



## **The Long Haul Carter Sunday**

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*“True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing.”*

— Desmond Tutu

Racial Reconciliation Work in the United States is not for the faint of heart. And it certainly is not something people take on expecting to solve all the outstanding issues in a very short period of time. The weight of our collective history weighs heavily on us all and, whether we want to admit it or not, it is a part of every conversation, every interaction, and every effort we make as we work for a more just and fair world. Next year, 2019, we will mark the 400<sup>th</sup> year of Slavery in North America. Two hundred and fifty of those years our country actively engaged in the practice of chattel slavery—the outright owning of other humans for the expressed purpose of forcing them to do what ever we wanted without compensation. For the next 100 years our country imposed a virtual slavery upon these same people and we enforced that form of slavery with legalized segregation, grinding discrimination, very few citizenship rights, and an unimaginable terrorist violence that claimed the lives of thousands of people. We have followed that period known as Jim Crow America to the present time with another 50 years of what some are now calling “The New Jim Crow” – that is, economic isolation and deprivation, partial citizenship, and mass incarceration. This is the wound that never heals because the dominant economic, political, and social powers of this nation have refused to acknowledge its existence and have refused to accept responsibility for the unspeakable crimes committed against a people for generation after generation, after generation.

I go into this detail with you on Carter Sunday, not to bore you or beat you over the head with a history lesson, but to remind us all that racism, slavery, and genocide are embedded into the very DNA of our nation and society. Those three evils exist right alongside our more lofty ideals and practices of self-government, rule of law, and freedom & equality based on natural rights. In North America we have functioned for 400 years with this major contradiction (Freedom & Democracy on one hand and Slavery & Genocide on the other) and it distorts every human relationship we have regardless of which side of the race and social justice equation we sit. This isn't about establishing guilt. Guilt is a luxury for which we do not have any time. Guilt does nothing but paralyze human relationships. What we need is what Desmond Tutu said: *"True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing."*

Much is written about the decline or destruction of the Black family in America and much of that commentary comes from self-serving white social pundits searching desperately to absolve themselves of any responsibility. I don't buy it and no one in this room should buy it either. The ideology of White Supremacy manages to always cast the blame on those who suffer from the results of oppression and never bothers to stop and take a long look in the mirror. The fact that any descendant of slavery has emerged with anything resembling a full participation in American life is a testament to the survival power of the Black Family, pure and simple. It is deeply cynical and hypocritical for anyone to publicly lay blame on the Black family for policies and official behaviors that have been purposely designed to do nothing but destroy that same family.

Today we are paying tribute to a strong Black family – the family of the Rev. W.H.G. Carter and Beulah Carter – because they, like Desmond Tutu, have moved and challenged us to look deeply at our own racist past. They have helped our congregation to begin the process of Racial Reconciliation. Today our congregation is re-committing to the idea that we will act as agents of racial justice and healing instead of division and destruction. Today we, again, answer the question Martin King asked all of us in the title of his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* We are saying resoundingly that we choose Community. We are choosing to place our lives on the Side of Love, as our banners in the back of the sanctuary proclaim. And, we are making that commitment for The Long Haul.

Seventeen years ago our minister, Sharon Dittmar, challenged us to "Get on the Bus" and discover our neighborhood of Avondale so that we could better become a part of the neighborhood and also so that we could continue the ministry of the Carter Family. It took some time but we have built deep friendships and co-worker relationships with the staff and recipient members of the Shiloh Food Pantry. We

have collaborated with the educators and children of South Avondale Elementary School to build a tutoring program that involves over 40 of our members. We are learning and growing along with the South Avondale students as they learn to read. Additionally, we have learned more about what it means to be without a home in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as we continue our relationship building with the families of the Interfaith Hospitality Network. In the larger Cincinnati Community we have First Church members engaged with Black Lives Matter Cincinnati, the Sanctuary Movement and Immigrant Rights, Economic Justice and Empowerment organizations, and a variety of Interfaith and Civic Organizations devoted to making our city a better place. All of this is a reflection of our commitment and a reflection of who we are, or at least, who we strive to be.

I hope you noticed as I went through that laundry list that I used the word “with” instead of the word “for” when I described what we did. We should not be doing things “for” others when we can work “with” others. The difference is significant because it reflects a state of consciousness about who we are and what we are about. When we do something with another we are clearly stating that our destinies are linked somehow, we are traveling together in this journey and that we are equally invested in each other’s well being. Too often Liberal Social Activists who come from the privilege of wealth and/or skin color fail to make this distinction and we replicate a colonial relationship even when we think we are doing the right thing. Doing things “for people” betrays the fact that we lack empathy and that we truly do not know how to identify with those who suffer from oppression. It is a form of Missionary Imperialism. Our church has slipped into that kind of missionary attitude from time to time in its history and it is, frankly, embarrassing, because it indicates that we still have some distance to travel in our faith work and our social justice consciousness.

Empathy and identification with oppression is a major building block of racial reconciliation and it brings us back to the futility of guilt that I mentioned earlier. We need to move from guilt to grief in order to reconcile our past with our present. When we can actually grieve the injustices visited upon others we can begin to know empathy. This is especially true when we have directly or indirectly benefitted from those injustices. Grieving means acknowledging the past in order to understand it. Grieving means mourning the lost opportunities for building community with others. And sometimes grieving simply means hugging one another because we have discovered that we absolutely need each other to deal with the past so we can plan for a better future. This is the journey of faith that Martin King spoke about whenever he mentioned the Beloved Community. This is the journey of faith that we are on as we celebrate the times we got it right and learn from the times when we fell short of our professed beliefs. How else can we proclaim the inherent worth and dignity of every person and actually mean it? This is a true test of our faith. Again Desmond Tutu is there to remind us that: *“It is through weakness and vulnerability that most of us learn empathy and compassion and discover our soul.”* We are most definitely on a journey to discover our collective soul.

If we are to carry out a prophetic justice centered ministry inside and outside the walls of this church then we must move beyond our guilt and our suffering and embrace the prophetic task of grieving the damage that has been done to us and by us for all of these years. We must name it and claim it in order to overcome it. Four Hundred Years is a long time for our nation's original sin to fester. Our own Congregation has lived through almost 200 of those 400 years as an intimate player in both supporting and opposing the institutions of slavery and its aftermath. We have moments for which we are deservedly very proud when our congregational fore bearers stood up and did the right thing. And we must take the time to celebrate those victories for humanity. That is what we are doing today when we honor the ministry of the Rev. H.W.G. Carter and Beulah Carter. We celebrate the fact that our church did the right thing by holding ourselves accountable for the harm we did to the Carter family and their ministry. We also celebrate the fact that the Carter family has moved us deeply and challenged us to carry on a legacy that was once buried in an ugly history. Together, with the Carter Family and our cherished neighbors in this city, we have resurrected the Carter Ministry and together we dream of continuing that work of racial reconciliation and justice. As we embrace each other we are also reminding ourselves that we are stronger when we make ourselves vulnerable to the truth and vow to follow that truth. That, my friends, is where we will find the inspiration and the courage to continue in building this Beloved Community.