

Fall Convocation 2016
“What the Worlds Needs Now: Building Authentic Community”
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It is so awesome to be back in North Carolina. I grew up in Brevard and my sister, Lynn, a 1975 graduate of Wake Forest lives in Hendersonville. One of my favorite stories is about the time Lynn and my husband, Bernie, and I were white water rafting down the Nantahala river in the mountains of North Carolina.

We failed to maneuver our boat properly down a six -foot drop in the river and were thrown from the boat. Lynn managed to get out of the water, but Bernie and I found ourselves in the freezing, fast rapids being carried down stream toward the deadly Wesser falls --- which they had warned us about during the orientation.

Several people frantically yelled instructions from the river bank. They warned, “Let the river carry you. We will drop ropes from the overpass.... one mile down river.”

I heard their instructions. But, my overwhelming instinct was to get myself out of that river. I kept trying to put my feet down, to stand up---and kept getting knocked over by the strong currents, all the while becoming more and more exhausted.

Finally, I managed to catch a glimpse of Bernie’s head bobbing in the white caps. He looked so serene, so “in the moment” --- like he was actually enjoying the ride.

Eventually, I surrendered and let the river carry me; trusting that what I needed would be given.

The ropes were dropped, as promised, and we were rescued.

Later, I asked Bernie how he managed to be such a Zen Master while heading toward Wesser Falls.

Bernie said, “I wasn’t paying attention during the orientation. I had no idea we were heading toward dangerous falls.”

I can’t remember a time in my adult life when our nation felt more divided. I can’t remember a time in my adult life when it felt that the soul of our nation was more in danger? So the questions I hope we can work with this morning are: How do we become repairers of the breach? How do we surrender, lean back in the river that flows toward justice, and trust that everything we need will be given in just the right timing?

Most of you know Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist Monk who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Vietnam war--- another very divided time in our nation. He wrote:

“Building communities that practice understanding, loving-kindness and compassion may be the most important thing we can do for the survival of our world.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: “Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.”

Building beloved, authentic community may be the most effective way we can help create a more just world in which **everyone** comes to know their life matters.

For as Rev. William Barber put it; “ Either all of us matter or none of us matter.”

So I'd like to name four characteristics of the kinds of communities---- particularly faith communities---that are repairers of the breach in these dangerously divided times; communities upon which the survival of our world depends.

Years ago, one of the residents of Samaritan Inns, the non-profit we nurtured, in Washington DC, invited me to come visit him at his new job. Later when he walked me to my car I commented, “people really seem to love you here.” He replied, “Yeah, but it doesn't mean anything. They only know what I choose to present. They don't even know I am a recovering addict, something as core to my survival as that.”

Too often church is a place where we present our polished, surface selves when what all of us long for and desperately need is a place to be deeply known and loved-- in all our brokenness.

If our world is to survive, the kind of communities needed are communities where we bring not only our gifts but our brokenness; where we are able to invite others to stand with us in our most entrenched and unsavory struggles. In our Recovery Café community we believe holding others accountable to who they say they want to become is the most loving thing we can do. Loving accountability involves being deeply known and accepted just as we are. The paradox is that change most often occurs when we are accepted just as we are before we've changed.

I love Pope Francis' saying that churches need to be field hospitals. I'd add churches need to be field hospitals with recovery support services; because all of us are recovering from something. If we're not in active recovery from something we are simply in active denial.

Which brings me to the second characteristic of the kinds of communities upon which the survival of our world depends. We must build communities that cross racial, socioeconomic, political, religious and other barriers. We must build authentic relationships with people whose life experiences are radically different from our own until their sufferings becomes our sufferings and their joys become our joys.

Building communities across these divides is exasperating, exhausting and sometimes exhilarating.

Once after my Dad---a 1944 graduate of Wake Forest--- visited New Creation Community in Seattle, I asked him what he thought about my little church?" He responded, "Well, most churches have their share of odd people, but your church has more than it's share."

In 1999, during the very violent, last year of apartheid, our DC faith community spent time in South Africa with the Johweto community; a community made up of a hand full of whites from Johannesburg and a hand full of blacks from Soweto who lived together on a farm in defiance of the segregation laws of their country.

One of the members of their community, named Silulama, explained to me, "South Africa has lots of activists who work tirelessly for justice and to end apartheid, but most of them do not have one, single authentic relationship that crosses a racial or socio-economic barrier."

Real relationships are what change us and ultimately change our surrounding world. Is it possible and more comfortable for us to live our lives around people whose race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and socioeconomic realities are similar to our own? Of course it is, but homogenous communities are not as likely to be transformative communities, and what the world needs now are communities that literally transform us and empower us to transform the larger culture.

In 1993 Samaritan Inns purchased another old, run-down apartment building to be transformed into our second, drug and alcohol free, housing community.. We had obtained the appropriate construction permits and construction was well under way when city officials rolled onto our property and shut down construction.

What we soon discovered was that we had not violated any city codes; rather the neighbors had put so much pressure on the city to keep the women and men we served out of their neighborhood that the city officials had caved under the pressure.

To make a long, four-year story short, Samaritan Inns ended up suing the District of Columbia for violation of the Fair Housing Laws of the Civil Rights Amendment. The case ended up in federal court in a thirteen-day trial and at the end of the trial, the judge ruled that the District of Columbia had, in fact, acted in gross violation of the Fair Housing Laws by knowingly discriminating against the women and men Samaritan Inns served. We resumed construction and opened a beautiful 42 unit, apartment building.

It's important to note that we did not just wake up one morning and decide we wanted to spend the next four years embroiled in legal battles. Our willingness to fight **for** those suffering injustice grew out of our call to be in relationship **with** those suffering injustice. If we truly are growing in love with our neighbors who are suffering at the hands of unjust systems—if that love is deep enough and authentic enough—then finding

ourselves opposing those unjust systems will follow as naturally as the morning follows the night....

Bonhoeffer pointed out that “the person who loves their vision of community will destroy community, but the person who loves the people around them will create community everywhere they go.”

Which brings me to the third characteristic of the kinds of communities desperately needed in these dangerously divided times.

We need communities where there is not only proximity to and relationships with those suffering injustices and indignities, we need to examine honestly the unconscious narratives deeply engrained in ourselves that perpetuate these injustices and together--- with those who are suffering these injustices---- create new narratives.

We, as a society, have a tendency to blame the poor for their poverty; to blame the addicted and mentally ill for their anguish and to blame those who suffer at the hands of unjust systems---like our criminal justice system---- for their outrage.

This is often an unconscious blaming rooted in the unconscious narratives that some lives are more valuable than others and that everyone gets what they deserve. These narratives are dangerous to our souls and the soul of our nation because they allow us not only to blame those who suffer under unjust systems but they also allow us to take personal credit for whatever privilege has automatically come our way. These narratives lead to denial of the oneness of the human family; and we deny the oneness of the human family at our own peril.

We must create new narratives. Narratives in which all lives are valued equally; narratives in which the suffering of some is the concern of all. Narratives in which we acknowledge that we cannot become who we were created to become while some have no possibility of becoming who they were created to become.

Which brings me to the fourth characteristic of communities desperately needed for the survival of our world.

St Francis said, “proclaim the love of God with every breath, but only when absolutely necessary use words.” It is not helpful for us to talk so much about God’s love; What is needed in these dangerously divided times are communities in which we **experience** God’s love. We need communities in which we are held to spiritual practices---like prayer and meditation--- that keep us deeply rooted in the vastness of God’s love. Only then can we infuse the surrounding culture with that vastness.

We need to hold each other to a fortified, daily prayer practice that takes us deeper than dualistic thoughts. Dualistic thinking keeps us dangerously divided.

If we want our doing to flow from our being, from that place of Divine Love in us, we must make showing up---day in and day out---for a deepening connection with Divine Love, our **primary** work.

Unless our doing flows from the depths of our being it will have limited power to heal and transform.

If we are to be repairers of the breach in these dangerously divided times--- if we are to make a qualitative and quantitative difference in the lives we touch--- we must allow transforming, reconciling love to flow through us, in spite of us.

We must practice leaning back into the river that flows toward justice; allowing ourselves to be carried to places we otherwise might not choose to go and we must build communities that are like springs whose waters never fail.

Thank you for listening.

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