

**Sermon Notes**  
**The Rt. Rev. Duncan M. Gray, III**

**Jackson, St. Andrew's Cathedral**  
**Liturgy of Repentance and Reconciliation**  
**May 21, 2011**

We are in the midst of doing a very difficult and a very important thing. We have gathered together to confess our failings – no, let's use the stark and penetrating word that speaks to this moment. We have gathered to confess our sin. The sin of our own hearts and souls as individuals, and the sin of our church, collectively and corporately. And, we are here to acknowledge before Almighty God, that we as individuals and that His Church, the Body of Christ have benefitted from the sin of racism that manifested itself in slavery, segregation and a quite contemporary complacency that seeks to reassure us that now, all is well.

There are many who have asked, "Why do we continue to talk about this?" Or more specifically, "Why do we need to confess to acts and events in some distant past? Can't we just move on?" I would love to move on. I would love for my past to be less a burden that it is. During my years in the parish ministry, I received many referrals from local mental health professionals. They had done all they could do with their clients. They had talked as much as they could. They had gleaned as many insights as they could. The next step required a confession to God and His Church. There is a burden that our sin forces us to bear until it is brought into the light and presented to God. The Church's sacrament – the reconciliation of a penitent – is designed, not to force us to wallow in our sin, but to be healed and forgiven that we might step into our future without the debilitating burden of our past.

But bishop, is not sin an individual matter? And besides, so much of this happened before my time, or at least before my own consciousness of its reality? Dear friends, we rightly take great pride in the good and heroic deeds of our ancestors from the founders of our republic to those who sacrificed their lives in defense of freedom. Their choices and acts have created our collective identity. And we bless and give thanks for their extraordinary witness. But woven within that same past are the horrors which we now confess – they are the burdens visited as scripture says, "from the fathers to the children into the third and fourth generation." The words of the old confession in BCP ring so true: "I/we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we

have done those things which we ought not to have done ... but thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us ... forgive us our sins. ...”

A word about reconciliation that may be the product of repentance: Though true repentance is so very difficult, ultimately the greater price of reconciliation is paid by the innocent one. The cross on Calvary’s hill is the icon of the price paid by the innocent to effect reconciliation. Our repentance and amendment of life does not demand, or manipulate God, into an act of forgiveness. Forgiveness, reconciliation is always a gift of grace freely given by the offended one who gives up the demand for retribution and justice. Repentance opens us to the possibility of reconciliation, but reconciliation is possible only when all are willing to pay a price.

Time does not allow for a litany of our sins against God and our neighbor. We all know our common and collective story and we are all trying to come to terms with our individual story. That is why we are here.

But as we, as the Episcopal Church, confess our complicity in the sin of racism it is also important to praise God for those who have been instruments of redemption within this church – a church that is both broken by its sin and filled by God’s grace. I sing a song of the saints of God patient and brave and true ...

I sing a song ... of our historically black churches. Churches who created their own unique communities as they shaped and formed many generations in a church that refused them equal status.

I sing a song of the saints of God ... Laurence Jones, young African-American Episcopalian came down from Iowa in 1907 with a God-given vision to establish a school for African-American children who were denied any access to education – Piney Woods School was the product, now the oldest boarding school for African-American youth in this country. For so many years, Dr. Jones and his wife were nurtured and renewed within the community of faith at St. Mark’s, one of our historically black churches.

I sing a song of the saints of God ... Okolona School in Chickasaw County. Its mission was nurtured and sustained by God’s saints such as James and Willie Raspberry, and was as William Raspberry, noted writer once said, “a very safe place in a very unsafe time.” Okolona College was also the summer gathering place of youth and adults while Camp Bratton-Green at Gray Center remained de facto segregated.

I sing a song of the saints of God ... The Rev. Ed Harrison – out spoken in his defense of the Freedom Riders from this very pulpit at St. Andrew’s Cathedral paid a great vocational, emotional and spiritual price. And there was

a fellow named Gray – a relative of mine – whose capacity for grace and forgiveness was for me, the source of his courage and witness.

We rejoice in their witness – for it gives us a glimpse into God’s ever redemptive activity in this world. God will take all that we offer – our best and our worst and use it for God’s purposes. We need not be afraid of acknowledging our failures. When humankind had done its absolute worst – nailing Love incarnate on a cross ... When humankind had failed its ultimate test – then and now God saves ... God redeems ... God heals.

In a moment we will gather around an altar – prideful, stubborn, sinful human beings – that somehow God desires to use. We gather as one – united not by our virtues, our good intentions or even our desire to repent of our sins. We are united by the God who took our worst – the cross – and made it into an instrument for healing and reconciliation. This banquet ... this feast ... glimpse/foretaste of God’s kingdom when all burdens are lifted. When all healing is made real – and in the words of one who glimpsed that reality in a dream ... “When all God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old negro spiritual, Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!”