



Matthew 25 Gathering 2017: Anglican Justice and Mercy Contending for Shalom

Clifton Warner – September 27, 2017

Our first Gathering was at Christ Church in Austin where I serve as rector. We had the honor of hosting the event, and one of the things we did there was to lament. We invited you to write down things that were heavy on your heart, to share your physical ailments, family stresses, and personal relationships that were broken, to share the tiny things and the global things, to share the many ways in which your cities were broken—anything that was going on in your lives or the lives of your communities.

You brought those pieces of paper to the front of the room and put them in the bowl we use at Christ Church for baptism. It's the font. Then my job was to take that bowl and just pray.

I've been a priest for eleven years at Christ Church. Before that, I spent five years as an associate on the border between El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. I've spent nearly all my adult life in ministry. And yet what happened in that moment is the highest privilege I've ever had as a priest. I had the privilege of holding your pain and letting the Lord meet me in that moment. I

look back on that experience, and I have this powerful sense of the Lord also meeting you in that moment.

As we lift each other's pain up before the Lord and lament together like that, we join the fellowship of the Lord's sufferings, and it's a sweet thing. It's painful, but it's a sweet thing to join the fellowship of suffering. So here we are again, and I didn't want to let the moment pass without sharing with you about what a privilege that was for me as a priest.

The main thing I'm here to do now is talk about what's happening over the next couple of days. Think of it this way: each of the talks and conversations that we have together are like a bead, and I'm going to show you how to string those beads together, to tell you how these beads all tie together. This is the string for all of the beads that we will be gifted over the next couple of days.

When we started planning a couple of years ago for our first meeting, one of the things that we felt was important was to bring language to this, to bring vocabulary to how we talk about this new movement. As Anglicans in North America what are the terms that are substantive and carry weight for us? And so we were very attentive to that in coming up with the name Matthew 25 Gathering: Justice and Mercy Contending for Shalom. Each of those words was very carefully chosen, and they together formed the conceptual framework around which we built that first Gathering, and this one as well. I'm going to go word by word and show you how we envision these days, tying all of that together.

Shalom is what Daniel Lizarraga is going to talk about tonight. *Shalom* is where it's all headed. It's where all creation is going. It's the way things are supposed to be. It's all things being united in Christ, and we are headed in that direction. All the universe, all people, all places, all things, all time held together in Christ by the power of the Spirit—that's *shalom*. We long for it. We ache for it. When we say, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," we are expressing a longing for that to come, and it can't come soon enough.

Justice and mercy recognize the fact that *shalom* is the way things are supposed to be, but we live in a world that's busted up. It's a broken world, but before we get too righteous about what's going on outside in the world, we must face that brokenness in our own selves. We must face the injustice of our own response to God and others, and we must face our own need of mercy. Then we can begin to see this world that's full of sin and our relationship to it. It's a world that's full of tragedy and disaster, disease and decay. It's all around us, and our only hope is the gospel. As you've probably heard many times, John Stott, one of our Anglican brothers, would often say that we believe in proclaiming the whole gospel for the whole person for the whole world. That's our only hope for *shalom*.

Jesus leads the way in this, and we all know how Jesus gravitated toward the company of the least of these. That's where we get our *Matthew 25* language. He *gathered* with those who were on the margins, and his harshest words were for the people in power, for the religious leaders. Jesus gravitated toward the places of pain and vulnerability and toward those who were under-resourced. The gospel thus calls us to work toward justice for those whose lives are oppressed by the sins and failures of others, as well as for those whose own choices may have led them to the

pit they're in; in this way, we are to seek justice, to show mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

Last year, we had some open mic time, and during that time, a man named Adam Rocap asked a very important question of us. Adam works among the homeless in the DC area, and he was not able to be here this year, but he raised a question that stuck with us as a steering committee and brought a lot of direction to our planning of the gathering *this* year, especially in relation to this emphasis on justice and mercy.

Adam said that if you look at the places where people are on the margins and people are vulnerable and communities are under-resourced, you find there's a correlation between *that* and people or communities of color. Adam asked us to consider that relationship. Why is there a correlation there? It's not random that that's the case. There's a story there, so what is that story?

And so we hope to explore questions of race and all that's going on with race in the United States. That's not an easy conversation to have. In fact, it's a very risky conversation to have. I confess that when I talk about it, I sometimes have a fear that I'm going to use the wrong term to describe another community or I'm going to misstep or I'm going to wish I could take something back or I'm going to show my ignorance somehow. It's a risky conversation, a vulnerable conversation, but it's one that we thought would be important to have here.

There's a journal called *Conversations* that focuses on Christian spiritual formation. The editorial board of this journal was predominantly white, and they realized this. They realized that

they needed to talk about race in their journal, and so they arranged for Kathy Khang, a Korean American, to serve as a guest editor for an issue. Here's my paraphrase of what she wrote in her editorial piece at the beginning of the journal: "There's no easy way or right way to talk about racial and cultural differences," she began, "Only that we, especially as believers who long to see God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, ought to be leading and leaning into the conversation."

It's not easy—it's risky—but we ought to lean into it. It's part of the kingdom.

These kinds of conversations are an aspect of justice and mercy. We're longing for shalom, and we see all creation headed toward shalom. We know the world is busted up—it's not the way it's supposed to be. And one of the things God invites us to do as we are in Christ is to join him God this mission of justice and mercy through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and one of the ways we, in particular, are focusing on justice and mercy is through racial justice.

But this is hard work. As we enter this work of seeking justice and mercy, we encounter obstacles within us and around us. We get tired. Earlier, Christine Warner offered us a litany of these obstacles: there's not enough money, there are not enough people, we're worn out. All of these burdens accumulate, and we must persevere. That's where the word *contend* enters the picture. This is a gathering where we're talking about justice and mercy contending for shalom.

Shalom always costs something. It cost Jesus and it costs us. It cost him the desolation, the cry of dereliction from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). It

cost him dearly to see shalom, to bring shalom, and it costs us as we join him in laying down our lives, as we enter a life of taking up our cross and following him.

It's a struggle, and we all know that. In the work you do, you have to contend and persevere. One of the talks will be on contending. It will be how we close our time together, and it will be a fitting talk as we go back to our places of mission and ministry to persevere in the work.

We don't just seek shalom. We don't just pursue shalom. There's more of a struggle—we suffer for it. We persevere with joy even as we suffer for shalom, joining the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. These works of justice and mercy require perseverance, persistence, faith, and hope. We keep battling the principalities, the powers for a lifetime of sustainable gospel servanthood.

The last word I want to talk about is *Anglican*. We are Anglicans, and we want to ask what it means to be Anglicans doing this work. In other words, what are the resources that we in particular, as Anglicans, can bring to this kind of work? Indeed, there are some resources that are unique within the Protestant world that we can bring to this.

As Anglicans, we have a rich theological heritage. At the last Gathering Bill Haley highlighted some of the ways we see this contending for justice throughout Anglican history. Let me mention a couple of others that, as Anglicans, we bring to the table.

We have a contemplative tradition, especially in our use of the *Book of Common Prayer* and in our adherence to a church calendar that brings us rhythms for reflection. One aspect of this

contemplative tradition is that we have developed a rich theology of suffering. We celebrate Lent and Holy Week. That's not true everywhere you go within the church. There are a lot of denominations that have strong theologies of resurrection, as there should be, but it's not everywhere that you find a theology of suffering.

We also have a theology of feasting. And I mean that literally, as we have feast days. We have high holy days where we're called upon to gather and worship. We have this whole church season called *Easter*. It's the feast of the resurrection for weeks! Our theologies of suffering and feasting thus provide us with unique resources to be contemplative activists as we do this work.

Another Anglican resource in this work is *sacramental spirituality*. What I mean by that is that in the sacraments, heaven and earth meet in the bread and wine, in the grain and grape that have been cultivated by human work. These are very common elements, but heaven invades right there in that grape and grain. Likewise, we recognize that heaven and earth meet in the most common places—the people we meet and the places we work that are out of the way and unseen, the places that are not hip neighborhoods or popular destinations. The most common people and the most common places where you do your work—that's where heaven and earth collide.

A sacramental mindset says that every time and place is where we see this collision of heaven and earth. There will be a talk during the next couple of days that will explore the sacraments a bit more deeply, asking us to consider how a sacrament and the work we do in justice are related.

I'm also really looking forward to what our different presenters are going to bring tonight. One of the things we're going to do throughout the evening is to bring you some reports from the field—those reports are from you, from your work. Some of you submitted videos. There's no way we could show all of them, but we have quite a few videos we're going to show. Then after each video is shown, we're going to pray for the person whose work is represented there.

That will help us to get a glimpse of the work we're doing in this room. One of our goals in the Gathering is to build community in which we understand each other, a community in which you know you're not alone, in which other people here have seen your work on film or heard you speak about it at a meal.

We'll start with a video by a ministry called A Rocha. They are an international conservation organization that was started by a British evangelical Anglican priest named Peter Harris and his wife Miranda. Their flagship work was in Portugal where they sought to restore wetlands through their practice of a robust theology of creation. In other places now all over the world, they're working to reclaim and restore habitats that have been ravaged or damaged, but their work goes beyond that.

In North America, one of the things they're really about is helping the church to love where it lives, to have a sense of place, to live as people who are located somewhere on earth, as people who are located in a specific place and neighborhood. Our church just bought an old building that we're now renovating, and A Rocha partnered with us; they performed a survey of our property and they helped us understand what's going on in creation right there on the property.

They informed us about our plants and native animal species—all this life that’s just right there on our property in the middle of the city. They really do help people to learn to love the places they live.

One of the reasons I’m excited to start off with this ministry is because it has so much to do with creation. We go back to the story of Scripture, and we find that it all starts with creation. And here at the beginning of the Gathering, we’re going to go back to “In the beginning” and just be reminded of the time before sin entered the world. We seek the ultimate shalom, but there was a time before now where everything was the way it ought to be. This is part of the whole picture of all creation being made new.

Also, this topic of creation relates to the work we do all around the world. Impoverished conditions affect the environment, and, likewise, environmental degradation affects impoverished communities. You might have noticed that polluted water supplies, for instance, are more often located near impoverished communities, and that’s not random. There’s a relationship between some of what we see happen in creation and the issues we’re talking about.

It’s just beautiful—the work of A Rocha and this video is beautiful, as well as the work of the God who makes all things new. Let me close with two readings, and then we’ll go to the video:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1), and “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the

beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:1).