decide on me? I’m not going to have anything to do with it?” My hair used to be red, but my politics have never been red. But I declare that we’ve got to apply the word “democracy” somewhere in our economic philosophy, so that we not only let the market decide, we also let the people decide. That the common good of the common people is important.

Now you will never do anything to build a faithful city unless you have some leadership committed to a faithful city, because I can’t separate leadership from the development and progress of any institution. As a bishop, I go through the motion of assigning pastors, and I can send one pastor to a church and it will dry up like a sun-dried prune. I can send another pastor--same people, same church, same community--and it will bloom. Leadership does make a difference, so it does matter who the leadership is. It matters what their commitments are, and they must be committed enough to bring some passion to the search for the faithful city. The issues of apathy and indifference disturb me.

If we are going to find the faithful city at the end of our search, we’ve got to get some fire in our belly. We need some passion about justice and education and what happens to our children in the streets and in the schools. When we get that fire in our belly, we will get closer and closer to the faithful city.

If you do this, if you succeed, if you put this together and you make it work, if you develop a faithful city where power is transferred, where change is real, where new leadership is enabled and nourished, you will be so controversial, you will have so many adversaries, you will be the target of

so many outrageous allegations, you will be offered the deception of respectability, you will be tempted with the benefits of success, but I plead with you...Make it work, then practice the disciplines of the desert when you finally get to the Promised Land.