

Good evening my friends, and God bless you. I am Eric Biddy, the rector or pastor at Saint Paul's and I know I speak for all of us when I say that we are honored, privileged, and delighted to be with you tonight. And I'll speak for myself in saying that preaching for you on Martin Luther King, Jr., weekend, I am honored, delighted, and intimidated. I am an imperfect ally in the quest for justice and an eager partner in the building of friendship—but to speak about Dr. King in this great context, with your rich heritage, is daunting. On the other hand, I have the audacity to preach about God every week, so I'll gird up my loins and stop clearing my throat and get down to it, with profound thanks to Pastor Bennings for the invitation and to the teams from each of our congregations who have already been building relationship, from before I ever even came to this beautiful city.

My text tonight is from the Gospel according to John, chapter 15, verses 12-17. Jesus is at the last supper with his friends on the night before he dies for us. And in the midst of several chapters of last instructions, he says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

In the Episcopal Church, my tradition, we don't "take a text" in the style of the free churches. We read passages from scripture according to a schedule, and the preacher preaches on the text assigned for the day. I've taken some liberties—this text was assigned on this past Thursday for a commemoration of an obscure saint named Aelred of Rievaulx. But I like it for tonight, because it is at the Last Supper as we celebrate your candlelight communion service. And it is about holy friendship, which will be my overarching theme.

And Aelred himself helps, too. It seems ridiculous to talk about Aelred of Rievaulx on Dr. King's weekend, but if you'll stick with me, I hope it will all come together. Aelred was a twelfth century English monk and eventually an abbot, in charge of a monastery. He was in a very strict order, the Cistercians, but was known for being remarkably gentle. And his most important book was called "On Spiritual Friendship." There, he claimed that in fact friendship was ordained by God in creation and even that in friendship, we are reflecting the very image of God. He calls Adam and Eve the first friends, the proof that God intended from the beginning for us to be friends with each other. Humans are created in the image of God, but humanity is incredibly diverse. In all of our remarkable, sometimes seemingly irreconcilable diversity, it is in the unions of our friendships that we reflect God's unity, that God's unity is manifest in us. When we do friendship right, Aelred asserts, we look a little bit more like God and we are drawn closer to God through Christ who is in the midst of every true friendship. Christ, who calls us his friends and joins himself to us in communion, is somehow a part, too, of our holy friendships, the love that is shared between friends.

We'll come back to Aelred, believe it or not, and to the gospel of John, but I want to talk about Dr. King, too. I think a white preacher who is going to talk about Dr. King is probably most likely to reach for the great, "I Have a Dream" speech, or perhaps the more pointed "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." But I've been dwelling lately on a later book by Dr. King: *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Dr. King wrote this book at a crucial moment in 1967, just a few months before he was assassinated in 1968. Attention had moved on from Selma, a community that needs our prayers tonight for a very different reason after severe weather created so much damage. The great march on Washington with the "I Have a Dream Speech" and the triumph of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were in the past. And the mood of the country and of the movement had changed. King opens the book by naming this change and acknowledging that many of the leaders

who worked hardest for the Voting Rights Act were no longer in leadership positions in the organizations they had built. Watts had happened; Detroit was happening as he wrote; our own city's violent reckoning with decades of submerged violence was bubbling away, even if it would be a couple more years before it came to a boil.

King succinctly describes the challenges of that moment. The Voting Rights Act had been the close of one phase of the struggle for civil rights. It was a phase when Black America had found a lot of allies in White America. But after the Voting Rights Act, the expectations of those white allies and of the Black folks they had worked with diverged. White allies had joined in sincere outrage to stop brutality. King says, "White America was ready to demand that the Negro should be spared the lash of brutality and coarse degradation, but it had never been truly committed to helping him out of poverty, exploitation, or all forms of discrimination. The outraged white citizen had been sincere when he snatched the whips from the Southern sheriffs and forbade them more cruelties. But when this was to a degree accomplished, the emotions that had momentarily inflamed him melted away" (3). As white support melted away, thinking the job had been done well before equality was real, Black anger deepened and spilled out into violence.

Some of y'all know this history much better than I do, and other histories too that matter. I'm not trying to teach you about Dr. King or the history of the Civil Rights movement. I am trying to ask again the great question Dr. King posed all those years ago—where do we go from here: chaos or community? King identifies the time when he wrote this book as a crucial turning point in the quest not just for equality but for brotherhood. Our "here" is a different place. We do not share exactly the same situation Dr. King described in 1967. Much progress has been made, and much progress remains ahead of us to be achieved. But just a few years on from the events of 2020, our choice of directions may be the same: will we choose chaos or community? Will we learn to live together in love, or continue slowly what King called "violent coannihilation"? Better historians and thinkers than I can tell us what happened after King's book, and many of you lived through it. I suspect that in the terms he set, what we actually chose then was some kind of hodgepodge, of halting steps toward community, punctuated by outbursts of chaos—one of which claimed Dr. King's life. And so as we face again the question of 1967, echoing down through the decades, we see that it was not answered clearly. And we still face it and face it again.

The root of the word "community" is of course, "unity." But unity is a tricky thing, because we all want it and the wrong ways to get it are so tempting. We have all seen at some point, maybe even in the church, unity used as a bludgeon to enforce conformity. If we aren't careful, in the name of unity we flatten diversity, distort the peculiar ways our siblings are created in the image of God, and rob ourselves of the gifts of difference. Or, we leave room for diversity but rush to claim unity by watering it down so much that all we have really achieved is a bland quiet, or a calm camaraderie that evaporates once really exposed to the light of real living.

We must instead strive for the unity Christians believe inheres in the Trinity: a bedrock unity in essence that is manifested in diversity. Trinitarian theology is a quick way to lose an audience in the evening, but traditional Christian theology teaches that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in essence, but distinct in personhood, and bound together in love. The key to the divine unity is the active sharing of love. This is the kind of deep unity that is both a means to all our goals, and a goal in itself. But getting there isn't clean or easy or quick. Love and diversity are both a little bit messy. A unity built on love and respectful of diversity will take some time to build.

Maybe Aelred is a surprising help, here. Dr. King was writing to a nation; Lord help me, I'm preaching to two churches. And for us, to choose community might mean first to choose friendship. I hope that our churches can partner with each other to do things, that we can find needs in our city to which we can respond with joined hands and one voice. But the most radical thing, and the most Christian thing, we can do is to love each other. And if Aelred is right, then the friendship built on

that love will reflect the very nature of God and Jesus will be with us, as he was present with his disciples. Those first weren't an obvious collection of friends. They included fishermen and tax collectors, political radicals and private traitors, mostly Galileans with a rogue Canaanite in their midst, and a pair of brothers who consistently broke the harmony of the group with their own pride and ambition. They were a mismatched group who became united through their love of Jesus, or more accurately, by Jesus' love of them. On the last night, Jesus called them friends and whatever uncertainty or tension was in the room, they were made friends by him.

For over two hundred years, our two churches have prayed our separate ways through the history of Augusta. We have each faced, from very different angles, the needs and challenges of this community. And today still this town faces serious challenges. There is much good, of course, but our challenges are real. Can a friendship between our churches provide the kind of change Dr. King was looking for? I don't know. At the end of his life, Dr. King was trying to stop the Vietnam War, unite the globe, and end economic exploitation both in towns like ours and between the rich and poor nations of the world. But I do know that Augusta will be a better place if we are friends. And even more, I know that we will be drawn closer to God in our friendship with each other, because I think Aelred was right—that Jesus is there in the midst of any folks who are brought together in friendship through his love. And friends in Christ can through the grace of God bear fruit that will last.

Thank you for inviting us tonight. God bless you. And let's continue to draw closer together in our Lord, for our own good and for the good of our city and the world. Amen.