

The Suicide of a Black Church

A Sermon by Robert Toney

Text: Isaiah 1:17 – “Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”

Luke 18:16 – “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.”

Introduction – A Cry from Within

Church, I come to you today not as a judge, but as a witness.

I come to you not as an outsider, but as a son of the house.

I come to you with tears in my eyes and love in my heart,

Because the house that built me... is dying.

I was christened in this church.

I played basketball in this church.

I gave my first Easter speech on that stage that now hides old folding tables and forgotten fridges.

I heard music from the fingers of Ramsey Lewis in this sanctuary.

I watched a young Barack Obama cast vision from this very pulpit.

But now... now the choir robes are dry-rotted.

The nursery is a storage room.

The gym is collapsing.

And our children? They are gone.

Church, the truth is painful—but we are dying.

And if we are brave enough to tell the truth,

We’re not dying because the devil came in.

We’re not dying because the city changed.

We’re dying... because we chose it.

We are committing suicide.

I. We’ve Forgotten Our Mission

Seventy years ago, we stood tall as a beacon on the South Side.

But now, with all our glorious history,

We have forgotten our prophetic mission.

We were called *not* just to worship in here...

But to uplift *out there*.

We were called to teach our children, shelter our widows, protect our sons, and raise our daughters.

But somewhere along the way... we traded justice for prestige.

We traded soul for sophistication.

We traded community for committee.

We ask, "What's happening to our children?"

But the real question is... what happened to *us*?

Warnock said it best: "The work of racial uplift is integral to the responsibility and vocation of the Black church" (Warnock, 2014, p. 77).

So if we've abandoned uplift...

What vocation are we living?

II. We've Rejected the Children

Oh, I remember when the building was alive with the laughter of children.

Basketballs bouncing.

Choirs singing.

Homework being done in the fellowship hall.

Children from Parkway Gardens... Robert Taylor Homes...

Being mentored by doctors, lawyers, teachers—Black excellence, pouring into Black youth.

But then something shifted.

The noise of children began to offend our ears.

We said, "Children should be seen but not heard."

And we meant it.

Especially the ones who didn't dress right.

Didn't act right.

Didn't come with a parent.

We shushed their praise.

We silenced their play.

And now we wonder why they're not here.

Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them" (Luke 18:16).

But we became the hindrance.

We prized Harvard over Howard.
We sought the elite and forgot the everyday.
And in doing so, we forgot Isaiah's call:
"Seek justice. Encourage the oppressed. Defend the fatherless."

III. The Neighborhood is Dying, Too

While we debated Robert's Rules of Order,
Blood spilled on our sidewalks.
While we reorganized file cabinets,
Mothers buried their sons.

Do you know where we are?
We are less than a mile from O-Block.
From Murder Row.
From Parkway Gardens—once home to families, now to funerals.

\$14,000 is the median income of our neighborhood.
Not a month—a *year*.

And yet... the church has no youth program.
The gym is locked.
The choir stands empty.

The building is quiet—
Too quiet.
Funeral home quiet.

Because we are dying.

IV. There Is Still Time

But hear me, church—
God is not finished with us yet.

I said—God is not finished with us yet.

We don't have to die this way.
We can pull the hose out the exhaust pipe.
We can repent.
We can return.

Stephen Lewis, Matthew Williams, and Dori Baker give us a blueprint in their book *Another Way*.

They call it C.A.R.E.—

- **Create** a hospitable space.
- **Ask** powerful questions.
- **Reflect** theologically.
- **Enact** faithful steps forward.

This isn't theory—this is a call to action.

We can gather in honest circles.

We can talk with the neighborhood, not just about it.

We can name the pain.

We can build the bridge.

V. We Must Heal from Our Trauma

I cannot preach this sermon without honoring the pain we carry.

We lost our pastor.

He was young.

He was bold.

He brought fire to this pulpit and invited us to read *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*.

He saw our pain—and believed God could still use it.

But when he died, so did our direction.

Now, chaos reigns.

Power struggles erupt.

And the sheep scatter.

But hear me:

God can still resurrect dead things.

God can still heal wounded churches.

God can still revive tired people.

Professor Stacy Williams teaches us:

We must get curious about our behavior.

Interrupt what destroys us.
And listen for the Spirit's whisper in the chaos.

Conclusion – It's Not Too Late

Church, the suicide is not complete.
We still have breath.
We still have time.

But we must turn.

We must return to our mission.
Return to our children.
Return to our community.
Return to our God.

Let the gym live again.
Let the choir rise again.
Let the children laugh again.
Let the Word be preached again.
Let justice roll down again.

Because this house... is not just bricks and stone.
This house... is not just history.
This house... is a holy calling.

Let the church *live*.

Amen.