

25April 2018

Mayor's Spirit Luncheon
"Faith in Action: Speaking Truth to Power"

Good afternoon! I would like to personally thank Mayor Heggins and the Covenant Community Connection for this invitation. I also thank each of you for setting aside time from your busy schedules to attend. Let's hope when it's all said and done you won't be disappointed. This is my very first Mayor's Spirit Luncheon. Needless to say, I'm a little overwhelmed because I have no idea what type of messages have gone forth in the past. I was told the guests would include clergy, faith practitioners, free thinkers, maybe some community leaders, and some public officials. Really! No pressure! Today, we gather to show appreciation to the spiritual and religious diversity of the city. Regardless of our spiritual or non-spiritual practices, I'm confident there is an element of instruction in each of us that encourages us to remember and adhere to the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The days for ostracizing and treating each other differently simply because we may worship a different God or no God at all should be a thing of the past. I hope we recognize the strength in our diversity and will work together to make Salisbury, NC, and America truly *united* in every sense of the word. I was asked to come and speak with you for a few minutes today on the topic: "**Faith in Action: Speaking Truth to Power.**"

This month, all across the country, commemorations took place in recognition of the 50th year since the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A few commemorations were held right here in Salisbury:

1. HTS hosted a panel discussion on the book by Dr. King titled *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*
2. Later that evening, the Covenant Community Connection held a viewing of Chairman Jones': An Improbable Leader, engaging in Q&A session afterward.
3. The Salisbury Chapter of the NAACP held a dinner and spirit-filled church service celebrating the life and works of Dr. King.
4. Mayor Heggins read a proclamation commemorating the death of Dr. King and the Bell Tower rang 39 times in honor of Dr. King's age when he was murdered.

As you can see, April 4th was filled with activities offering community members the opportunity to remember, reflect, and re-commit to continuing the work of Dr. King. During the panel discussion on the book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community*, Dr. Conrad Pridgen (one of the panelists) shared how elated he was to see such a panel discussion on this topic taking place at a seminary because he believes in order to see Dr. King's dream come to fruition, it will require the work of what he called the 3 S's: sanctuary, seminary, and the streets. No one "S" can do it alone. These 3 S's should work in tandem in order to compel government officials to bring about the necessary changes which will lead to all of humanity having the privilege to experience what Thomas Jefferson penned in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men (women) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We, the people in the sanctuaries, temples, mosque, and gathering space play a pivotal role in working to make this a reality.

A few months prior to his assassination, Dr. King, in response to President Johnson's declaration of war on poverty, shared his vision for a march that would take place in Washington, DC in May 1968. He labeled the march the *Poor People's Campaign*. Dr. King persuaded a multitude of individuals of various races, various ethnicities, various class of people to prepare to join him in May and commit to staying until the government agreed to change the manner in which they dealt with the poor in this country. Despite the assassination of Dr. King, a beautiful rainbow of people, much like the beautiful rainbow of people currently occupying this space right now, made their way to Washington, DC and remained there for 42 days. They organized demonstrations and met with multiple agencies demanding action be taken to provide jobs and income for the poor. Unfortunately, the demands of the Poor People's Campaign were never realized.

Dr. King along with many others were calling for a "revolution of values." He articulated, **"In the days ahead we must not consider it unpatriotic to raise certain basic questions about our national character. We must begin to ask: Why are there forty million poor people in a nation overflowing with such unbelievable affluence? Why has our nation placed itself in the position of being God's military agent on earth? Why have we substituted the arrogant undertaking of policing the whole world for the high task of putting our own house in order?"**¹ These questions were raised over 50 years ago and yet they are

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here Chaos or Community?* Beacon Press, 141.

still relevant today. They get to the heart of what Dr. King referenced as being the *triplets of evil: economic injustice/poverty, militarism, and racism!*

Do we speak of these evils in our sanctuaries, temples, mosque, gathering spaces? Are we teaching in our sacred spaces about the suffocating stronghold economic injustice/poverty, militarism and racism continue to inflict upon this nation?

There are some who may be thinking “we have come a long way since 1968.” Yes, the country has come a long way. The U.S. economy has grown more than 18 times in the past 50 years.² However, that growth has not managed to work its way down to the poor working class. Data shows that in 2017, the **400 wealthiest Americans owned more wealth than the bottom 64% of the U.S. population (204 million people).**³ We in our sacred spaces must begin to refute the false narrative which states “poor people are poor because they want to be poor.” **WHO WANTS TO BE POOR?** Poverty does not discriminate. It is an equal opportunity grabber. Of the **40.6 million people in 2016** living below the federal poverty line⁴ 17.1 million are White, 11.1 million are Latinx, and 9.2 million are Black.⁵ 2017 data for Rowan County shows 23% of children are in poverty (down 6.9%), and 36% of children from single parent household are in poverty (up 2%). There is absolutely no legitimate reason why people are dying of poverty “in the richest nation ever to exist”. Hyman Bookbinder, assistant director of the Office of Economic Opportunity declared, “The poor can stop being poor if the rich are willing to become even richer at a slower rate.”⁶

Militarism and the War Economy is another evil that must be addressed. I was going to say I don’t know why this country is so fixated with war. But I do know why, greed. The military budget has grown over the last 50 years from \$354 billion to \$668 billion. Still for some, it’s not large enough. The various wars over the last 50 years have not been about protecting Americans. They have been about increasing profits for private contractors. Meanwhile, many of the soldiers who are risking their lives are coming home seriously injured and suffering from PTSD. Often more intense than the physical toil is the emotional and psychological turmoil. In September 2017, a report was made indicating we lose approximately

² The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America 50 Years After the Poor People’s Campaign Challenged Systemic Racism, Poverty, War Economy/Militarism & Our National Morality

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. The federal poverty line is an income-based measure. Low income is defined as living at below twice the poverty line.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ King, 6.

20 veterans a day to suicide. Some find it overwhelming to re-acclimate themselves back into society after having served so many tour of duties and witnessing the atrocities no one should ever have to encounter, let alone sometimes initiate.

Finally, we must address the final evil Dr. King referenced: **racism**. Better yet, systemic racism. Systemic racism entails putting systems, policies, and programs in place that disenfranchise a sector of people from having the same power, resources, and responsibilities of other sectors of people. Oftentimes the disenfranchisement comes from both the federal and the state levels. James Baldwin said “If you don’t know what happened behind you, you won’t know what’s happening around you.” What happened behind us was that systemic racism and white supremacy was imbedded into the DNA of America. Native Americans and Blacks (African-Americans) were never working with a full deck of cards. Yes, we have the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But we still have economic inequality due to policies and programs that continue to stack the deck against sectors of people. Right this minute, there are fewer voting rights in 2018 than they were 50 years ago. States are passing laws to make it more not less difficult to vote. It’s inconceivable to learn that over the last 50 years, federal prisons have increased by nearly 700% with people of color accounting for 66% of the inmates. We have undocumented immigrants afraid to send their kids to school or going to the doctor for fear of being picked up by ICE and getting deported.

Systemic racism highlights very clearly how something may be legally right but morally wrong. It may be legally right to build for-profit prisons but it is morally wrong to house those prisons with people who have committed nonviolent crimes and whose sentence is oftentimes much longer than others who committed the same exact crime if not worse. It may be legally right to decriminalize marijuana and begin to offer assistance to those who are addicted to opioids but morally wrong not to release those in prison who were found guilty of the same business that is now deemed legal. It may be legally right to require photo identification for voting but morally wrong to shut down all the motor vehicle offices in the urban areas making it impossible for people to get the ID, ultimately making it impossible for some people to vote.

In order to eradicate the world of the triplets of evil we, the beloved community must work without ceasing to establish a new set of values. We must “cry loud and spare not”: speaking against the policies and programs that inhibit individuals and

families from having a fair chance to live life without struggling to survive. It is imperative we engage in conversations in our sanctuaries, sacred spaces, or wherever we gather and then step out into action to help bring the change we want to see take place in the world. Too many times we have so much to **say** and yet **do** very little!!! We, the people must unite around powerful action programs and movements which are working around the clock to eliminate the evils of racial injustice. Faith in Action includes committing to not just commemorating Dr. King on April 4th but putting in the work every day to ensure our economy becomes more “people-focused and not just profit-focused.”⁷

We, clergy, faith leaders, free thinkers, community and business leaders have to step up and take advantage of the opportunity our position presents to us. Challenge, convict, and convince your listeners to get involved in working to truly making this country, state, and city the very best it can be for all people. It seems we are so busy preparing others for the life to come that we fail to instruct them on what our responsibilities are in the here and now. We are our sisters and brothers’ keepers. Let’s put our faith in action and remember, “To love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. Let’s not look at if our responsibility is to be charitable or seek justice. In my opinion, it’s not **either/or** but **both/and**. We are mandated to assist those in need through charity but we are equally mandated to assist them through challenging the systems that keep them in a position of need.

As I shared earlier, the Poor People’s Campaign 50 years ago ended without the campaign getting their demands met. Fortunately, individuals are working extremely hard all across this country to re-launch the Poor People’s Campaign. Dealing with the same triplets of evil Dr. King spoke of plus adding to it ecological devastation, co-chairs Rev. Dr. William Barber and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis are mobilizing another beautiful rainbow of justice warriors. The movement is considered a “moral fusion coalition that is multi-racial, multi-gendered, intergenerational, inter-faith, and **constitutionally grounded**.”⁸ The campaign intentionally seeks to build a unified front whereby we will break through the politics that divide us and stand united against the injustices which continues to make this an immoral nation. It’s not about being Democrat or Republic, it’s not about liberalism or conservatism, it’s about right versus wrong. When individuals gather and hear stories from people directly impacted by economic injustice (poverty), systemic racism, militarism and the war economy, and ecological devastation it’s easy to link hands and say “Somebody’s hurting my brother and

⁷ King, 142

⁸ Ibid, 14

sister and it's gone on far too long. And we won't be silent anymore." There were others who refused to be silent when the rights of the poor, the widow, the children, and the most vulnerable were being trampled upon; speaking against those saying "Peace, peace when there is no peace." Dr. King said "Real peace is not the absence of tension but the presence of justice." The relaunching of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call to Moral Revival is all about fighting for the soul of the nation!

As I prepare to go to my seat, I say to each of you: here is a concrete way to put your Faith in Action: Speaking Truth to Power! Get involved with this campaign. The official launch date is Mother's Day, May 13. Over half of the states will be engaging in Non-violent Direct Action Civil Disobedience. If you are interested in learning more about the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, visit their website at www.poorpeoplescampaign.org. It is my desire to see many more of you in the spaces where training and preparation is taking place across this city and county preparing us for the challenge that's ahead. It is my desire many more sanctuaries and sacred spaces will open their doors to bring in facilitators who will lead conversations and discussions around what is happening in this country right now. Ignoring it, refusing to ask the difficult questions, and not wanting to challenge people will not make it disappear. Things will only continue to escalate. In order for things to really begin to change in this country, it's going to take those who are not being "picked out to be picked on" to speak out and speak up for those who are being "picked out to be picked on" and say "ENOUGH is ENOUGH"! **Let us all put our Faith in Action and Speak Truth to Power!**