Sermon - The Fourth Sunday of Easter A
The Reverend Dale T. Grandfield
May 7, 2017

Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
I Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

We expected it to be there, but it wasn’t - it had disappeared sometime in the weeks before graduation a year ago yesterday. It was a simple-enough cypresswood chair in the kind of french empire style that flourished in the Mississippi delta in the early 19th Century. Happens it was one of two chairs that sat in the chancel of the Episcopal parish on the grounds of bishop Leonidas Polk’s plantation in Louisiana; Polk who was the first Episcopal bishop of Louisiana, one of the wealthiest, most prominent slave-owners the entire nation - he owned enough people to fill these pews to an Easter morning’s crowd - a bishop who turned Confederate General to champion the secessionist cause during the Civil War. A plaque on the back told the story that the chair had been carved by some of the people whom Polk owned.

Since the late 60’s when the chair had been given to the University of the South, every year a bishop of this church would sit in that grand chapel on a mountain in Tennessee in full vestments in that chair made by enslaved craftspeople in Louisiana and preside in Medieval Latin as students in their regalia marched up and were graduated from the University of the South and The School of Theology. The chair would have been there for me, too, except that, thank God, some black seminarians caught a glimpse of the plaque one day and started raising awareness about the chair’s provenance and said, this makes us feel unwelcome.

I thought of that chair when I read a post on Facebook the other day about two stained glass windows in our National Cathedral given in 1953 by the Union of the Daughters of the Confederacy to memorialize the heroism of Generals Lee and Stonewall Jackson.1 The article highlighted the continuing dialogue in the Cathedral’s Chapter about the suitability of keeping those windows high above the floor as luminous pages of our holy history…

It’s interesting to think that those windows were installed concurrently with the time when Allan Rohan Crite, a black Episcopalian and liturgical artist visited Sewanee and was so mistreated that he produced three images of Christ as a black man, bound to a column, whipped; hanging on the cross dead in front of The School of Theology; and finally risen, pointing to how even the most pathological evils are redeemed in the Resurrection;2 it was in that time when the professors at the School of Theology went on strike because the University refused to desegregate - a battle that lasted another full decade, at least:

2 See https://www.episcopalarchives.org/Afro-Anglican_history/exhibit/images/leadership/Leadership_Allan_Crite2.jpg
The Psalmist writes “You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;”3 Listen to that again: You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; in this Psalm that’s held dearly by many as the comfort Psalm of comfort Psalms we have the image of God the waiter - God the servant - creating space. The enemies had already sat down to dinner, they were feasting in their club, satisfied with themselves and the fare - when God came in and made space. You spread a table before me in the presence - right there among - those who trouble me. And lavish it is! the table spread, the cup running over, the head sleek with the anointing oil of royalty:

This whole Psalm bespeaks how God makes a place where there is none: through the valley of the shadow of death, in the presence of those who trouble: the roadblocks, the danger, even the trouble-makers aren’t so much removed as spread apart, a place is made; a safe place, the right to be.

Unfortunately giving the right-to-be means that God has to destabilize the trouble-makers: it’s just that simple - they aren’t going to open their party on their own; God bursts in and moves their chairs with them in still in them, pushes the tables apart and sets up a new table and another spread and brings out the best; it’s the same with the valley of the shadow of death where the wolves hide in wait for the sheep the Good Shepherd makes it possible to pass through unharmed. It takes a staff and a club; it’s the same with the resurrection: when power and privilege and empire and war and religiosity reigned, God came and suffered and died and broke through the power of death and made it possible to be abundantly: it was the same as The Episcopal Church struggled and does struggle still with its history of racism and lukewarm commitment to equality - it took shoving the chairs and putting up a table and rearranging the furniture; the same with women’s ordination; and some people got real mad, because they felt threatened, but God doesn’t ever seem to be interested in placating people’s fears and insecurities, particularly not in God’s household, the Church:

Because it is God’s household the church and we are people for whom God has spread the table and filled the cup and poured the oil; but we must always beware that our place never precludes the sitting of another whom God is calling in, that our furniture even in unspoken ways could send the message you’re not one of us. The banquet is boundless, you see; only when we fear that God won’t provide enough do we exclude - there is enough and more, friends, enough and more and now in this Eastertide, it is good to renew our focus on the Good Shepherd, servant Christ who is spreading a table here in new ways, too.

Other works consulted


https://www.episcopalarchives.org/Afro-Anglican_history/exhibit/index.php

3 Psalm 23:5 NRSV