

**Together in Love
Joint Revival
New Jerusalem and St. Stephen's**

Address to the pastor and people of New Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church

Before I start in on the topic for the day, I want to say a little about this unlikely relationship that has become one of the most cherished relationships of my professional ministerial and personal life, and that is the one with Rev. Brocks and New Jerusalem.

It's not common to see Lutherans and Baptists getting on.

We have been reminded of the words of Dr. King each night – that the most segregated time in the world is Sunday morning – but you and I know that should be the time when the kingdom of God is closest to reality...and I don't know about you, but the Bible I read tells me that the kingdom of God is represented in full array of color and language, in faith and belief, that the kingdom of God is represented in its finest when diversity flourishes and shows the many shades of God's beauty in the faces of strangers and friends.

That's the kingdom of God – that's that beloved community – and that is my dream for this our city of Wilmington. Just as I know it is yours as well, because as I look out into the pews, in my heart I know this is a glimpse into the beauty of the coming kingdom.

You know what, I would be audacious enough to say, here and now, that the kingdom of God on earth represented in all it's beauty of diversity is the same dream that God has for us as well.

God's dream:

Not walls but bridges.

Not hand grenades at concerts but love overflowing for one another.

Not shooters in nightclubs in Orlando but understanding and acceptance and RESPECT...RESPECT of those different than us.

You know, how many of you feel sometimes that evil has the last say? Does it seem that a cloud of gloom hangs over us – always keeping us reminded that evil tends to lurk in the shadows?

With the current administration in our nation's capital it seems that the evil of racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and sexism has been invited to leave the shadows and dwell even in front of our very faces.

Death – death seems to be everywhere these days, another body in the streets at the hands of gang violence or another body because of the abused privilege of rogue police causing us to question those good men and women that wear the uniform actually serving and protecting us. Evil that

causes us to even question the good! How many feel that is happening?

Seems like the bad tend to overshadow the good.

But when Jesus Christ enters our hearts and softens the hardest of hearts or unfreezes even the most frozen of hearts, we cannot help but realize that in any death there is resurrection.

There is resurrection.

For without it there is no Christ and without Christ there is no hope and without hope there is only gloom, death and evil.

But since there is Christ and resurrection. then there truly is no death - then we have already had the final say and that is evil will never prevail.

Now, let me do something that is very un-Lutheran...something not of my tradition, and that is to testify. I would like to testify to you today that I know that resurrection is a truth and reality. And I know there is resurrection that has conquered the power of death and evil...I know it because it was not all that long ago that an act of pure evil brought flames and destruction to the corner of Vandever and Pine (a place mind you that none of us at St. Stephen's probably knew much about until December 16, 2015) and while evil revels in the ash and dust of a burnt church, a God of resurrection tells us that out of ash and dust is a new creation...Genesis 2 tells us that from the dust of the ground God made humanity, a new creation...and from the dust and ash from the ground of that corner God brought New Jerusalem and St. Stephen's together in an unlikely relationship...giving us the honor to encounter each other...to build friendships and to build up what brought us here today, into a joint worship, a joint revival...to know without a doubt that God is good, that God is the maker of unlikely relationships, and that a God worshipped in a Lutheran tradition is the same God worshipped in a Baptist tradition, is the same God of Jesus Christ, the same God of resurrection and the same God that brought out of destruction new life in a friendship that has committed itself to one mission – and that is one of love and compassion as taught to us by Jesus Christ and demanded of us to teach and preach and live outside these walls and in a community that may sometimes seem hell bent on destroying itself...one mission to tell all out there that they matter, that they are important and that they are loved.

And how good it is and how pleasant it is, says the psalmist in Psalm 133, for us to dwell and be together here...to say that evil has no grasp on any of us so long as we grasp onto Jesus.

All this to say, Rev. Brocks...guests and friends, it is an honor to have you in this church tonight and over this week – you give us so much strength to carry on in a weary, weary world.

A Reading

1 John 4:7

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Sermon delivered May 26, 2017

I think I get to have the best slot, because I am able to look over the past five days and reflect on them - reflect on what has come from God calling us together, to worship, praise, and be revived...

The rough start and the spontaneity of the first days of the revival is very indicative of how real change happens. The uncertainty and unfamiliar surroundings or order of worship helped us to awaken to something new...something different the Spirit was doing for us.

The Holy Spirit does not work according to schedule, or to a time table...the Holy Spirit does not fit into the cells on an Excel chart or into a graph...the Spirit is wild, uncontrollable.

C. S. Lewis tells us exactly how it is...when talking about Aslan - the Lion from the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe...”He's wild, you know. Not like a tame lion.”

The Holy Spirit is much like an untamed lion...wild and unpredictable, but always loyal, powerful, and surrounding us with so much grace and mercy.

When we follow the winds of the spirit, we find that we have only one guiding light, and that is the truth we find in Christ...the truth in Christ that love liberates...that love dictates...and that love propagates.

In Christ, love liberates. Because we are loved by Christ we are liberated by his truth and grace...that is why we as Christian people cannot just say we love justice, but we have to work for justice. And as we are told in Proverbs (21:15), when justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous and terror to the evildoers. Because justice is holy, justice is what liberates, and justice when sought together as a diverse people will be the only way we can make America and the church great again.

In Christ, love dictates. It tells us what it means to be Christian, what it means to be people of God...what it means to follow in Christ's final commandment given to us - to love one another as Christ loved us...to love our neighbors as ourselves. And you know, that final one I find is the hardest...because we sometimes try so hard to love our neighbors, but never really learned how to love ourselves. Far too many people cannot even look in the mirror for more than a few seconds without either looking away or wishing they had better hair...or in my case, more of it...or going onto

dangerous diets or suffering from eating disorders...or falling into self loathing. It's no wonder why we find it easier to bomb other nations than to love ourselves. We truly need to find ways to love ourselves the same way God loves us - remember when we were created God called us good...and we must worth it because God never would have sent his only son to live with us, to suffer and die for us...and to be resurrected so that death and evil are crushed once and for all.

Finally, love propagates. Any good gardener knows that to keep the garden growing you have to be comfortable propagating your plants...and what better gardener than God. God can make a grain of wheat sprout up from the rock in the heat of the desert...in Corinthians Paul writes "I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow. 7 It's not important who does the planting, or who does the watering. What's important is that God makes the seed grow" because God gardens and tends to us with love and grace and all we need do is look at the love and grace propagated by Jesus Christ.

So while we may preach differently, or do church differently...one thing remains...and that the love and grace of Jesus Christ knows no bounds, knows no limits. This is the God that created life from dust and Ash in the beginning, and gave us new life through the ash and dust created by an act of evil and violence...always reminding us that God is good, God is good all the time, and God is the one and only path we have in this broken world to realize the love that Christ has called us to show, to be part of the beloved community of people that believe in the strength of diversity and in the power we have united as one force of goodness to have this audacious hope that we can change Wilmington - and the world for that matter. Simply by believing in the power of love and Christ.

The Rev. Jason Churchill
Friday, May 26, 2017