

A transcript of Bishop Michael Curry's sermon at the Episcopalians for Global Reconciliation U2charist for the MDGs – Tuesday, June 13, 2006

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...It is good to be in God's house with God's people.

Let me offer some words from a Negro spiritual, sung by slaves in the antebellum south. It's a very simple spiritual that basically says, "My soul is a witness for the Lord."

Amen!

As the successive stanzas and verses of the song, beginning with "My soul is a witness for the Lord" recount different people from the Biblical stories. It begins, for example, with Methuselah (for y'all Episcopalians, Methuselah was old!) It begins with Methuselah and says "Methuselah was a witness for my Lord" and then it goes on and tells the story of other folks, Deborah the Prophet was a witness for my Lord, Queen Esther was a witness for my Lord, Daniel was a witness for my Lord, Mother Mary was a witness for my Lord, Martha was a witness for my Lord... And then, after going through the Biblical story, the singer comes to the last verse and says "Now **who** will be a witness for my Lord?" Moving from the Biblical past to a new Biblical present--who will be a witness for my Lord?

When I was a kid, I grew up Episcopalian. My swaddling clothes were an Episcopal flag! (*laughter*) So there were a few Episcopalians in my family, but the rest were Baptists. When you went to church with them, there was **action** on Sunday morning. And every once in a while, when the preacher would preach, there would be these moments in the homiletical experience (*anticipatory laughter*) when sometimes, when the preacher may have felt that the congregation wasn't as responsive as they could be--trying to get an "Amen!" out of them, and they wouldn't respond, sometimes he'd say Amen like, "Amen, wall"...and if he really got desperate, he might say, "Now can I get a witness?" (*Yeah!*)

And, "Can I get a witness?" was a rhetorical device to be sure, that was to suggest a critical moment in the service. But more than that, it was a **spiritual** device intended to project the hearer from where they were in church out into the world, where their discipleship was to be exercised. (*Yeah!*) When they said "Can I get a witness?" they weren't talking about in church, they were talking about **out there**. And that's what I'm going to talk about for a few moments tonight.

And for a text--you see all of that was just introduction! (*Laughter*) Let me offer these words from the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Moments before our Lord ascended into heaven, returning to the fullness and the mystery of God. Jesus, when his disciples wanted to know specifics about how the Kingdom was gonna come, said "Y'all can do your own strategic plans". He said "It's not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority, in other words, "There are some things that ain't y'all's business!" (*Laughter*).

And he goes on and says, "But you will receive power--you will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. And you will be my witnesses--in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. You will receive power! (*Amen!*) Power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. You are **sealed** by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. You will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, "Defend, O Lord, this thy Child, with thy heavenly grace, that she may continue yours forever and daily increase in your Holy Spirit." You will receive **power*!*" (*Cheers and applause*)

You will receive power, not for your own sake, but you will receive power, and you will be **my** witnesses, in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Columbus, in Cincinnati, in Cleveland--and unto the uttermost parts of the earth. (*Laughter and applause*)

Not I'm not going to keep you long--I'm going to keep this brief so that we can get back to the music!

But I know there are probably some here thinking at this moment--you hear me talking about "Can I get a witness?" and there's some of you, hearing that word "witness", in a church environment, y'all must think, Saturday morning, somebody walking two by two down the street, selling Watchtower magazine. (*Laughter*).

And I believe in evangelism, because I believe we've got some **good news** to share. It's a bad news world, and we've got some **good news** in this bad news world!

I'm talking about a different kind of witness. I don't have any expectation that we're going to get Episcopalians going out on Saturday morning, two by two--giving out [Episcopal Life](#). (*Much laughter*) I'm talking about a witness that is born of our discipleship. I'm talking about a witness that is born of our timid sometimes, halting sometimes, but our willingness to follow Jesus of Nazareth. To follow in the way of his teaching, to live in the way of his Spirit, to **dare** to emulate his light, until his light becomes our light, and the world begins to be his light through our lives.

And to help us, I think the text for Trinity Sunday is helpful. (*Laughter*). Because I am convinced, when you read the third chapter of John--go home and read John Chapter 3 again. Get those Bibles, get those Gideons out of the--(*laughter*). And when you read John Chapter 3 and listen to the story of Nicodemus, I am **convinced** that Nicodemus was the first Episcopalian! (*Laughter*)

Now think about it--**only** Episcopalians would try to come to Jesus, quietly, at night, when nobody was looking!" (*Laughter and applause*)

Now obviously Nicodemus came to Jesus quietly at night for good reason. You have to remember that though Jesus and Nicodemus were both Palestinian Jews of the first century, they came from very different worlds. Nicodemus, so far as we can tell, was a preacher of the city--Jesus of Nazareth was a preacher of the country. Nicodemus was

well-learned and schooled in the great schools of the rabbis. Jesus was a country preacher! An itinerant rabbi. Nicodemus was part of the ruling power structure of first century Palestinian Judaism, a member of the Sanhedrin. Jesus came from the peasant class. Nicodemus was one of the privileged--help me somebody! (*Amen!*) Jesus came from folk who were poor--from folk who *struggled* to find a daily possibility of living. These two, though both first century Palestinian Jews, came from entirely different worlds. And yet, to Nicodemus' credit, Nicodemus, the great rabbi himself from Jerusalem, went to this itinerant rabbi.

That's--I'm gonna say it--that's like Archbishop Rowan Williams going to Oprah Winfrey for philosophy! (*Extended laughter and applause*).

Nicodemus had good reason for going at night, because he was crossing into a different world. And yet, thank God he did do it--he went anyway, as a disciple going to his rabbi. One rabbi went to another. He went, and something happened. *Something* happened, because, by the seventh chapter of John, we shift to the Sanhedrin, and when some of the folk who are out to get Jesus, are out to get him, it is Nicodemus who stands up for justice, and stands up for decency, and stands up for Jesus!

John doesn't give us the details, but *something* happened, because, by the end of the Gospel, after Jesus has been crucified, John's Gospel says that it was Joseph of Arimathea and good old Episcopalian Nicodemus who went and *begged* the body of Jesus from Pilate, and gave it a proper burial. And you know only an Episcopalian's gonna want to do things right! (*Laughter*).

I am **convinced** that in John's unfolding of the story of the Gospel and of Nicodemus, what you have here is someone who engages on some level of discipleship with this Jesus, and as he engages with this Jesus, he goes out, somehow different, and goes out and begins to make a difference in this world. Can I get a witness this night? (*Yeah!*)

I am *convinced* that we are Nicodemus. (*Tell it!*) And we have come by night to Jesus. To Christ. To the Christ in those who have not. The Christ in those who struggle, for a crust of bread. The Christ in children, hungry and bereft. The Christ in a creation crying out to be cared for. The Christ in women seeking human equality and dignity. The Christ in children who must never again go to bed hungry. (*Amen!*) I daresay we have come to the Christ that these [Millenium Development Goals](#) represent a moment and a possibility of transfiguring discipleship, in which we can make a witness in this world.

My friend and brother and colleague Bishop Steve Charleston, in a recent essay, said this--and let me just read it to you for a second.

He said, "as the Episcopal church, the most important question before us is not about schism or sexuality. It is about witness. What witness will we make? In my life I have known many seasons in the Episcopal Church. This is the season for our witness. This is the time for us to do something totally unexpected and wonderful, to confound those who

say we have lost our vision. This is our moment to show the world that we can practice what we preach-- " (Amens and applause)

I am convinced that these [Millenium Development Goals](#), and our embrace of them passionately as an act of Gospel-based discipleship, is a way for us to discover live again as a church. (*Yeah! and applause*)

And I'm convinced, because Brother Bono has shown us the way. God will always have a witness, and if the church doesn't give it, U2 will! (*Laughter and applause*). And I'm convinced, because, I'm getting into the music, you all gotta help me--I'm an old man without rhythm. You can tell people you saw a Black man without rhythm! (*Laughter*) But I am convinced that brother Bono has shown us the way by lifting up a compelling vision of the world transformed from the nightmare it often is to the dream that God has intended from the very beginning. That he has dared to claim the high ground, and as he has claimed the high ground, folks have gathered around him.

I can't think of any other context, or any other person, who has brought Jesse Helms to the table, and Jesse Jackson to the table. (*Laughter and applause*). When you claim the high ground, all will stand--all will rise. Can I get a witness this night? (*Yeah!*)

And as we engage in this work, as we go forth, passionately convinced that poverty **must** become history, that suffering **must** end, that war must become obsolete (*Yeahs and Amens*) then the world will not only find its light, but we will find ours.

Well, let me conclude it now--I really am gonna stop. (*Laughter*) Y'all know the definition of an optimist? An optimist is somebody who believes the preacher when he says "And in conclusion..." But I do mean it, honestly.

I was probably about 13 if I remember correctly. And I don't remember what I said or did, but my father responded to whatever I said--now think about being 13--responded to whatever I said, with, "You know, the Lord didn't put you here just to consume the oxygen!" Now, like I said, I don't know what I said to precipitate that, and I don't know if it was a considered philosophical or theological statement, or just responding to 13 year old hormones, but the more I live and the older I get, the more I am convinced that there is profound wisdom in that.

"The Lord didn't put you here just to consume the oxygen." Now, let me exegete that briefly for a moment. (*Laughter*) Why are you all laughing--I did go to seminary, now! "The Lord didn't put you here **just** to consume the oxygen." The operative word in the sentence here is just. Which is sort of like the one where Moses and then later Jesus said "One does not live by bread alone". You don't live by bread **alone**. So that the operative word is **alone**--'cause you do need bread! But bread by itself ain't enough. "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow." Huh? Life is more than food...

But in this statement, "The Lord didn't put you here just to consume the oxygen", just is the operative word, 'cause you do need oxygen! In fact, the truth of the matter is, we **are**

here in part to consume the oxygen.

Think about it now, when you inhale, what do you inhale? Oxygen! And when you exhale, what do you exhale? Carbon dioxide! Oh, this is an educated crowd, see? You exhale carbon dioxide. The entire animal world, if you will, inhales oxygen and exhales carbon dioxide. The plant world, on the other hand, does what? It takes **in** the carbon dioxide, and it **releases** oxygen.

Help me somebody--that's not an accident! This world has been created in a symbiotic relationship so that we and the creation are in relationship--it gives, we receive, we receive and then give. We were **made** to give **and** receive, and life is lived when we give **and** receive, when we love **and** are loved--(*loud long applause*) and we will find our life in that giving and receiving.

Now let me bring this to a conclusion. (Laughter) The Hebrew word for spirit--one of them--is *ruach*. Over there is Dr. Jeffrey R--(?) He's responsible for all of this--he was one of my teachers! But *ruach* and be translated, it can be translated spirit, right? It also can be translated "wind", and it can be translated "breath". Like "Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew..." But, it occurs to me that breath has something to do with **oxygen**. (Laughter) And breath has something to do with life! And if that is the case, then the spirit of God is not only the life of God, but the spirit of God is the source of all life, and my Jesus in the New Testament, quoting Isaiah, said this, and I quote, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has annointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, restore liberty to all those who are oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord. That spirit is upon us, and that spirit is the spirit that Jesus said follow me into. Follow me--and I will make you more than you ever thought you could be! Follow me--(*applause drowing out some words*) Follow me, and I will show you a life of love, that hate cannot defeat. Follow me, and I will show you a life of justice that injustice can **never** tear down. (Amen) Follow me, and I will show you life that not even the power of death can take away.

You shall receive power. We have already received power, for the Holy Spirit has already come among us, and we are His gifts. So go forth. Witness to a love that will not let you go. Witness to a compassion that knows no bounds. Witness to a kingdom and a dream of God, where all of us can find life, and hope, and happiness.

Don't be ashamed of that Gospel. And don't be afraid to stand up for that kingdom. So, you go on out and be an Episcopal witness. You go on out and take your little [Episcopal Life](#) in your hand (*laughter*) and then go forth in this world and end poverty, end hunger, end injustice, and war. So walk into this world and help God help establish God's reign and God's kingdom in this world.

My soul is a witness for my Lord! (Amen!)
God bless you!