

Address at 34th Anniversary of the Advocate Cafe  
Rev. Dr. Renee McKenzie  
November 11, 2017

I am somewhat surprised to discover that there is not much written history of the Advocate Soup Kitchen. I supposed that that's not too surprising considering Paul Washington and Isaac Miller, my immediate predecessors as rectors, was busy doing the work and not immersed in record keeping. In Paul Washington's autobiography "Other Sheep I Have" he only says a few words about the start of this ministry. He simply writes that the soup kitchen was founded during the 1980's when decisions in Washington, DC and Harrisburg PA, that is during the Reagan and Thornburgh administrations respectively, began to rip a hole into the American safety net and hunger and homelessness became critical issues in communities like North Philadelphia. In 1983, with a \$7,000 grant from the Black Ministry desk of the national Episcopal Church, Paul and this congregation began the work of serving meals to hungry people. Paul understood that \$7000 would not go very far and that \$7,000 would not last very long but the work was seen as critically important and if the work was meant to sustain it would find a way to sustain. And as we know it has sustained. By 1999, during Paul's ministry, the Soup kitchen was serving more than 2,000 meals a week often to over 300 people per day. Hunger was real and the need was great.

In 2016 the Soup Kitchen, now called the Advocate Café, served over 22,000 meals to approximately 100 people per day. And in 2017 we are seeing the meals served rise from 100 meals per day to 125-130 meals. In this community hunger remains real and food insecurity is an increasing problem.

I can't imagine anyone believing that it is good news that our numbers continue to rise, it can't be good news that food scarcity is an increasing concern, it can't be good news that more and more churches and other nonprofits are working to address this issues in pockets of this city. It can't be good news that many among us are not afforded a basic human dignity and a basic human need to regular access to food. This was not good news in 1983 either nor is it good news today.

The good news was is that there are people like you who believe that we can and should do better. The good news is that Fr. Paul believed not only that God would increase the \$7000 but stimulating others to recognize the human cost of not responding to hunger issues but that he also believed that many would come to this place to eat and would be grateful for the support. Fr. Paul believed in both those who gave and those who received.

He believed, just as we do, that sometimes all it takes is for one person to believe in you and your mission.

The Advocate I came to was a place struggling to exist. It was a place struggling to meet the financial demands of the Café and the financial needs of the entire work and ministry of this place with a big heart and strong convictions. And then, as if God sent, and I believe it was God sent, one person demonstrated his belief in our work by sending us \$800 per month, which coincidentally was the amount we spent during our monthly excursions to Restaurant Depot to purchase food and food supplies.

It was this grant, this vote of confidence, this gift of relative stability that ushered the growth of the Soup Kitchen into the Advocate Cafe.

Our Cafe service today is multi-dimensional. We have spent hours formally assessing how and why we do what we do and the healthiness of our meals to ensure they are nutritionally fulfilling and pleasing to the eye. We hired an outreach coordinator who in 2016, fielded over 5,500 service requests ranging from food vouchers to employment opportunities to housing assistance to sending faxes. We have witnessed over these past couple of years a changing ambiance that is slowly and intentionally transforming into one that feeds the human hunger that extends beyond the need for food for the belly to the need for positive social interactions, the desire for education, the priority of self-awareness and raising consciousness about how to achieve individual healthy outcomes. Our ministry is about fostering respect and empowering people to advocate for themselves and for others.

In 1926 Langston Hughes wrote a poem that I'm sure many of you are familiar with. The poem speaks about the movement of people from the margins to the center, from the kitchen table to the dining room table. It is a poem about eating when and where you can in this moment to grow in strength until full human recognition is voiced in our long fractured society, in a culture where some people are recognized and seen as valuable while many others are not.

This is what Hughes wrote:

**I, Too** BY LANGSTON HUGHES

I, too, sing America.  
I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.  
Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.  
Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed—  
I, too, am America.

I long to see the day when the American government and the larger society repents in shame for rampant injustice and dehumanization of children, women and men. I long to see the day when we live up to the vision that has given shape to the American dream.

But In the meantime, in the long meantime according to Martin Luther King, Jr, which is that time between the now and the realized promise of tomorrow, the Advocate will continue to be the Advocate. We will clothe people for today and grow the spirits of people for tomorrow when we can all have a place at the table or until we will work to build a new table together.

This is the essential Advocate's story that extends from 1866 and prayerfully will march into that brave new future. For that tomorrow to come it's critically important that the work continues. The Advocate has demonstrated that it is both a place that others can believe in and a place that believes in others.

My spirit rejoices in knowing that this is our work together: feeding the hungry spirit that is all of us. Hungry to eat, yes, but also hungry to share our resources so that others may eat. This is just being human. This is what God asks of us.