

“Come by here. Kum ba yah”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant 2/17/19

Luke 6:17-21 “...Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”

Though the exact origins of the folk song “Kum ba Yah” are not definitively known, research shows the phrase to linguistically come from Gullah, the Creole dialect on our Southern coast; the words “Kum ba yah” translate as “Come by here.” As a folksong, it grew in popularity, especially in the 1950s and 60s, being recorded by celebrity folk artists of the time—including Joan Baez and Pete Seeger and many others. The song came to symbolize the unity we can find with one another, despite our differences. So popular was the song and its implicit ideology at the time—that it became the grass-roots name for part of our camp as it met in downtown Lynchburg in the 1960s. And when the downtown camp “Kum ba yah” merged with the camp here on Boonsboro, “LCF Day Camp,” in the early 1970s, the symbolism of the phrase “Kum ba yah” emerged as the new banner under which this combined community, which had largely been respectively Black and White, would now fly in a renewed spirit of unity together. Even as I grew up in the 70s and 80s, the phrase “kum ba yah” was always associated with an almost surreal vision of unity, a moment in which we hold hands and sing songs together because we have somehow overcome our differences, our alienation, our distrust. This would be referred to almost mockingly because the very idea of it seemed too far-fetched to be real. What I didn’t know was the actual meaning of the words I was singing with the other children: “Come by here, my Lord, come here.” Without my even realizing it, we were inviting the very presence of the Divine into our space—asking the Eternal for help in our moment of need, and many of us didn’t even realize it.

The song and subsequently the phrase “Kum ba Yah” became a mantra against hate. In essence, this early 20th Century, cultural folksong became a rally cry for love and tolerance, forgiveness and harmony, all in a climate of a tumultuous era mixed with civil rights and anti-war sentiments. The song portrayed a solution of deeper unity, deeper understanding, and ultimately a deeper love for one another. And in this month of remembrance of Black History, we must not forget the attempts toward racial solidarity that have been made by so many in the past and thus honored in the very title of the camp that surrounds us, in whom many of us at least in part embody as a community of faith. Our hope finds itself naturally aligning with the picture of God’s Divinity mixing with our Humanity in this sacred space: “Come by here, my Lord, come by here!” Then the question quickly becomes: What happens in that interaction?

We are comprised of a group of people that are drawn to that interaction. Many of us return to each other at this very junction, this intersection of the Mortal and Eternal, week after week (some of us day after day) in hopes of touching something greater than ourselves. It’s reminiscent of Moses himself asking to see God, and God then giving in to his request, and passing over him as he held his head low—finally getting a glimpse of what the Hebrew Scriptures call “God’s backside.” Not all of God and his glory, but a portion—a sliver. This reminds of Jesus healing the blind man and asking him, “What do you

see?” and the man responds by saying, “I see people, but they look like trees walking.” So, then Jesus touches his eyes again before the man can see clearly. We see glimpses of God here. None of us claim to see it ALL. We see portions of God’s magnitude, God’s grace, God’s brilliant light. We journey in silence next to each other as we dig inward. There are moments of sharing, moments of clarity, deep epiphanies or moments of introspection and we confide in one another. We respect one another’s individual spiritual journeys. Each of our journeys look different, take different turns, different gradations: They smell different, act different, and ultimately present differently. We do not preach uniformity in our sacred journeys. We cling to a set of shared values and covenant together to love one another intentionally, without prejudice. We follow Jesus’ teachings because we find great value in them. This doesn’t mean we ignore the wisdoms of the world, such would be ignorance for many of us. The Gospel message teaches personal and communitywide liberation, both inwardly and outwardly. When we read the passage of Jesus healing the blind and broken hearted, those plagued with grief and mental illness—we don’t see an exaggerated God-man dispensing untouchable supernatural powers (acts found hidden in creative mythology), we see a deeper LOVE and COMPASSION within the heart of both what is human and what is divine, and we meet each other there. This is our story: Our very real, human story seeking to be present with the Eternal. We need each other because we desire a community of hope-seekers. We need God because we crave hope. “Come by here, my Lord, come by here!”

I cannot ignore the cynicism that comes with the mantra “kum ba yah.” In a world where there is so much enmity, dissension, misunderstanding, and hate—people rightly ask, “how in the world can you possibly claim ‘kum ba yah?’” So, some have concluded our mantra to be nothing but a pipe-dream, a hope, not a reality. I disagree. Taken from the wisdom of a children’s animated movie, Kung Fu Panda, the old master tells Po, the bumbling Panda who feels alienated from the world, “The past is history, the future is a mystery, but today is a gift—that’s why they call it ‘the present’.” Many of us get mired in our past, good or bad—reliving the glory years or drumming up old, painful baggage. Both can be toxic to progress. Some of us live in the future; we cannot cope with what is, so choose instead to live in the “what may come”: That’s where I often find myself. However, like the Buddha himself said, “Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment,” we must grab hold of what is right in front of us. This the Kum ba Yah moment. This is where we hold each other’s hand and ask for God’s grace, God’s touch, God’s love to emanate through us. “Come by here, my Lord, come by here!”

Remember when Jesus was healing the people, it says in Luke 6, that “he stood with them on a level place.” Though could be a simple description of the topography of the land, I like to think it is the Divine meeting with us in our Human dimension, showing us what equality in our own species should be like—we are all equal, none greater or above the other. But even more profound was what Jesus says after healing the people, he acknowledges their present before ever talking about a future. He says clearly, “...*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*” Jesus does not gloss over the fact that there are people hurting all around us. In that moment we become the suffering as well, in the present, with an understanding to work together for a better future. The present is the true gift, rather

than the future. To be in the struggle together, helping each other move forward is the real intersection of the human and Divine: Come by here, my Lord, come by here! Let us move from our inward journey to its natural outward expression in company with world around us. Let us truly walk with one another in Love.