



HOPE TO A DIVIDED WORLD

9th annual Diakonia Lecture

Presented by Jim Wallis

Good evening everyone. Before I get started, I want to thank the Diakonia Council of Churches for hosting this event, as well as everyone who had a hand in organising the 9th Annual Diakonia Lecture. I am deeply honoured to follow in the footsteps of the distinguished speakers of years past, and I feel truly blessed to be with you this evening.

I want to speak to you tonight about the vocation of the church in the world. I believe that one of the central elements to our vocation as churches is to offer **unexpected hope to a divided world**.

Our mission is to the kin'dom of God - "thy kin'dom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." That is what we pray. And while the kin'dom of God was the central message of Jesus, and the New Testament, it has faded as ours. Finding salvation to heaven is part of the message, getting closer to God is part of the message, but **the heart of the message of Jesus** was a new order breaking into history - to change everything about the world, including us.

And that is why we can offer such hope to the world. The church is supposed to be saying, and the church is supposed to be showing, that our life together can be better. In our shallow, superficial, and selfish age, Jesus is calling us to a completely different way of life. He called it the kin'dom of God - which is very different from all the political kin'doms of this world. But that better way of living was not just meant to benefit Christians, but everybody else too. And that is the point of it.

Christianity is not just a religion that gives some people a ticket to heaven and makes them judgmental of everybody else. Rather, **it is a call to a relationship**; and one that changes all our other relationships. Jesus calls us into a new relationship to God; and he says that also brings us into a new relationship with our neighbour, especially with the most vulnerable of this world, and even with our enemies. You do not always hear that from the churches. But that transformation of all our relationships, when lived out, has always been the best thing for what we call the common good.

Judaism, of course, agrees that our relationship with God is supposed to change all our other relationships, and Jesus's recitation of the law's great commandments to love God and your neighbor flows right out of the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Islam also connects the love of Allah with love and responsibility to our neighbors. In fact, virtually all the world's major religions say that you cannot separate your love for God from your love for your neighbor, your brothers and sisters. Even the nonreligious will affirm the idea of "the Golden Rule": "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

The clear connection between loving God and loving your neighbor has always - when lived out - been the best catalyst for movements aimed at improving the human community. **But the common good is quite uncommon today.** We seem to have lost this unifying vision in our community and public life, and especially in our politics - in nations all over the world and political parties across the ideological spectrum.

So it is time to listen again to an old but always new vision that could, and is supposed to, change our selfish behaviour - and make us happier too. Jesus said those who live by the beatitudes of his kingdom are "blessed" or "happy". But it is a happiness different from and deeper than what we are offered by a selfish society, which actually makes us feel quite fearful and unhappy.

Our public life could be made better, even transformed or healed, if our religious traditions practiced what they preached in our personal lives; in our families' decisions; in our work and vocations; in the ministry of our churches, synagogues, and mosques; and in our collective witness.

The summary of ethics and the religious law, said Jesus, was to "**love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.**" And that most fundamental teaching of faith flies right in the face of all the personal and political ethics which put myself always before all others; my rights first, my freedoms first, my interests first, and even my country first - ahead of everybody else. In other words, selfishness is the personal and political ethic that dominates our world today; but the kin'dom of God says that your neighbor's concerns, rights, interests, freedoms, and well-being are as important as yours are.

We must therefore always keep in mind that faith should never worship at the altar of politics. **We worship God**, and the kin'dom of God is **never** the same as the kin'doms of politics. It is our worship of God that must shape our engagement with politics, not the other way around. When politics shapes our religion, it distorts our true worship. This is a big problem for us in the United States, but it is a phenomenon that is as old as civilisation and can be seen all over the world.

Rather than becoming the chaplains or enablers of political idolatry, the faith community should confront it. The idols of politics are legion: the idol of money over democracy, the idol of winning over governing, the idol of celebrity over leadership, the idol of individualism over community, and the idol of ideology over civility - just to name a few.

Today, politicians from every political party take a problem and do two things with it: **first, they try to make us afraid of it, and second, they blame it on their political opponents.** What they do not do is work together to confront the underlying causes of our problems and solve them for the common good.

People of faith, no matter who they vote for, should not be rallying around the kings of their party with the kind of blindly uncritical support that the political elites on all sides urge - all of them eager to protect their access, influence, and income in the present order of things. We who call ourselves followers of God should instead be raising our voices in defense of, and as advocates for, the people and principles that are essential to our faith and the true worship of our King.

We are **all** connected to one another, responsible for one another, and are not fully human apart from one another. No one is demonstrating that more clearly right now than Pope Francis. His message resonates with people of all religions and none: that we are our neighbour's keeper and should treat others the way we want to be treated. Says Francis about our vocation as Christians, "It means protecting people, showing loving concern for each and every person, especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about."

A pope committed to the poor, to peace, and to creation has challenged the status quo and institutions of wealth and power while becoming an inspiration to the poor and vulnerable everywhere. He is a refreshing voice to many people disillusioned by religion.

When Pope Francis invites homeless men to have breakfast with him on his seventy-seventh birthday, or provides a chair and food for the Swiss Guard outside his room, he reminds us of Christ. When he kisses the feet of Muslim prisoners, or offers to baptise the baby of a woman who was pressured to abort it, he reminds us of Christ. When he chooses a simple place to live and simple clothes to wear, and when we hear rumours of his going out at night in disguise to minister to the homeless, he reminds us of Christ.

Francis is calling the church and society back to the ethic of the common good when he says, "For her part, the Church always works for the integral development of every person. . . . The Church encourages those in power to be truly at the service of the common good of their peoples." But despite the global discussion this new pontiff's teachings are creating, Pope Francis loves to laugh and is often smiling. The title of his 2013 encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* means "The Joy of the Gospel." This joy is a revolution - a revolution of love.

When it comes to how we are to live together in our culture and society, I especially like the African idea of *ubuntu*. Leymah Gbowee, a Liberian peace activist, summarises it

well in her translation: “I am what I am because of who we all are.” Archbishop Desmond Tutu clarifies the meaning of the common good when he says, “You cannot exist as a human being in isolation. . . . You cannot be human all by yourself.” He offered a definition of *ubuntu* in a 1999 book: “A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.”

The vision from these ringing statements is very compelling to a new generation. And it is that generation that will help us reclaim the common good. In living a life for others, as many young people are now being drawn to, a person creates the opportunity, space, and atmosphere for the reality of community to emerge. Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen said it like this: “Community can make us think of a safe togetherness, shared meals, common goals, and joyful celebrations. . . . Community is first of all a quality of the heart. It grows from the spiritual knowledge that we are alive not for ourselves but for one another.”

In other words, we must truly embrace Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Doing so is not only radical, it is transformational; and it is essential if we are going to create a public life not completely dominated by conflict, but one that actually can articulate what might be in the interest of the common good and even some common ground between us all.

Yet as we go about the church’s mission to bring unexpected hope and promote the common good, I believe we must do so with **a deep and authentic humility**. Unfortunately, I think we underestimate the power of human sin. I am talking about the sin in politics and economics; and the sin in all our human institutions; **but I am also talking about the sin in our religious institutions and social movements**. Many if not most of our conflicts in social movements and religious institutions are not the result of principled differences; but rather our own egos, issues of self-esteem and self-interest, personal and positional and financial competition with each other and other groups. We are **all** sinful human beings in need of God.

As Matthew 7:3 tells us, “Why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?” Acknowledging our own shortcomings and sins will allow us to approach our mission with the humility that is a prerequisite to bringing people together.

But even as we underestimate human sin, we also underestimate the power of hope. God can do amazing things, and God can do these things through us. But to find, realise, and reach that hope we have to trust in God, and not in ourselves. It is God who changes the world, not us.

Of course, we can be hopeful without being naïve - and being truth tellers requires this of us. But we need to realise that there is a **critical difference between skepticism and cynicism**. Skepticism is both healthy and necessary - we need to always ask the hard questions of our politicians, our economy and all our institutions - even our religious ones. On the other hand, **cynicism is spiritually dangerous**; because it can become a buffer against personal commitment, which makes it much harder for God to work through us. If we believe nothing can ever really change, why should we take any risks or really commit ourselves to change? And if we do not make those personal commitments the changes will never happen.

So no matter how bad things are, we must never give in to cynicism. Equally important, we must reject **despair**. For despair, as J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote, **“is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt. We do not”**.

And Tolkien is right! We can not know the future, “beyond all doubt.” **We do not and cannot know for certain** what will happen five minutes from now, let alone next week or next year. And that is actually reassuring, because **it defeats the very idea of despair**.

Hebrews 11:1 says “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” I like to paraphrase that text in this way: **“Hope means believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence change.”** I have seen too much not to believe in hope, both in the United States and here in South Africa. God can do the extraordinary, despite how ordinary we are. And we can never lose that.

So, to sum up, I think it is critical for faith communities to take on a genuinely prophetic and pastoral role in bringing hope to a divided world. To do so, we need to be asking important questions: How can we name and unmask the “idols” of politics and lay out the biblical, spiritual, and even secular foundations for an ethic of the common good? How do we move from the politics of fear and blame to the politics of values and solution? How do we build a culture for the common good in an age of selfishness? And how can we find common ground by moving to higher ground?

Americans, South Africans, and people of all nations are longing to see political polarisation and paralysis give way to visible progress on the issues that most affect their lives. But **broken systems generally cannot fix themselves**; it takes a movement from outside, citizens intervening to bring about change.

In America, the fact that many local churches are moving into community organising is a most hopeful sign. And that the next generation is being drawn to a post-candidate politics, focused more on real people and real issues, is also a sign of change.

There are very hopeful signs among younger Christians and other believers or seekers with whom I regularly speak. They care about their world, are engaging it, and want to connect their faith or spirituality with social change. The citizens of a new generation really want to change their societies, and their question is how. What are the new questions and models? How can faith communities play a key and even catalytic role in creating and sustaining the kind of movements that have changed things in the past? Major social reform movements have always had faith communities at their center. We have done this before and we can do it again.

So my closing advice to you is to never be content with what is predictable, to never become cynical about change. Our role as Christians is to create faith communities whose vocation is to be unpredictable and to be able to offer hope where nobody else does.

We must remember that we are not committed to the kin'dom of any culture, class, or racial group, or the kin'dom of America or South Africa or any other nation, or even to the kin'dom of any particular church; but rather to the kin'dom of God, which is meant to turn all the other kin'doms on their heads, to break open the unpredictable, and bring new hope to lives, neighbourhoods, nations, and even the world.

So God bless you in that wholly unpredictable and so needed ministry of hope.

Thank you.