

# The Reverend Speaks

*I preached this sermon on Sunday October 3, 2021 during our morning worship. The moment we're in is one that has a lot of us feeling anxious, reactive, and angry — and like every human being this behavior shows up sometimes in the Church. This doesn't mean the Church is bad. It means that the Church is composed of humans who human everywhere we go. The difference between the culture of the world and the culture of the Church is that, when lived out in a healthy way, the Church turns towards each other for mutual support, reconciliation, and community. This sermon is inspired by this dynamic, and I wrote a manuscript to say it as precisely as possible.*

*This is intentionally mostly intact as I preached it, but I may make a few revisions for the sake of reading more clearly. If I change the content of what I preached more than a little, I'll make note of the difference.*

-PEW

Friends, when I was ordained on March 1, 2009 it was a snowy day. This was highly unusual for Columbia, SC. It was so unusual that Pastor Bill Eiwen, my childhood pastor who preached at my ordination, got the laugh he deserved that day when he said, “I always said it would be a cold day in hell before Eric was ordained”.

That day I became Pastor Eric and pastor of a congregation, but it would take me years to understand what it means to be a pastor. It would take me years longer to understand the difference between Pastor Eric and Reverend Wolf. A pastor is a friend and a companion. A reverend is one who is acting out of the authority of the office of Word & Sacrament.

Well into my 12th year of life as a pastor and reverend, today is only the third time in my career that I've written a manuscript for a sermon, because it's only these few times that I've felt the deep need to speak as a reverend rather than as a pastor. I feel the need to speak today out of the Office and authority of Word & Sacrament ministry. I write a manuscript today because I need my words to be precise. Next week I plan to be back to the normal program.

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There is nothing — *nothing* — more sacred in the Kingdom of God than relationship. In today's first reading from Genesis 2, we hear a familiar tale told in a really strange way. The Inclusive Bible draws on the traditions of Midrash and Aggadah, which are traditions that engage Jewish theological tradition with great authority, but isn't necessarily the majority opinion. In this story, God creates *adamah*, literally translated “creature of dust” or “of the red earth” from Hebrew. This is where we get the name Adam, but in this tradition Adam as we know him comes a little later. Though my professor compared it to the word *Earthling*, I prefer to

name this protohuman God creates *Dustling*.

God creates Dustling into a solitary existence, alone in the universe with no other being as their peer.

God is with Dustling, but God realizes that this is not enough. God can speak everything into existence as well as form it from dust, but it turns out that there are two things God cannot do.

First, even God cannot love without experiencing the vulnerability it brings. This vulnerability makes God aware of the needs of the ones God loves, and causes the second thing God cannot do: God cannot have an equal relationship with Dustling because creation can never be equal to its Creator. It's for this reason God says, "it's not good for Dustling to be alone, so I will make a companion".

What's wild here is that God doesn't skip to the deep sleep or rib. God creates animals to see if there's a companion to be found, and Dustling names them all but identifies none that is suitable for a relationship of equals.

So it's for this reason that God recognizes that *this* creation is different. In the same way God forms this creation with unique attention and in God's own image from God's own hands, Dustling's companion can only be born from the essence that has been given by God.

And so Dustling is made to sleep.

God reaches into the creature's side, and pulls out the choicest part of God's creature to create the one we call Eve — from the Hebrew Chava or Hayah, which means "to breathe" or "to give life", we will call her Breath.

Now, I know I'm taking some true poetic license.

The difference in this text is a little jarring compared to what we're used to. I do this to explain that it really is a faithful interpretation despite being a nonstandard translation. In this interpretation of the second creation story, a remarkable thing happens. Dustling's essence continues though the creature's original form ceases to exist, and there now is a second new creation: male and female.

What I like a lot about this translation is that male and female aren't stratified or normative. They're simply descriptive of the purpose of their creation: the man, who we will now call Red Earth, is brought into life with Breath as his partner. Together, Red Earth and Breath will tend the garden and populate the earth.

As y'all hear this, raise your hand if you're hearing something new in it that you've never heard before. I know I am as I type it, and I've preached this interpretation before.

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When Paul was writing his second letter to the Corinthians, by the time he gets to the fifth chapter he's so worked up about the joy he finds in Christ that in the Greek he writes a sentence fragment. Most of the time we hear this rendered as, "if anyone is in Christ they are a new creation" with proper grammar. In the Greek it's more along the lines of, "therefore, if anyone is in Christ — NEW CREATION! The old is dead and the new now lives!".

There are moments when we're struck by the reality of the change we're facing in our lives. We realize that in the blink of an eye, nothing will ever be the same again. I can think of one personal example--the moment when fatherhood hit me. When I saw Willoughby's head crown — NEW CREATION!

As we faced shutdowns and mask mandates and what may become a two year change from life as we knew it — NEW CREATION! The old has passed away, and all that's left is this newly born infant of an existence that's so new that we don't even know how this world works anymore. It's frustrating and angrymaking, and it hurts us because sometimes we can't even figure out how we can safely gather without three changes of venue before the day it happens.

Sometimes we can't even figure out how to *be* Church together because we don't really know what that means right now.

We dwell in a moment of grief for what we've lost.

We also dwell in a moment of hope for what might become.

It's a moment of darkness for not being able to see the road in front of us. In the moments of darkness when we wander in unfamiliar places, as I mentioned in my newsletter article, God provides a pillar of fire by night and cloud by day to lead us around the dangers so that we might arrive at the place where we can cross by faith, knowing that the one who has guided us will protect us. Just as God led the Israelites to the Red Sea — from slavery into freedom — by the winding road so they could avoid Pharaoh's army, so we will be led out of this moment of frustrating unknowingness by the One who is creating us all.

Like the Israelites, we have moments when we grumble along the way. Yet God continues to love us even in our grumbling. Moreover, God commands that we love each other even while we grumble.

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In today's Gospel, we have one of the more challenging texts to preach — an infamous passage about divorce. Jesus responds to the question about divorce by saying that no one should divorce unless there is infidelity. For generations, I believe this has been wrongly interpreted as a pronouncement of the sanctity of the institution of marriage, causing people to feel shame when marriages end because pastors have engaged in uncaring preaching and interpretation of this passage.

BUT! BUT! BUT!

Context is everything. I can't name a single time when Jesus says that *any* institution is more important than the people it involves. Not ritual hand washing, not the Sabbath, and I would wager, not marriage.

In Jesus' time, men were able to divorce women — and not the other way around — for any reason they chose without very much hassle at all. Don't like dinner? Don't appreciate a barbed comment? Don't like the way she dresses?

Divorce was an easy out, and the man got everything and was able to leave the woman with nothing. When Jesus said this, it may well have been to point out that marriage is sacred, but I hear it more as a statement that there is no person who deserves to be beggared by another's whim.

It isn't marriage that's sacred, but it's *people* who are sacred. Women left destitute by men is the type of thing that Jesus would address.

And we know the importance God places on relationship already from the story of all the trouble God goes through to create Red Earth and Breath for relationship in today's reading from Genesis.

It isn't buildings that are sacred, though they have holy purpose and we love the things we do there.

It isn't paraments that are sacred, though we use them to represent the depth of faith and mystery.

It isn't a congregation's history that's sacred, even though our history reminds us that who we have been is beautiful.

In this moment, we are called to be the Church that joins who we have been with who God is calling us to be.

The church is living, breathing, and dynamic; beloved of God.

This congregation is the Body of Christ, and like all bodies, we exist in relationship. Relationships are always evolving, and as my wife likes to say, all living things **MUST** evolve,

because living things die if they don't adapt to grow and thrive.

Our history tells the story of the faithful who came before us — not so different from the story generations to come may tell about all of us. We in the Church today tell the old, old story by remembering the stories of those who came before us, but not for the preservation what was. We tell these stories to remind us that those who came before us also faced the challenge of singing new verses of the old, old song that still tells the old story so that new people might join in the refrain with us as we write the verses of our generation.

The Church is the beloved community gathered in this place for word and sacrament, brought into God's family through water and word, nourished through community and communion, and sent back out into the world to proclaim the good news to all the world that this exists for them too, especially when they can't bring themselves to believe it.

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This brings me to the reason that Reverend Wolf is preaching this morning.

My calling as a Minister of Word & Sacrament is to administer the means of grace, and one of my vows is to "pray for God's people, nourish them with the word and sacraments, and lead them by my own example in faithful service and holy living", and also, to "give faithful witness in the world through word and deed, that God's love may be known in all that I do".

I look to the example of Jesus. He could have given an easy answer to the question about divorce and said, "well, the law says yes". Instead, Jesus gave the hard answer.

COVID is a moment of hard questions and hard answers. We've spent the last year-and-a-half exploring what it means to be the Church, what it means to worship, what it means to love our neighbor, what it means to carry with us the nearness of the Kingdom of God that calls us to repent and believe the Good News like no generation before, perhaps since the plagues of the Middle Ages.

This moment is HARD.

Being the Church in this moment is HARD.

We're hurting, broken, weary and worried, anxious and angry, and I'm as tired of it as you are.

Reverend Wolf is here today to say this: *St. John is an amazing collection of people with diverse gifts and talents that join the ONE body of Christ. **We cannot eat our own without devouring the unity in Christ that this body represents.***

Are we a body where it's okay to yell at each other?

Are we a body that accepts it when meetings represent our painful brokenness rather than grace-filled living?

Are we a body that talks behind each other's backs?

It's true that conflict and rivalries happen in *every* family, *every* congregation, and within each of us as individuals. It's just human nature.

Jesus looked at the disciples, who at the time were arguing about who was the greatest among them, and said "the rulers and leaders of the Gentiles lord it over them and their high officials exercise authority over them, but not so with you! Whoever would be the greatest must be the least, and whoever would be first must become the servant of all just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many".

The world will *eat us up*, but not so with you. This is our respite, our community; this is our body as much as it is Christ's body. That doesn't mean there isn't conflict, but in *this family*, we turn toward each other and not away.

In this place we will be gentle with each other.

We will speak truth with loving kindness.

We will be the place that invites people and ideas that are new because we understand that this place belongs to every single person who God calls to be here with us just as much as we do.

We need to decide together that we will live the new creation that made Paul see the joy of new creation and sentence fragments.

We need to decide together to be the place where those who are weary and heavy laden will find their rest.

We need to decide — together — that when members of this beloved community hurt so badly that they hurt those around them, part of that love is standing *in* love to communicate **that this is not okay**. Communicating that this is not okay can feel harsh, but love demands we do the hard things so people in this family feel safe and heard. So that the new creation people find with us is a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light.

Conflict is normal, and emotions running high is normal, but as we confess every Sunday, we own our thoughts, words, and deeds. The same way that we confess *this* together here at St. John, we — together — confess that when we make *the change that costs us our comfort*, we honor God.

I've told you before that I'll never ask you for the easy thing. I'll always ask you for the hard thing.

The hard thing I ask this morning is that we hold each other — myself included — to the standard of love. That when we're hurt, we say it. That when we worry, we say it. That when the pastor is a jerk, we say it.

When we are careful and speak in love we live together in more productive ways.

This is who we are created to be — love for each other, the relationship that is so unique that *only* we can do it.

Friends of Jesus, know this: when we do the hard work of learning to be *this* church — *The Church* — no force in heaven or on earth will stand in the way of the Gospel we preach with every breath in our bodies so that the stories our descendants tell will be worth the telling.

As we tell the story of our lives with Jesus at the center, we become the new creation that the world could never expect or hope for, but that only God's presence can bring and that God has chosen to create through us. Amen.