

Using A Covenant to Root Out Racism in Liturgy

Bishop Rickel has asked that all parishes of the diocese incorporate “A Covenant to Root Out Racism” in their worship on the Sunday closest to the anniversary of the murder of Mr. George Floyd, May 25. On this year’s liturgical calendar, the closest Sunday would be May 23, the Day of Pentecost.

Preparation

In preparation for the incorporation of the Covenant in worship, it seems good and appropriate to *prepare* worshippers for this act of lament and commitment rather than spring it on them as they gather for worship. Such preparation can be communicated through digital and print media by introducing the Covenant with the words of Bishop Rickel:

*Dear People of the Diocese of Olympia,
At our most recent Diocesan Convention (2020) you overwhelmingly passed a resolution supporting the Anti-Racism Covenant put forth initially by the Rt. Rev. Deon Johnson, Bishop of Missouri, and co-sponsored by many other bishops. My name has been on this covenant since just after its posting, however, I have now, on your behalf, added not just my name and office but the entire Diocese of Olympia. It is important to read the Covenant regularly, to use it as a rule of life right now, to study it in your congregations, and to hold it up as the ideal we are striving for. As I said at our convention, signing such documents, passing such resolutions, really is the easy part. The difficult part, the part that will change this Church, this country, this world, is our following it, acting on it, living into it. I offer it here as I vow to do just that personally.*

Blessings,

+Greg

An additional note from the rector, vicar, or priest in charge can encourage members of the congregation to reflect on the covenant prior to gathering for worship on May 23, the Day of Pentecost. There may be groups in the congregation that can spend time in discussion of the Covenant prior to May 23 and certainly after that day: the vestry/Bishop’s Committee, a class to study the Covenant, the worship committee, or a social justice or service committee.

Staff need to be apprised of the Covenant given their interactions with vendors, congregants, and persons interested in visiting or joining a congregation. Musicians, intercessors, and visual artists need to become familiar with the Covenant given their responsibility for placing texts and images before worshippers.

Members of the congregation can be invited to participate in the Sacred Ground Project of the Episcopal Church: <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sacred-ground/>

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Collect and Lectionary Readings

The collect and readings for the Day of Pentecost lend themselves well to the concerns voiced in the Covenant.

Acts 2:1-21. The Acts reading notes many people of different races and ethnicities gathered in Jerusalem as one community. Quoting the prophet Joel, Peter speaks of the Spirit of God being poured out on all flesh – not just socially powerful or privileged flesh.

Ezekiel 37:1-14. The Ezekiel reading narrates God asking the prophet to speak to dry bones, prompting them to come alive. There is the clear call of liberation from all that brings degradation and death to the human family.

Psalms 104:25-35, 37. In a psalm that praises the inclusive and abundant generosity of God to all creatures – not just human creatures – we hear of God’s power to renew the earth itself, an implicit criticism of any force or voice or action that deals in discrimination, subjugation, and death.

Romans 8:22-27. Echoing the clear voice of lament in the Covenant is the reading from Romans in which Paul speaks of creation groaning – groaning – for redemption: a groaning heard in the many voices of those who have suffered with belittlement and overt, racist acts of exclusion. Set next to that groan – that lament – is the word of hope, not as naïve optimism but as realistic hope rooted in Christian participation in God’s action to bring life out of apparent death.

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15. The ever-present temptation in many churches is to imagine that the work of rooting out racism is up to committed Christians who must do this work on their own. Here it is important to hear Jesus’ promise of an advocate who will “prove the world wrong about sin.” Keep in mind that earlier in this gospel, the Baptist points to Jesus and announces that he will take away the sin of the world. What is “the sin of the world”? Is it not, in part, the social systems that oppress and do so frequently for the sake of profit? Jesus’ invitation to love God and love neighbor, a love made manifest through works of justice, asks Christians and Christian congregations to ground their work to end racism in a living relationship with the Advocate, the Spirit, through prayer, meditation, and worship.

Collect. Almighty God, on this day you opened the way of eternal life to every race and nation by the promised gift of your Holy Spirit: Shed abroad this gift throughout the world by the preaching of the Gospel, that it may reach to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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Lament

We are not a church that is practiced in lament, other than praying the psalms of lament in the Daily Office. Lament is a cry, a howl, a groaning rooted in despair and affliction. It does not ask to be resolved with pious optimism or the pastoral version of “It’s *all* good.” Lament is the honest complaint directed to God. It does not blame God but complains to God concerning one’s present distress. Of course if one lives a comfortable life, surrounded by security, safety, and wealth, lament might never fall from one’s lips. Such comfort can serve as a barrier to others or an unwillingness to recognize how one’s comfort or safety or wealth has been secured by the suffering of others: a concern voiced clearly in the Covenant.

And yet the sacramental sensibility alive in our church claims that we are not separate from each other but bound to each other and bound to each other for eternity through Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist: one’s person suffering *is* my suffering. Lament pushes us to recognize this suffering.

Worship

We suggest two options. *First*, the preacher may focus the Pentecost Day readings on the Covenant while worshippers have the Covenant in hand, distributed in whatever manner reaches the largest number of persons who might worship. Ideally, the distribution of the Covenant text would be accomplished prior to the beginning of the liturgy so that worshippers have time to read through it.

Second, note that the covenant is not short; it is a text that lends itself best to study, reflection, and as our bishop notes, incorporation into one’s faith as a Rule of Life. Should it be used in worship in the form given here as a litany, it can replace the Prayers and Confession and thus focus the worshipping assembly on its content for this Sunday. Given the many images present in the Covenant, it does not lend itself to a rapid “bidding and response” but rather a measured use in which the intercessor allows a pause between petitions for the image or central concern of each petition to sink in to one’s consciousness. Silence, even a brief silence, is our friend in that it creates a “space” in which words, images, can find a place in heart and mind.

Again, given the laments and the commitments of the Covenant, some of which may be new to some parishioners, serious preparation of the parish prior to the liturgical use of the Covenant will enable worshippers to engage the Covenant in a thoughtful and respectful manner.

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A Covenant to Root Out Racism

We lament the Church's role in the subjugation, enslavement and genocide of societies of indigenous peoples, including Native Americans and Pacific Islanders.
Lord, have mercy upon us.

We lament the Church's role in profiting from the selling, trading, and genocide of people of African descent and the lasting effects of the peculiar trade present with us today.
Lord, have mercy upon us.

We lament the Church's complicity-by-silence in the commoditization, dehumanization, and belittling of peoples brought to this country to toil in brutal labor, including Latinx people, Asians, Pacific Islanders and other immigrant and undocumented populations.
Lord, have mercy upon us.

We lament the church's complicity in failing to honor the language, culture and civil rights of Latinx people, both American citizens and those from other countries.
Lord, have mercy upon us.

We lament the places in which we have been spectators and participants in the public and private lynching of people of African descent.
Lord, have mercy upon us.

We lament the Church's lack of moral courage to stand with and on the side of the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed.
Lord, have mercy upon us.

We lament the systems of white supremacy, white exceptionalism and white privilege present in the Church that have condoned people – particularly people of African descent – being viewed as less, inferior or unworthy rather than as beloved children of God, made in the image of the Divine.
Lord, have mercy upon us.

We lament the ways in which the stories of People of Color have been diminished or erased from the histories of our churches, institutions and communities of faith.
Lord, have mercy upon us.

We lament the collusion of the Church with systems that directly and indirectly promote racism, oppression, segregation and disenfranchisement.
Lord, have mercy upon us.

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We lament the willful blindness of Christian leadership in promoting and advocating for systems of over-policing, the militarization of the police, mass incarceration, school-to-prison pipelines, poverty and violence.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

We lament the resounding silence and the crippling fear that often infects the Church in matters of racial reconciliation and social justice.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

PAUSE

Will you covenant to re-examine the history of our communities of faith and institutions to, in tangible ways, acknowledge racist legacies and to recognize, remember and retell the stories of Native American, enslaved persons and other People of Color, whose labor contributes to white privilege?

We will with God's help.

Will you covenant to engage our communities of faith, staffs, colleagues and experts in critical discourse that propels us forward?

We will with God's help.

Will you covenant to devise and implement standards, policies and programs that make our commitment to diversity and inclusion a visible reality?

We will with God's help.

Will you covenant to invest in local businesses that are owned and operated by People of Color and underrepresented populations?

We will with God's help.

Will you covenant to listen to and to validate the stories, experiences and feelings of People of Color as companions along the journey, valuing those experiences as being sacred?

We will with God's help.

Will you covenant to adopt an intersectional approach in all aspects of our common life, remembering that all forms of oppression are connected?

We will with God's help.

Will you covenant to financially support the important work of Historically Black Colleges and Universities?

We will with God's help.

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Will you covenant to work towards the dismantling of the school-to-prison pipeline and other systems of institutional oppression?

We will with God's help.

Will you covenant to stand up and speak out against everyday micro and macro acts of oppression or aggression?

We will with God's help.

Will you covenant to struggle and speak out against denial of civil liberties and voter suppression?

We will with God's help.

Will you covenant to educate ourselves, and share with others, the many places where our privilege blinds us from being compassionate to others?

We will with God's help.

Will you covenant to call out bigotry and hate speech in all aspects of our common life?

We will with God's help.

[Will you covenant to gather with others, including faith leaders and decision makers, at all levels of the church to ask the hard questions: Does the leadership of our institution reflect the diversity of those we serve? Are the many faces of the diverse body of Christ represented in decision-making processes? How are we inviting and forming leaders? Who is missing around the table? Whose untold story do we need to hear?

*We will with God's help.] ***

Will you covenant that in our corporate worship and other activities of our communities, to intentionally cultivate welcome, hospitality and participation for people of all cultures, ethnicities and backgrounds, and to include their rich musical and liturgical offerings in worship?

We will with God's help.

Will you covenant to invite all members of our faith communities to reflect about and seek a better understanding of racism and privilege?

We will with God's help.

Will you covenant to preach about and pray together for an end to racism and white supremacy, not to bring down people of European descent, but to lift all others up?

We will with God's help.

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Will you covenant to join with local community organizations in working for racial justice?

We will with God's help.

Collect

Almighty God, who created us in your image:
Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil
and to make no peace with oppression;
and, that we may reverently use our freedom,
help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice
in our communities and among the nations,
to the glory of your holy Name;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,
now and for ever. *Amen.*

** This one statement of commitment seems best suited for study and reflection by parish leaders, committee members, liturgical leaders, ministers of hospitality, and parish social justice or public service groups rather than for recitation in worship.