

THE VERY REVEREND WILLIAM O. DANIEL, JR., PHD

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“Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

I was at a conference this past week in Atlanta, Georgia, where 1200 Episcopalians—1200—to talk about Spiritual Formation in our church. It’s the largest gathering in recent memory where Episcopalians have come specifically to talk about how we grow together in the fellowship of Jesus Christ.

The week was kicked off by a plenary given by a non-Episcopalian, evangelical, self-appointed bishop, the Reverend Dr. William Barber. Having grown up in the holiness tradition with evangelical tendencies, I’m always a bit reluctant to listen to someone who basically anoints themselves to their appointed calling. Yet Barber has made his way and has proven himself to be an advocate for the poor. He’s not a prosperity gospel preacher, and as of yet there are no scandals he is having to answer for.

As I sat in the bleachers of Clark University, a historically black University, and listened to Barber speak about the life of Christ, the witness of scripture, and the plight of the poor and oppressed, I have to say, I was moved in ways I can only describe as the movement of the Spirit. The electricity with which he spoke and

the words that gave voice to those who need to be heard stirred up in me an awakening that could only have come from God.

And then I started talking with other Episcopalians about how to shift the imagination of our churches and dioceses toward the way of love instead of wrestling over whether we should paint the walls white or beige, how to have a better social media presence, or how strict we need to follow the Book of Common Prayer. And I realized something, William Barber had called us to take up the sword of justice, to put on the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation and strap our feet with the peace of Christ, and to go out into the world to feed the hungry, attend to the poor, bring healing to the oppressed, and preach release to captives. He never gave us a plan for how to do it, he inspired us to imagine that life among the poor and oppressed is where we will find God.

Barber, this evangelical pastor, had reminded all of us Episcopalians what it means to follow Jesus. He reminded us of something we already knew, but had, perhaps, forgotten in our world where churches are in decline and it's no longer cool to follow Jesus.

Change your heart, says Jesus. *Metanoia* in the Greek, which is a marvelous word that often ruin by translating repent. Repent these days conjures the negative imagery of the street preacher holding his sign on the corner saying, “Repent or die.” But it also doesn’t capture the full import of *metanoia*. *Metanoia* really does me turn everything around, but to turn everything around so that the very depth of your emotional register—your gut, as it were—is changed.

And here’s the thing about change: we don’t like it. But here’s the other thing about change: we don’t like it not because I prefer to speak our prayers rather than sing them; we don’t like it not because I prefer that the table be over here and not over there; we don’t like it not because I prefer the priest stand in the pulpit when he preaches instead of sitting or standing in the aisle. We don’t like it because it means something within me has to change. We don’t like change because it reminds me that I am not in control and that there is more to life, more to our life together, and frankly more to you and me than what you or I think or feel.

In other words, change reminds me that I can only be who I am, if together we are who we ought to be.

I can only be who I need to be when you and I are working together in the Spirit of Christ to feed the hungry, to serve the oppressed, and to comfort the afflicted. And the same goes for everyone in this room.

It was amazing to have time this week with 1200 other Episcopalians to figure out how we become who we ought to be as a people rooted in Jesus. You'll hear more about during Annual Meeting downstairs, and if you were planning to stay for the meeting, I invite you to change your heart, to come and listen, so that we prepare together for the work the Spirit is calling us to in this new season of our life together. Amen.