A sermon preached by the Rev. Jeanne Leinbach  
at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
on February 2, 2020


Today is the Feast of the Presentation. Forty days after Jesus’ birth, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple, adhering to the Jewish law that every firstborn son be dedicated to God in memory of the Israelites’ deliverance from Egypt. When Mary placed her baby into the arms of Simeon, the Old and the New faced-off. The old sacrifices, the burnt offerings - a bull, a bird, or a ram without blemish - were done away; a new and perfect offering had come into the temple. Through Christ, we no longer need to adhere to the old way of approaching life, focused on what we cannot do. As in the Book of Exodus, “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien…you shall not revile God, or curse a leader of your people…you shall not delay to make offerings from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses.” The old laws focused on the wrong, on what we cannot do. With Christ, we have new life, a new focus on all that we can be. Christ gives us the summary of the Law: love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind; love your neighbor as yourself. With Christ, we are freed, freed from the bondage of sin, freed from the obsession with all that we cannot do, freed to be all that we can be, to love our neighbor as our self, radically, unconditionally.

Two weeks ago, on the Friday before Martin Luther King Day, I received a call from Caroline Sweeney, a reporter for Channel 5 News here in Cleveland, asking if she could come on Monday, MLK Day, and interview me about the Rev. Dr. King speaking at St. Paul’s in 1963. I said, “Yes.” During the interview, on the spot, one of the questions she asked me was why so many people showed up here at St. Paul’s to hear from Dr. King. The Nave was packed. You can see in the photo, which is hanging just outside Tucker Hall, that people were even sitting on the
floor in the center aisle. When she asked me why so many people flocked to St. Paul’s on a Tuesday afternoon, I found these words coming out of my mouth: people have a thirst to hear King’s message. I have spent much time since the interview thinking about my words – why is there a thirst? As we enter Black History Month, celebrating the achievements of African-Americans, let’s listen to Dr. King’s words, which he shared here at St. Paul’s just weeks after being released from the Birmingham Jail and just a few months before giving his *I Have A Dream* speech in Washington, DC.

He said, “When I think about what is happening in Birmingham, Alabama, and when I think about our struggles all over the South and over the nation, I am always reminded of the fact that in reality we are really working to make the American dream a reality. And I would like to take a few minutes this afternoon to say something about the American dream. And I choose this subject because America is basically a dream, a dream yet unfulfilled. It is a dream of a nation founded on certain basic principles. The substance of the dream is found in these sublime words: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’

King continued, “The first thing that we notice in this dream is the amazing universalism. It does not say some men, it says all men. It does not say all white men but it says all men, which includes black men. It does not say all Protestants but it says all men, which includes Roman Catholics. It does not say all Gentiles, it says all men, which includes Jews. There is something else at the center of this great document which distinguishes our democratic form of government from totalitarian systems. It says that we all have certain basic rights that are neither derived from nor given by the state. In order to discover where they come from, it is necessary to move back
behind the dim mist of eternity. They are God given. Very seldom if ever in the history of the world has a passage expressed in such a profound eloquence and unequivocal language the dignity and worth of human personality. The American dream reminds us that every man is the heir of the legacy of dignity.”

Truly, Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of the greatest orators of all time. What makes a great orator is not just the delivery, but the delivery of a great message. His message is profound, enlightening, and true. Our basic rights are God-given. Christ freed us from the bondage of sin to be all that we can be; he freed all of us from that bondage. Every man is created equal, to live into the wholeness of his or her being, afforded the same rights and opportunities. Why do we thirst for King’s message? Because, right matters. Because God’s righteousness matters.

We thirst for King’s message because innate within us, God-given, is justice and righteousness. Innate within us is the peace in embracing justice and righteousness. It is a holy peace, living life as God desires us to live life. Here at St. Paul’s, Dr. King said, “All life is interrelated. We are born into an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single bond of destiny. Whatever affects one man directly affects all men indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.”

Right matters. We thirst for justice and righteousness because in its fruition we know the peace of living life the way God desires us to live life. We thirst for wholeness…I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. In wholeness, we are nurtured from an inner peace. We experience a palpable, holy peace. That’s how we know justice and righteousness is right. It is a dream yet unfulfilled. We live with the lasting effects of overt racism: subpar housing, poor-quality education, unfair hiring practices, an unjust criminal justice
system. Our faith implores us. We will not rest. We will strive to recognize the covert side of racism and effect lasting change. Right matters. Amen.