

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

May 8, 2022

*IV Easter, John 10:22-30*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Born in Bombay in 1931, Anthony de Mello served as a Jesuit priest and worked as a psychotherapist. Following seminary in Spain and ordination to the priesthood, he started a pastoral counseling center in his native India. His optimistic, syncretistic ideas found wide appeal. He travelled the world for speaking engagements, including here in the States. Blending his chosen Christian tradition with Eastern religion and popular psychology, he drew the Vatican's furrowed brow, both before and after his death in 1987.

In 1981, he published *The Song of The Bird*, a collection of parables drawn from Buddhist, Christian, Zen, Hasidic, Hindu, and Sufi traditions, among others. He proposes that each story be read more than once into "a silence created within [the reader,] where the story [will] reveal [its] inner depth and meaning: Something beyond words and reflections." He commends us to "carry [each] story around all day and allow its fragrance, its melody to haunt [us, speaking] to [our] hearts, [and] not [to our] brains."<sup>i</sup>

In that spirit, this morning I offer an adaptation of "The Explorer."

An explorer set off along the river from her village to visit territories beyond her people's daily toil and experience. Time passed, and the explorer traveled home.

Upon her return, her neighbors and friends were eager to learn what she had encountered, and they asked her many excited questions. But the explorer wondered, "How can I put into words the feelings that flooded my heart when I saw exotic flowers and heard the night-sounds of the forest, or when I sensed the danger of wild beasts and steered through roiling rapids? How can I explain the strange and beautiful colors I saw, or the lush textures I felt in my hands and under my feet and against my cheeks?"

So she said to her friends and family, "Go and see these wonders for yourselves."

To guide them, she drew a map of the river, identifying with careful icons where different beauties could be found. She pointed to the vast regions she had left unexplored.

Her village delighted in the map. They framed it in their common hall. They traced copies of it for themselves and for their own homes. In time, all who had a drawing of the map considered themselves expert on the river, for did they not know its every turn and bend? Did they not know how broad it was and how deep, how and where its rapids should run and where its falls would crash?<sup>ii</sup>

During today's 11:15 Formation hour we will continue with the second of three presentations that topline the Task Force on Justice and Reparation's report, following their two years of work together. Plans call for the Task Force to publish their report next month. Last week, the Task Force presented highlights of its historical study, and today the Task Force will present its recommendations, hopes, and dreams for repair of what has been broken and who has been harmed by the anti-Black racism in our past and present, whether purposeful, tacit, or complicit.

Importantly, for us at Trinity Church – and in all the faithful congregations comprising the Body of Christ throughout the world – **every reparation we endeavor has its commencement and fulfillment in Love** – the sacred-making, life-giving, joy-inspiring, transformational, Easter Love of God's Chosen, Jesus. This chronology – *Love comes first* – and this priority – *Beloved Community always our end* – distinguishes our reparations as a Church from those repairs undertaken by secular businesses, institutions, and governments.

Secular organizations endeavor or oppose anti-racism *for secular ends*: for social acceptability, for political expediency, and for market productivity, among others. While we may view some of these secular efforts as “righteous” – even “godly” – because we identify resonances with our own loving, Christian labor, their work is not about God's hope for the world, but about the goals of their organization. I do not intend to dismiss such benevolent missions as unimportant, I simply intend to distinguish them from that of the Church, for our goals and strategies – contextual, intermediate, and ultimate – are necessarily and consequentially different.

Many secular organizations undertake or oppose reparations to remain relevant with their chosen constituency or customer base. Compelling doctrinal assent from those who the business convenes, these organizations require trainings and enforce the jargon delivered to them by consultants in the anti-racism or in the *anti-anti-racism* fields. Having measured the cultural momentum in one direction or another, these businesses leverage the idea of repair to achieve or maintain their social acceptability and to maximize their profitability.

Related, secular institutions commit to reparations (or oppose them) with sums tallying an impressive number of zeroes, yet do so only as a means of *fortifying* their positions rather than interrogating them. That is, these institutions calculate carefully the dollar amount they deem as above easy criticism, while well below what might imperil their status. At their best, these institutions view reparations as an unavoidable project to be completed – a box they perfunctorily check – and, at their worst, they do not seek repair at all, but coopt its cultural energies to reinforce their historical power.

Perhaps most cruelly, many secular governments endeavor or oppose reparations to replace one tyrannical power with another, installing new despots their party declares more righteous than those they opposed. Adopting the very strategies of the radicals with whom they disagree, these political movements stir a religion's fervor and prosecute the singularity of their ideas with fanatical force. Leaving no room for personal growth, these fascists sort all comers as either acceptable or unacceptable, and they skewer the nonconforming.

Despite the differences and deficiencies, as we mainline American Protestants more earnestly consider *our* call to reparations, we too often uncritically ferry these secularist models into the Church. Rather than bringing the values and hopes of our Christian faith into the public square and into its reparation discussions, we demand pulpit prophecy that aligns with our preferred partisan positions; we package and repackage the Gospel's agenda for acceptability in the conservative or progressive social circles we aspire; and we demand programming products that satisfy our consumer appetites. Lying in wait to pounce every misstep, our contemporary Church leaves no room for the newcomer or the curious, demanding a proficiency in anti-racism (or anti-anti-racism) practices that approach perfection. Perpetuating these generations-long patterns will continue to shrink the Church, and instead of teeming congregations who grow together in Love – with righteous power enough to raise the dead to life, as in the Acts of the Apostles<sup>iii</sup> – we will dissolve into irrelevance and infighting.

In the dedication of *The Song of the Birds*, de Mello writes:

This book has been written for people of every persuasion, religious and nonreligious. I cannot, however, hide from my readers the fact that I am a priest of the [Roman] Catholic Church. I have wandered freely in mystical traditions that are not Christian and not religious and I have been profoundly influenced by them. It is to my Church, however, that I keep returning, for she is my spiritual home; and while I am acutely, sometimes embarrassingly, conscious of her limitations and narrowness, I also know that it is she who has formed me and made me what I am today. So it is to her that I gratefully dedicate this book.<sup>iv</sup>

As named on Easter Sunday, we Trinitarians seek the renewal of the Church and not its destruction, for even as we recognize the limitations and narrowness of our faith home – sometimes embarrassingly so – every reparation we endeavor must nonetheless have its commencement and fulfillment in God's Easter Love and the Beloved Community Jesus inaugurated. While the Church can benefit from openness to the ideas beyond it, in that engagement we must not concede our first identity as members of the Christian movement, welcoming all to our parishes where they are, as they are, with Love. And we expect our devotions of welcome, historical reflection, action, and reflection, to continue for the rest of our lives, and the lives of those who succeed us.

For, people of God, realize that the practices of “active anti-racism” are themselves products of economic, political, and philosophical marketplaces. Independent of the Gospel's hope and devoid of Christ's Love, these practices are scarcely more righteous than the racism prompting their necessity. Indeed, to aspire only an “actively anti-racist” parish implies the work of repair is a project we can complete – a set of standards we can abide – and fixes our horizon far too near! Instead, we at Trinity Church endeavor a *post*-racist parish.

Hear me: I did not say “post-racial,” that convenient lie plastering over difference, subordinating the experiences of the suffering, and sustaining domination structures. Indeed, I pray that this morning's full and unflinching acknowledgements of our history will testify to the righteousness of our intentions, for our reparations seek a post-racist, *realization* of Beloved Community. Believe, the Good Shepherd does not call us to concepts for study or to trainings for certification;

but to transformation of our very being, as individuals and as a collective.<sup>v</sup> The Good Shepherd calls us to love one another, and, for us as Christians, our reparations must *always* move us from brokenness to wholeness, from division to union, and, ultimately, from suspicion and resentment into joy. Even in the demanding labor of repair, Love *still comes first*, and Beloved Community *always* remains our end.

See, with God's Love on our lips and in our lives – setting the needs of other before ourselves unfailingly – **we must go and see these wonders for ourselves!** And by our reparations, adventure together into unexplored territories ... into beauties beyond words ... into God's Belovedness, as God's Beloved Community, healed and whole.

For the life of the world to come,  
*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> De Mello, Anthony. *The Song Of The Birds*. Doubleday, 1984, p. xv.

<sup>ii</sup> De Mello, pp. 32-33.

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 9:40. "Peter put all of [the family and the disciples] outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up.' Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up."

<sup>iv</sup> De Mello, p. xiii.

<sup>v</sup> John 10:25-28. "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they know me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." I read this notion of "not belonging to my sheep" not as a matter of identity, but of priority. That is, those who "do not belong," set themselves outside God's flock by the choice of their priorities. That is, their marginalization is a matter of circumstance and not constitution, of their choosing and not God's judgement.