

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Senior Minister
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One Sunday Dr. William Willimon found himself the guest preacher at an African-American church. It was a great experience, an exuberant outpouring of praise welling up and spilling over in crescendos, typical of worship in the Black church.

Of course, the service was not circumscribed by our familiar one-hour increment. The choir lit up two anthems. But that reminded the choir director of another, so they did a third. There was the regular offering, then the mission offering. When not enough was received in the regular offering, they repeated it, preceded by a lengthy, more fervent appeal. And that didn't even count the lengthy testimonies. Movements like these require time and space. In the end, that entire service was well over two hours. Just another Sunday in the African-American church, friends.

So after this action-packed morning Willimon stood in the church parking lot with his preacher friend, his pulpit gown draped over his arm. They were ready to part. This was good, Willimon thanked him. It's always good to worship with you. But may I ask a candid question? Sure, his colleague said, fire away. *Why does it take you folks so long to worship God?* I mean, I had six cups of coffee before worship today and I was *dying* up there. His pastor friend smiled and chuckled.

“Why does it take us so long to worship God,” he echoed. “Just look around.” Not surprisingly, the church was poised far from the posh side of town. Urban blight was visible in all directions. Loud billboards, with their casino, liquor and cigarette ads, glared down. The constituency from which that church drew was clearly targeted for profit by powers without their best interests at heart, powers eager to exploit and hurt them. “So why do *you* think it takes us so long to worship God?”

“All week long my own hear the message that they're nothing. They don't matter. They're mostly invisible and disposable. You see, they don't have the great jobs, drive the sleek cars, or live at the leafy addresses. They don't figure in the meetings where matters of life get decided. They are afterthoughts. In our great rat race of getting ahead, my flock gets looked down upon as the rattiest of the rats.”

“So each Sunday I'm called to remind them *all of that's a lie*. Don't believe it! Because they're beloved children of God, they do matter. God's eye is upon them. God's holy councils watch over them. God feels their sorrows and joys. They are *precious* to God. Where I live, with so many lies to counter, with so much despair to reverse, that takes a couple of hours. So how long does it take you with your people?” Have we even thought of worship in such a way? We'd do well to do so.

Our service today might exceed an hour, but we won't go two. After all, it takes a while to bless everyone eager to know God like this, to experience God having the last word over them--not social status, earning power, or sly ads. I do not get

complaints about going over at this service for the reason the preacher stated. Feeling God's power countering other harsh, diminishing powers is well worth it.

Of course, we live on the other side of the tracks. Worldly markers of our acceptability as worthwhile differ, but they are no less insidious. What college did your son get into? Was he a legacy?...Where does your family summer? Chatham? Kennebunk? Nantucket? How many generations?...I once had a guy dismiss me on a Vail chairlift for wearing the wrong sunglasses. I suddenly became invisible.

Where else but the church can we go to expose the lies of jockeying and oneupmanship? Finally, we're not just producers or consumers. We are not just salaries, degrees or family pedigrees. Our bodies are not mere props to keep fashion houses profitable or worse if our bodies aren't supermodel perfect. We are relentlessly exposed to these lies. If we hear them enough, we'll start to believe them.

I'm telling you, spiritual warfare is being waged just beneath the surface of things. And the stakes are human souls. God intends the church as counterculture to the subtle and explicit ways that worldly powers reduce us. Some scratch their heads at Gary going to Kenya to build schools with the poor, or me going to Mexico to build homes. Why do we passionately insist upon it? These people are beloved children of God, but they live like animals. We've recently heard how the corridors of powers speak of such lands. We bring another word. The word is *gospel*. Good news. With a school or a home, gospel becomes so real they can touch it.

For me, the struggle to get through the day is realizing that the world constantly broadcasts subtly flawed messages that seem, on the face of things, to be true. It is as though media are the transmitters and my head is the receiver. I buzz with veiled, clever messages as I finger the dial, filtering among them. You are what you earn. You are what you wear. You are what you drive. You are what and who you know. *So you had better be this somebody. Or you're nobody...*At the same time God addresses me daily and would buoy me, if I only have ears to hear. I spend my days fiddling with this dial searching for a signal that I'll call *Radio God*.

Like an underground movement, it broadcasts an alternative message over our humanity for knowing contentment, for living the truth, for being spiritually whole. I know it's out there and I want to tune it in. But sometimes it gets crowded out by taller transmitters with bigger funding. Yet God breaks through the dismaying static, if we will but hear God out. The signal comes loud and clear. It announces a whole other life than that most of us live much of the time. That is the life I seek. This is the life I want to share with you. For it will never disappoint us. We will not look back on our years and have regrets. I can't say that about the other signals.

Where else but the church can we go to hear the one truth foundational to living a sane, strong, and contented life? That truth is articulated at baptism more than anywhere else. We hear it in that voice booming from heaven at Jesus' baptism.

As this message blessed Jesus at the outset of his ministry, so also it blesses us along the way of our life journey. For Jesus spread this favor to all of God's own. And it goes something like this: "You're beloved to me. You are my child, my son, my daughter. You belong to me and I claim you, despite the worst you do. You did nothing to deserve this belovedness, but live into it--and live up to it--anyway. For everything in life is eventually taken from us--our health, our wealth, our family, our niche in the world, our accomplishments. But God's loving nature quietly endures forever. And it's there waiting for you in that moment you need it most."

I can barely pronounce such a message without it reducing me to tears. Can you believe it, Gary? We are called, we have jobs delivering this good news! We get to broadcast a countercultural gospel that, taken seriously, would subvert much of our economy and politics. Gary and I get to bless you with this blessing. Now you know my view of the church, no mere parish of Christendom, ready to bless whatever comes down the pike; but a mission outpost, gospel guerrillas of grace.

And you can say what you want about the church—they're a bunch of hypocrites, they're as mean as anyone else, they fall way short of the standard they set. Say what you want about the church, but you won't hear this message or receive this blessing anywhere else. And today it is the centerpiece of everything that we do.

As you come forward today, to renew your baptism, your belovedness, by way of reaffirming it, my hope is that you will hear the one who speaks through us above all of the static. That the signal will be clear and the message will be delivered. We need to hear and remember this truth to live with strength, dignity, and poise.

I like how Tony Campolo sums all of this up with the simple reminder: did you know that God carries around a picture of you in his wallet? Did you realize that?

So hear this and live: You are God's beloved children, with whom God is well-pleased. Considering that's all we need to know, we don't say it nearly enough. Amen.