A sermon preached by the Rev. Jeanne Leinbach  
at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Height, Ohio  
on November 3, 2019

*Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31*

A powerful voice for justice and righteousness died two weeks ago. Elijah Cummings, the son of sharecroppers, practiced law for 19 years, and then served in the U.S. House of Representatives for more than 20 years, most recently as the Chair of the House Oversight Committee. He is the first black lawmaker to lie in state at the U. S. Capitol. Over the past couple of weeks, we have remembered “…his voice that could shake mountains, stir the most cynical hearts, inspiring us all to do better.” As a fellow legislator notes, “His power came not from his booming baritone, but from his moral force.” He was a man of dignity, integrity, compassion, and humility.

I find his passing unsettling, perhaps for you, also, because it feels like over the past few years in this country, we have lost our way, and now there is one less voice for the people. It feels like we’re living under a hovering cloud. It feels like powerful forces in this country, people elected to serve, have forgotten the call to service - too many have prioritized the protection of their individual fortunes over honesty and integrity, over justice and righteousness for all. What happened to our moral compass? What happened to our ability to collaborate, to join forces for the common good?

And, it feels, at times, like this hovering cloud descends like a fog, quietly creeping in, and then suddenly we notice it – we notice how our own behavior is evolving, how we assume the worst in one another, rather than the best, how we are quick to judge, rather than to seek to understand.

Be aware. This is the message wrapped up in the Beatitudes. Jesus prefaces his message with the hope of eternal life: “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” But then, he moves to the now, to living life: “Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.” Be self-aware. Explore yourself. Have the courage to self-interrogate. Ask yourself questions. Why did I react that way? Why do I think that? What am I assuming? What am I missing? Jesus is offering us the courage to self-interrogate…for good reason. As we get closer to understanding ourselves fully, understanding our true self, we move from conceptualizing God to experiencing God.

I’m reading a great book right now by Robin DiAngelo entitled: White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism (Boston, Beacon Press, 2018). DiAngelo confirms that “race is an evolving social idea that was created to legitimize racial inequality and protect white advantage” (p. 17). Race is a social construction. Part of what sustains racism is the notion that if I am a good person, I cannot be racist. Yet, racism is systemic. As DiAngelo writes, “Being white is a social and institutional status and identity imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges that are denied to others” (p. 24). Racism is embedded in our culture, reinforced by “…images, stories, interpretations, omissions, and silences” (pg. 34). I want to be good. All of us white people here want to be good, and that desire hinders us from acknowledging a deeply-seated perspective that conflicts with our desired beliefs.

Racism is an example of our need to self-interrogate. Jesus is telling us that we are in this together. We exist for one another. We care for each other. Yet, caring for one another requires more than attending to needs. It requires a deep dive into ourselves, to call into question beliefs and assumptions and motivations and behaviors, so that we might then recognize the divide between reality and justice, between reality and righteousness.
Who is going to show us the way? Listen again to these words from Ephesians, elicited from one who experienced God. Hear the fervency in the desire for us to know this life-altering news: “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ…may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power.” This is why we come together into this community, to seek and pray and share stories and serve. We come together to gain a spirit of wisdom and revelation, to enlighten the eyes of our heart, to discover the hope to which we are called. This is why we grow a loving community, because we want all to know God’s transforming power: the courage to endure, the inspiration to create, the heart to love, and the peace that all will be well.

This fervent desire for all to know is precisely how we welcome the newly baptized into a life in Christ. We pray: “Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.” We welcome the newly baptized into a lifelong journey of faith. There are no quick answers to life’s challenges – no one worship service, no one adult forum, no one youth group meeting, no one tutoring session, no one meal shared. Rather, we commit to living together in community so that we might fall in love with Jesus and recognize and respond to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We desire to grow a loving community to share the Good News, to awaken hearts, and inspire minds and comfort souls. We grow a loving community so that the truth lived is God’s justice and righteousness. Amen.