I had a vision of Jesus, once, about 12 years ago. I was sitting in the chapel at Seabury Seminary, waiting for a worship service to begin. I looked across the aisle and I saw Jesus. He was facing away from me, but he was reaching around with his hand extended toward me. When I shared this experience with my spiritual director, she asked me about what he looked like. But, I didn’t see his face in any clear way. I can’t describe it to you. I knew he was Jesus. I have a vague recollection that he was wearing a robe. What I remember clearly is the sense that he was on a path and the path was sure, it was certain, it was definite. The message was, “Follow me.”

So, I was a bit startled when I read our Scripture passages as I was preparing to preach today. In the passage from Exodus this morning, we hear an exchange between Moses and the Lord. The last verse of this passage is the Lord telling Moses, “You shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.” Why? Reading this passage brings up this wondering all over again. Why can’t we see a face? Perhaps the indiscernible is exactly what draws us into God’s inclusivity.

A couple of weeks ago, my Leadership Cleveland class explored the Clark-Fulton neighborhood on the west side. A highlight of the day was a tour of Thomas Jefferson International Newcomers Academy. This public school serves children from Pre-Kindergarten through High School. The children are all new to this country; together, they speak 44 languages. They attend for two years to learn English and to acclimate to the United States. We were invited into a 5th grade classroom. The children were sitting at their desks, pulled together, arranged in groups of four to six. I sat down with a group of four children, two girls and two boys. I learned that one of the girls is from Syria and the other from the Congo; one of the boys is from Puerto
Rico and the other from Guatemala. There they were, four children from four different countries, sitting together, doing their math homework, no one telling them to judge or to fear one another. It was breath-taking.

Let’s turn to the Gospel. What are the Pharisees up to this morning? They ask Jesus, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” In the day, taxes could only be paid with Roman coins. The inscription on the Roman coins was: “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.” This inscription on the coins that were used to pay taxes was blasphemous to the Jews. Augustus was considered divine. He was known as Son of God, God Incarnate, Lord, Redeemer, Savior of the World. Sound familiar? Of course, these are terms we reserve for Jesus Christ. It was blasphemous to the Jews that this mortal man was considered divine. However, if they did not pay the taxes, they were subject to arrest by the Romans. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” What are the Pharisees up to? They are trying to entrap Jesus. Why? Fear. They feel threatened by Jesus; their authority is being questioned. For the Pharisees, life is all about ensuring strict adherence to the Law with over 600 commandments. Yet, Jesus says, the Law is not the “be all end all.” Adherence to the Law cannot be at the expense of loving one another.

At the Leadership Cleveland gathering, one of the speakers, I believe he is a City Councilman, told us about a recent misunderstanding in his Ward. The worshippers at a local mosque, many from Somali, were getting parking tickets while attending services. They didn’t understand – they thought the police didn’t like them. The head of the mosque met with the police and learned that the worshippers were parking four cars deep, so police officers and fire fighters wouldn’t be able to get there quickly enough if there was an emergency. What might seem so obvious can be a cultural misunderstanding. They just needed to talk. We don’t need to
fear. We just need to listen to one another, listen with open hearts and minds, desiring to learn, desiring to love.

Paul Loeb, in his book *Soul of a Citizen* (chapter 2), tells a story about Gandhi, the civil rights leader. “Gandhi’s family mortgaged everything they had—their land, their jewelry, everything of value—to send Gandhi to law school. Gandhi graduated and passed the bar, but was so shy that when he stood up in court, all he could do was stammer. He couldn’t get a sentence out in defense of his clients. As a result, he lost every one of his cases. He was a total failure as a lawyer. His family didn’t know what to do. Finally, they sent him off to South Africa, where he literally and metaphorically found his voice by challenging the country’s racial segregation.”

We don’t need to fear, because we have been given the ability to love. We don’t need to fear; we simply need to find our voice. We are called to exactly that place where our gifts and the world’s needs coincide. And, in that place, we live in peace because we are living the life we are meant to live. What do we fear? When we are deeply honest with ourselves, what do we fear? Is it something about a different race, or gender, or sexual identity, or religion, or culture? When we are deeply honest with ourselves, do we somehow feel that this difference will shake the safety or comfort of this life we have carefully built and nourished and understand? The Good News is that we are meant to live in this world together. It is precisely our diversity that makes us whole. Let’s take the first step in confronting our fears. None of us is expected to save the whole world, we simply need to take a step forward. Acknowledge our fear. Explore a new community. Build new relationships. Find the place where our gifts and the world’s needs coincide. Each one of us is created in the image of God. We don’t need to fear. We just need to love. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often quoted the abolitionist minister Theodore Parker who said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” (*The Book of Joy*, p. 117-118). Justice is love for
all. Amen.