

Mrs. Hamer, Mrs. Durr, Brother Will, And the Word of Faith

The 1999 Commencement Address

by

The Reverend Fleming Rutledge

Being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified . . . The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart, that is, the word of faith which we preach . . . So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.

Romans 10:1-17

In the May 17 issue of *The New Yorker*, political writer Joe Klein reports on the Presidential candidacy of Elizabeth Dole. He describes how she chose the New Hampshire Republican Party's Campaign 2000 kickoff dinner to make a statement in favor of modified gun control. Since the Republicans of that state are notoriously attached to their weapons, this was a courageous thing to do. There was just one problem. Mrs. Dole stated her position as she strolled around in one of her signature walkabouts, so that her words seemed to vanish into the far corners of the room. Mr. Klein concludes, "One wonders what the impact . . . would have been had [her words] been delivered from the authority of a lecturer."¹

Our theme on this day of commencement is not speaking styles or church furniture, however. We have before us a class of freshly-minted servants of the Word. This is a sermon about the *authority* of the gospel, the *word of faith which we preach*. In our text for this morning from Romans 10, St. Paul writes: *The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart, that is, the*

word of faith which we preach; and, he continues, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. . . . For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him (Romans 10:6-9, 12).

I am going to be referring to three books I have just finished reading. All three of them are related to the civil rights movement. The first is called *Outside the Magic Circle*. The author lived right here in the Seminary neighborhood for 15 years in the thirties and forties. She died just a few weeks ago at the age of 95. Her name was Virginia Foster Durr, and of all the natives of the American South of whom I have ever heard, I believe I admire her the most. She and her husband Clifford Durr became famous in 1963 when they went down to the jail in their home town of Montgomery, Alabama, to bail out Rosa Parks. But they had already lost most of Mr. Durr's law practice and many of their friends years before because they

would not knuckle under to the Communist-hunters who were striking fear into the hearts of so many during the fifties. Cliff and Virginia Durr were born into privilege in the Old South, but all their lives they had very little money because of the positions they took. The courage, wisdom, humor, and insight of Virginia Durr, in particular, almost defy belief, and I urgently recommend her autobiography to you.²

There is only one aspect of her book that is out of tune. She was theologically tone deaf. This is understandable, since her father, a Presbyterian pastor, was thrown out of his pulpit because he refused to sign a statement saying that he believed Jonah was literally eaten by a fish. His daughter Virginia never could see any point in theological hairsplitting after that. She said, "I think the teachings of religion have been nearly ruined by theology . . . It seems to me that the essential point of every religion I've ever studied is the Golden Rule, to treat people as you want them to treat you."³

Virginia Durr heard Martin Luther King preach many times. She admired him greatly as a leader, but she understood him largely as a politician. She was oddly oblivious to the *theological* power of his message.⁴ The opposite is true of Charles Marsh, who wrote the second book, called *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights*. It's a theological thriller. The heroine is Fannie Lou Hamer, the semi-literate Mississippi sharecropper whose astonishing physical courage and transcendent spiritual leadership placed her in the very first rank of movement leaders. Mrs. Hamer (as she is always called) holds the key to the theological puzzle posed by Marsh.⁵ He presents her not only as a Protestant saint of no small dimensions, but also as a genuine theologian "every bit the equal of our canonized masters of conceptual thought." Marsh shows how Mrs. Hamer instinctively understood—and preached—the crucial distinction that Paul makes in today's reading between *the righteousness which is based on the law and the righteousness based on faith* (Romans 10:5-6).

Fannie Lou Hamer was arrested in Winona, Mississippi, for the crime of attempting to register to vote. While she was in the Winona jail, a group of male law enforcement officers orchestrated a savage beating intended not only to hurt her physically but to degrade and humiliate her spirit. She never forgot that night, and till the end of her days continued to talk about it, but she never kept what Maureen Dowd calls a "dis list." Moving around the encampments of young civil rights workers as they prepared to go out into the Mississippi night, she was a living example of Paul's apostolic preaching: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, [there is neither black nor white], all are one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3:28). She spoke to the

young people about a new world in which they were not going to hate white people no matter what suffering they endured. The word of faith which she preached was based in her radical understanding of the work of Christ.

The problem with many of us—not all, but many—who run around quoting Galatians 3:28 is that, without meaning to, we are using the passage



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to set up a new kind of righteousness by the law. In Paul's later letters, specifically Romans, he shows that he is aware of this danger. Those who *have a zeal for God*, he writes, are *not necessarily enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness* (Romans 10:2-4).⁶ I could keep you here all day with stories

about my husband and me in the sixties and seventies when we were in love with our own righteousness. We had great scorn for those who had not been converted as we had. We did not understand that Christian social action arises out of the radical breaking down of distinctions, not the introduction of new distinctions. This radical breakdown is expressed most succinctly in Paul's crucial words in Romans 5:6: *Christ died for the ungodly*.

The Episcopal Church is presently in danger of a new kind of legalistic sentimentality that threatens the very causes we care about. Sentimentality says that if we just elect enough minorities to General Convention our problems will be solved. "Just look at our diversity!" we brag. Christian realism says this is just window dressing compared to the real work of love and struggle that must go on day in and day out on the local level. I am not saying do not elect minority deputies. I am saying let's not think that because we have done it we have thereby established our own righteousness. With all due deference to Virginia Durr, *theology is important*. Paul's proclamation, *There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, is impossible to live by unless there is righteousness by grace through faith, because unaided human nature always wants to divide Jews from Greeks, godly from ungodly, righteous from unrighteous—according to works, according to law. But Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified* (Romans 10:4)

There is always some kind of law rearing its head in the church. Today it seems as if there has to be a litmus test for everything, from inclusive language to sexuality to tithing to "personal sharing." There is this pressure to conform to one ideology or another. It can be found in Cursillo as well as urban coalitions. When I was in seminary, the law divided those who

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boycotted Gallo wine from those who did not.⁷ Today the distinction seems to be more in the realm of what we're calling "spirituality." What a change in 25 years! Seminarists hardly prayed at all in the early seventies; today one is suspect if one is not in spiritual direction. This presents us with a fresh problem, as people begin to feel alienated because they don't want to join prayer groups. If Paul were here today he might be saying, *Christ died for the unspiritual.*

This theological emphasis, as of course you know, comes from Paul through Augustine to the Reformation. For reasons truly mysterious to me, the Episcopal Church doesn't want to be Protestant any more. Well, God knows Protestantism has been divisive.⁸ Human behavior always threatens to undo whatever good there is. However, and this is where *the word of faith* comes in, it is the Protestant emphasis that preserves the nerve center of **true inclusiveness**. It is the Protestant emphasis that keeps reminding us, "there but for the grace of God go I."⁹ Without a continuing commitment to the righteousness that is by grace through faith, we have no theological hedge against that other, most pernicious kind of righteousness—namely, self-righteousness. Listen again to the way Paul describes what happens to godly people when they get self-righteous: *Being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. But Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified* (Romans 10:3-4).

Now we are going to appear to undo everything we have said so far. Charles Marsh ends his theological thriller with a strong hint that there are certain times when distinctions do have to be made in the church. He cites a question posed by James Cone: "How could both black and white churches be Christian if they took

opposite stands and both claimed Christ and the Bible as the basis of their views?" Tightening the screws, Marsh evokes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who in 1934 said that German Christians who were not in the resisting Confessing Church were not Christians. A whole chapter in *God's Long Summer* is given to the unexpurgated theological views of Sam Bowers, Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Mississippi Ku Klux Klan, who ordered the murders of the three civil rights workers during Freedom Summer. Reading Bowers' opinions and contemplating his works, most would agree that Sam Bowers is not a Christian. Well, are you and I Christian? What are the defining issues of our own time? It is difficult to say, because there are no clearly drawn lines as there were in 1934 and 1964. I am mulling over the possibility that the death penalty might be the test case for us today. The saying I quoted earlier is attributed to a 16th-century Englishman, John Bradford, who, when watching some malefactors being taken off for execution, did not say, "They are getting what they deserve," but rather, "There but for the grace of God goes John Bradford."¹⁰

Are you and I Christians? What ground do we have to stand on? There is something out of tune when we clergy and other Christian leaders allow ourselves to be known in our communities purely for our good works, as though we ourselves were the message. David Boies, probably the most brilliant litigator in America today, was recently quoted: "I don't want people to say, 'He's a great lawyer.' I want them to say, 'He has a great case.'"¹¹ What is our case? Is it the Golden Rule? Or is it *the word of faith which we preach*?

Anybody who has seen a Eucharist at an international Anglican gathering will agree that the sight of all races and peoples coming together to the

Lord's Table is unforgettable and transforming. But *faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ*; the Eucharist must be interpreted by the Word. If it isn't, it will deteriorate into sentimentality. How long has it been since anyone, anywhere in the Episcopal Church was refused the Eucharist? What about a man who abruptly leaves his wife for another woman in the same parish and three weeks later comes to the altar rail with the new lady friend, in full view of the congregation (true story)? How about Charlton Heston? Just kidding . . . but what *would* be a reason strong enough

to excommunicate someone, at least temporarily? Paul called for an excommunication in the Corinthian church, as you know.¹² Would we give the Eucharist to Sam Bowers? How about the unrepentant killers of Matthew Shepard? Whether we do or whether we don't, however, the point is that we have to be prepared to defend our position *theologically* in the light of the Christ *who justifies the ungodly* (Romans 4:5). It is a lot more complicated than the Golden Rule. It is a lot more complicated than just saying "God loves everybody." Indeed God *does* love everybody, but that is not a sufficient account of the gospel.

It turns into sentimentality in a blink. Paul's crucial words *Christ died for the ungodly* (Romans 5:6) have a bite to them. The implication is that there is such a thing as ungodliness and that *all* human beings need to be saved from it, including you and me.

So that puts the preacher and the congregation on the same plane. To the Class of 1999, I offer congratulations and thanksgivings with all my heart. I am sure you are proud and grateful that you have accomplished the difficult academic challenges of the past three years. Now, however, the really hard work begins—the work of teaching and leading all kinds of folks.



The Class of 1999

There is something out of tune when we clergy and other Christian leaders allow ourselves to be known in our communities purely for our good works, as though we ourselves were the message.

You will be driven to desperation at times because your people will not support your best ideas, your highest aspirations. You will have completely unspiritual people in your parishes. Like Virginia Durr, they respond to calls for action. They won't come to your quiet days and they won't even try to learn centering prayer. They may be in your office more often than you would like, hectoring you about some social program or other. Other people in your parishes will be breaking out into prayer at every pause in the conversation ("O Lord, I just ask you to help our rector see the light"). Still others will be badgering you to have more praise music, or to get rid of praise music. Those of us who envisioned ourselves out on the barricades leading the battle against injustice have been horrified to find ourselves bogged down in quicksand with the Altar Guild. What's going to hold us up? Where do we find that firm ground at the bottom of this human muck?

This brings us to book number three, by Will Campbell. Everybody knows who Will Campbell is, right? No greater servant of the radical gospel lives today. He was, as he says, "in the crosshairs of the Klan" for many years, but everything Brother Will writes is constructed around the gospel message, *Christ died for the ungodly*.¹³ His latest is *And Also With You: Duncan Gray and the American Dilemma*.¹⁴ Duncan Gray was a genuine hero of the Episcopal Church in Mississippi during the civil rights movement, and the book is written as a tribute to his witness. I want to give you some idea of the book's ending, but please be aware that it is far more intricate, poetic, artful, and profound than I can even begin to suggest. That said, let us follow as Brother Will describes a day with a most unlikely and unholy triumvirate. Picture Will Campbell, Sam Bowers, and civil

rights activist Kenneth Dean, colleague and friend of Duncan Gray. Bowers is escorting them on foot through the "deep, foreboding" Mississippi swamps, "as remote a place as I had ever seen," where "dark rituals [had] uneased the night" at "nocturnal, clandestine gatherings" of the Ku Klux Klan.

Beside me was Bowers, a man alleged to have been responsible for multiple murders, bombings, and mayhem. On the other side of me was [Kenneth] Dean, a man who had risked his own life trying to save the lives of black citizens . . . It was the greatest test my tentative understanding of unconditional grace as overshadowing, overcoming, conquering humanity's inherent sinfulness I had ever known. The scandal of the gospel I had heard preachers and theologians talk about in generalities all my life assumed an even more outrageous posture. Is grace abounding here in this darkening arcane forest? Truly unconditional grace? Something as crazy as Golda Meir chasing Hitler around the pinnacles of heaven, and after a thousand years he stops and lets her pin a Star of David on his chest? Who said that? . . . I felt a strange oneness with the two men with me. And an even more unfamiliar concord with those I knew had convened on this ground to plan missions of atrocity.

What is that oneness? What is that concord? That is the theological question. Is it simply "God loves everybody?" No one who cares about God's justice can be satisfied with that. Religious reassurances of the ordinary variety do not reach the deepest pain or bridge the widest chasms. Nothing will do it but this Word: *Christ died for the ungodly*—"not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offenses." That is our oneness, that is our concord. The unconditional grace of God, the righteousness of Christ in his death, "overshadowing, overcoming,

conquering humanity's inherent sinfulness"; the purpose of God at work with resurrection power to reclaim this whole human race of "miserable offenders" for his glorious kingdom: that is *the word of faith which we preach*.

The Charge to the Class of 1999:

You are invested with authority today, not because you have a new degree, but because you have been called to the ministry of the gospel. John Calvin wrote that "God puts his words on the lips of human beings while angels keep silence." Paul writes, *How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?* (10:14) Lectern or no lectern, high pulpit or low pulpit or no pulpit, it is not your own authority that you exercise in worship, in preaching, in the sickroom and by the deathbed; it is the authority of the Word. Week in and week out you will wrestle with the text of Scripture as you go about your pastoral or teaching ministry. It will be confirmed for you again and again: we have a great case, the greatest that the world has ever known. The foundation of true Christian preaching, liturgy, prayer and action is the knowledge that not one of us can claim a righteousness of our own, but instead the unconquerable righteousness of Jesus Christ, given in his death for the ungodly, the unrighteous, and the unspiritual. In every generation this revolutionary message is proclaimed afresh. The dispatch from the Commander passes now to you. There is no power in heaven or earth that can wrest the righteousness of Christ away from a sinner whom he loves. May it be said of us all, in the words of God from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

*Servant of God, well done! Well
hast thou fought
The better fight, who single hast
maintained
Against revolted multitudes the
cause
Of truth, in Word mightier than
they in arms.*

(PL VI/29)

Amen. ✠

Notes:

¹The Talk of the Town," 5/17/99 [emphasis added].

²*Outside the Magic Circle* is currently out of print, but an edition of her letters is presently in preparation.

³Virginia Foster Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle* (University of Alabama Press, 1985), p. 125.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 284.

⁵He believes that she is properly understood only if viewed through her Biblical faith. The otherwise reliable biography of Mrs. Hamer, *This Little Light of Mine*, is deficient in that respect.

⁶I could be criticized here for failing to acknowledge that Paul is speaking of the

Jews. In other places I have spoken about the meaning of Romans 9-11 as it relates specifically to the Jews. Chapter 10, however, can legitimately be understood in terms of religious people in general. As one of my longtime friends, a graduate of Virginia Seminary, used to say, "We're all Jews," meaning, we all seek to establish our own righteousness.

⁷Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1973-4.

⁸Though we could also mention the Crusades and the Inquisition.

⁹Catholic writers like Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy are more Protestant than they will admit.

¹⁰Cited in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*.

¹¹Quoted in *Forbes* magazine, February 1999.

¹²I Corinthians 5:1-5: Paul's wording is of great importance: *You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved In the day of the Lord Jesus*.

¹³One annoying thing about Will Campbell is his insistence on saying that he is not a theologian. That's equivalent to Aretha Franklin saying she is not a singer.

¹⁴Will D. Campbell, *And Also With You: Duncan Gray and the American Dilemma* (Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House Publishers, 1997)



Mrs. Rutledge and Center for the Ministry of Teaching Librarian Ruth Hailu at commencement.