

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Mass of the Resurrection in Celebration of the Life of Lee Arthur Black
26 August 2017

Scripture readings:

Job 19:21-27a Revelation 21:2-7 John 14:1-6

First of all, welcome to everyone who's come from all over the place to get here and worship with us. Your presence here is important and significant to the whole church. We've ridden a bit of a roller coaster with this because the first indications were that things were going to improve for Lee and that he was headed for rehab, and I wondered what a journey that might be. And then things went south very quickly and now we celebrate the fact that he is where nothing more can hurt him. He has shuffled off this mortal coil in which we still find ourselves and from which and toward which we look not only now and in this place in these times for meaning, but by which we are limited in our understanding of things that are eternal.

Last night I sat with an ecumenical group just across the way on the other side of the street lights at the Assembly of God Church to watch a film which I didn't want to see, but I went because I felt I was supposed to. Something you may have seen, something you may have liked, called *The Shack*. *The Shack* is for theologians an extraordinary exercise in what is known as heresy on all sides and for all kinds, but an interesting exercise of people trying to understand tragedy in their lives - alcoholism, the murder of a child, death in general, and the struggle of what it means to be a human being in this world. As you know, in that film the Trinity is depicted in a fashion that we have called incarnation when we think of God the Son or Jesus Christ. Well, God the Father is incarnated as a black woman, and the Holy Spirit as an Asian woman. That's not so shocking for people who worship here because I often refer to God as She. There was a suggestion in the film that in the traditional understandings of God there is something missing if we forget maternity, we forget motherhood, we forget struggle. I was frustrated because I thought there was going to be an opportunity to have a discussion after the film. Well, it was too long; everybody ran home afterwards. And we were not allowed to have popcorn. *[laughter]*

The question I wanted to ask of our ecumenical group was this: We have sat here and enjoyed a film in which God the Creator has been depicted as a black woman. Why was it that a week ago when our ecumenical council met and I asked whether or not we could produce a statement about racism, there were no takers? And I thought of Lee and I thought that perhaps the only good thing I could come up with in terms of this death was the fact that this man would no longer experience the increasing volume and incessant and pernicious racism which is finding voice and power and sanction and governmental approval in our country.

I pulled from my shelf the other night a book called *Behind the Scenes* which was written in the 19th century by a woman named Elizabeth Keckley who was thirty years a slave and lived for four years in the White House as the personal servant of Mrs. Abraham Lincoln. If this sounds terribly political, friends, I'm sorry. *It is* because we who gather here know that the gospel of Jesus Christ does not permit, affirm, agree to or assent to racism in any form. We mourn the departure of Lee for more than one reason because a couple years ago he and Melvina were the only two people of color to integrate this Diocese at Convention. Every other representative at the Episcopal Diocese of Bethlehem was a white person and there were no persons of primary language other than English. This in a Diocese which contains the urban centers of Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton, Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, Stroudsburg and Reading. Then we sat around and watched slides of Kajo Keji in Africa where we send so much good money of ours to help the people over there.

I regret Lee's departure because he was a Christian man who increased the Body of Christ in this place in ways that most of us can't and in ways that many of us will never ever be able to understand. This is about color. This is about the Body of Christ. This is about you and me, and this is our commitment to keep Lee alive here by keeping Christ alive here by being the inclusive presence of God in the world today who in fact does look like a black woman and an Asian woman and even a couple white people too. Don't be fooled. We are in this together, every last one of us as God's creatures. In the beginning God created this world and everyone who lives in it, and God looked at what She created and said, "*It is good.*"

And so it is we mourn today because we have lost from our midst a very good man, beloved by God, who shared God's love with each and every soul he knew here, and if that is important to you, then your job is to do the same.

At the beginning of that film a note was found in somebody's mailbox left by God. It had to have been left by God because there were no tracks left in the snow. We are here to leave tracks in the snow. We are here to de-mystify and de-spiritualize God and to give God body with feet that leave footprints where it is we go.

I have shared with some of you recently the horrifying question and it's a good one and it was asked in the film last night in a different way: Where was God during the Holocaust? Where was the Body of Christ when millions of people were being killed for no other reason than for whom they were born to be? It's a tough question, but I regret to say I have the answer. The Body of Christ was there. The Church was there. Europe for centuries on end, two thousand years, was Christian, and when that garbage was going on the Church said very little or nothing.

It is unacceptable to me today that we should gather here as the Body of Christ and strangle the voice of the Lord. It is unacceptable to me today that we should gather as the Body of Christ and not leave footprints and handprints of God's love in this world as we experience those footprints and handprints from Lee and from each other.

We talk about our faith as something which needs to be practiced. I'm all for it. We never have it all right all the time, but it means our job is never done, and together we must say NO to evil in our presence. And, friends, racism is nothing other than evil. And despite that evil and that lifelong aggravation that Lee suffered, we knew in him a happy man who loved us and cared for us and wants us to continue that tradition. This is Christianity, friends. This is not defeat. This is just the beginning!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.