

Run With The Vision: A Covenant for Truth Repair and Reconciliation

Dearly Beloved, We are gathered here today to get through this thing called life--- Well really to worship, join in covenant relationship and fellowship.

I'm Charese Jordan Moore, an Elder here at Knox, co-chair of the Presbytery's Dismantling Racism Team along with my co-chair and friend Guy Moody who is here today, and I sit on the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board where I'm slated to become the moderator of the board's Matthew 25 Team. I add my welcome to our dear friends from Govans and all other visitors. Thank you for allowing me to deliver the message today and let it be pleasing to the Lord who inspired it.

I'd like to start with the Book of Habakkuk – One of my Favorite scriptures that informed the title of my message today –

Run With The Vision: A Covenant for Truth, Repair and Reconciliation.

Most of us have read that the Lord instructed the prophet Habakkuk to Write The Vision and Make it Plain, So that a Runner Might Run With It. Now Habakkuk was railing against the Lord about the state of the world and injustice around him. As I re-read the Book, I thought that could easily be you or me in 2024, right here in Baltimore.

I also thought about Presbyterians and our love of words – our confessions, our creeds, our overtures, our concurrences to the overtures – and even our covenants – We have no problem with writing a vision. But making it plain – that might be another story. And remember in Habakkuk the runner would likely have been running with stone tablets. With our love of words those tablets might have been very heavy.

Beloveds, we are gathered here to join each other in covenant relationship – sacred and joyful – and hopefully not too heavy for us to carry into our future together.

How Did the Covenant Between Knox and Govans Come to Be?

Who knows about the proposed Covenant between Knox and Govans? Show of Hands? In fact, who has read it – Show of hands? It's okay. I plan to make the vision plain today, so that we all can run with it.

1. In 2021, Pastor Tom and I met each other as members of the Presbytery's Dismantling Racism Team. And after the meeting, he soon after told me that he had to introduce me to Lea Gilmore.
2. He then reached out to talk about how the two churches – one a small African-American church and the other a larger predominantly white, and wealthier church, might build a relationship around issues of racial justice and healing. – Interesting!
3. We thought the best way was to begin with relationship-building through Bible Study. Certainly, as people of faith we had the Bible in common. Right? So,

members of Govans joined Knox's Noon Bible Study. Pastor Tom became a leader along with Knox Leaders, our dearly departed, George Fisher and Quinton and Colleen Cates – and the relationships began to form.

4. What did we do next? We're Presbyterians – we formed a Committee. – It now consists of Tanya Morrel, Lea Gilmore, Kit Clark, and Angela Pignalia from Govans and Doris Wison, Kenneth Walker, Quinton Cates, and me from Knox. And we planned activities – joint services, Lenten book studies, concerts, -- and we invited each other to the other churches' events, and we prayed.
5. But we wanted a deeper and more impactful relationship – at least I did – and I know Pastor Tom did too. When our current pastoral consultant Rev. Kevin Johnson came to Knox, Pastor Tom even shared the vision with him.
6. So, we're still Presbyterians right – the committee decided to write a covenant to make the Vision plain. And it took a minute to write it, actually about a year. We wanted it to be transformational and not transactional.
7. When we completed the draft, we sent it to the Sessions and some other committees. And they discerned and discerned and discerned some more. They're Presbyterian too, after all.
8. At the end of 2023, both Sessions voted to bless and sign the Covenant relationship of Knox and Govans.

That's the history! Where is the scripture and spirituality? Bear with me and encourage me. Amen!

Let's talk about the sacred and spiritual nature of a covenant. A covenant is biblically based and different from a contract. In the world, the two terms are often used interchangeably. A contract is a legal agreement often for an exchange of goods, services, or property for a prescribed period of time – and often easily broken. One party doesn't deliver on a contract. The contract is broken and often the parties head to court – or sometimes they just walk away. A biblical covenant is a voluntary agreement that can change, stretch, and grow because the parties are in relationship with each other. For instance, marriage is a covenant. The Lord had a covenant relationship with the people of Israel – and wow didn't they challenge our Creator many times, but the Covenant relationship with God's love remained. And God has a covenant relationship with us.

So, what does the Covenant between Knox and Govans call for us to do? All the things that we've already been doing – Maybe more joint ministry.

Three things that are spiritual endeavors, all for the Glory of God.

1. Seek and Speak Truth
2. Repair of Historic Harms
3. Seek Reconciliation as God's Children – Siblings all the same.

The 1st - Seek and Speak Truth

In these United States, we share a painful history about issues of race. There's no denying it and we live with the legacy of that history every day. If I attempted to recount that history in detail, we would be here much too long -- so I will not.

I will, however, paint a quick picture With Words of some of the racial history that scars the lives and landscape of the country that many of us love. Take a deep breath. Look at your neighbor and say, "Neighbor, THE TRUTH WILL SET US FREE. Take a deep breath!

SLAVERY – Yes, I Said Slavery

Earlier, I introduced myself by telling you titles that I hold and things that I do – my credentials.

But who I am is so informed by the people I come from. As I heard a facilitator say in a PMA training last summer, when his grandfather meets someone new, his question is, "Who your people is?" So, I want to share that I am Charese, daughter of Clarence, granddaughter of Pearl, and great-granddaughter of Marie who was born in 1868, three years after slavery ended. Her parents were enslaved. And she is just 4 generations back. Great grandmother Marie lived to be 100 years old, and she was alive 10 years after I was born. She basically saw the first years of freedom from slavery through the Civil Rights movement. These are the people I come from through my Alabama ROOTS – and many of the things we talk about today are not ancient history.

Great grandmother Marie also saw:

- Reconstruction
- Jim Crow
- De Jure Segregation
- Redlining & Housing Discrimination
- The Civil Rights Movement
- Lynching
- White Sheets and White Flight
- Voter Disenfranchisement and Suppression
- State Sanctioned Violence

And thanks to modern technology we all saw:

- The Killing of Brother George Floyd and Sister Breonna Taylor among others
- We see Poverty, Education, Health Care Disparities
- We see The Racial Wealth Gap

I could go on, but you get the point! We're Presbyterians – I know you watch the news and read and plan lots of lectures and book studies. Sister Lea has a whole Racial Justice Library in her office. And Brother Charlie Johnson is a living historian here at Knox, and you should take the opportunity to get to know him.

Now some of our written history is sanitized – white-washed if you will, but the truth is that many of our ancestors, Christians – Many of whom were Presbyterians – condoned, participated in, and supported the laws and policies that allowed these atrocities and systems to prevail. And, at the very least, they were advantaged by a system of White Supremacy that disadvantaged people of color. Hard and uncomfortable to hear? Perhaps. Hard for me to say? Maybe! I implore you all to sit in discomfort for a moment, because Christ our Lord calls us to a better way and gives us hope for a new way.

So, let's talk about the second focus Repair of Historic Harms

Repair Historic Harms – What's That? Hint – It's not a construction project for churches or homes. Take another deep breath...

The Covenant Calls for Govans to make “significant, unencumbered donations to Knox.” That's reparative justice.

In the Luke , we hear the story of Zachaeus the tax collector. He was a short man and climbed a tree to see Jesus. Jesus looked up and asked him to come down immediately and host him at his home. In verse 7 the people muttered – “Jesus is going to stay with a sinner”. They knew Zachaeus had sinned as a tax collector and had become a wealthy man. Perhaps he cheated people, perhaps his sins were condoned by the laws of the day. What is remarkable about Zachaeus is that he immediately took responsibility for making things right. Without demand or law, he voluntarily said, ‘ Look Lord, here and now I will give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone out of anything, I will pay back 4 times the amount.’

Zachaeus understood repair. He looked at Jesus and he looked into his own heart to make restitution. And Jesus looked favorably on him. We are all guilty of sin, and sometimes beneficiaries of the sins of the systems in which some of us thrive and others perish. I would take note of the words significant. I have often been asked what that means. There are many formulas that project the amount of generational wealth lost in our racist system. I'll leave that to the economists and the government for now. I believe that those in this room must look into your hearts and use your very intellectual Presbyterian brains to figure out what significant looks like. As is often said, I can't define pornography, but I know it when I see it. I can, however, define unencumbered. That means if you stole my grandfather's car – and your sense of justice compels you to give it back – you don't get to tell me how to drive it. If you think you should, I ask you to sit with that example and examine your motives about control of your siblings of colors bodies, brains, and resources. Plain Talk! Amen!

Let us not despair as we talk about the 3rd focus of the Covenant.

Reconciliation – Hope for the future – Y'all might as well take another deep cleansing breath.

Our second scripture from 2 Corinthians, Chapter 5 is about The Ministry of Reconciliation.

My father used to say that you can't truly forgive, unless you forget. On that point – Sorry Dad – I differ. We've talked about acknowledging and speaking the truth. We've talked about the responsibility of repair, which to quote Rev. Jermaine Ross-Allam, PCUSA's Director of the Office of Historic Harms, is both "Necessary and Possible." Jermaine also says that we should engage in repair "as soon as possible and for as long as it takes."

So, now let's talk about Reconciliation – A new thing – and both a necessary and possible thing. God calls us to turn away from our sin and be reconciled to Him. In turn we must be reconciled to each other.

In verses 17 – 20, we are told "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave us the Ministry of Reconciliation. That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation."

To those who have been harmed, I challenge you to be open to forgiveness and reconciliation.

We remember and honor the truth of our ancestors who were enslaved, suffered under Jim Crow, denied adequate housing and education, denied full voting rights and citizenship. We remember Brother George Floyd, Sister Breonna Taylor and so many others. We carry that pain – and we carry the strength and resilience that allows us to still stand.

But we serve a God that calls us to forgive as we have been forgiven, to love as our great Creator loves us, and to be reconciled to our Siblings as we are reconciled to him.

That is what the Covenant between Knox and Govans is about. It is God doing a new thing as we pledge to walk alongside each other as we seek love, justice, and liberation for all. Will it always be easy as we run with the vision? NO! Will we have some ouch and oops moments along the way? MAYBE! Will we stumble and even fall at times? QUITE POSSIBLY!

What matters is that today we are pledging to run with the vision together. Years ago, I saw a news clip about an Olympic runner who sacrificed winning the race to help an injured competitor across the finish line. When I Googled it, I found out that there are many instances of this happening from high school to Olympic athletes. It restores faith in humanity.

- So today, we pledge to join hands, and run with the vision.
- To get back up if we stumble.
- To carry each other when it's needed.
- To be in a reconciled relationship inspired by the love and example of Christ.

- So that when we see the poor, the hungry, the incarcerated the lonely and downtrodden -we see Jesus – and he sees us – His Hands and Feet in the spirit of Matthew 25.

Beloveds, Let the church say Amen!

Elder Charese Jordan Moore, Knox Presbyterian Church, April 28, 2024