

**The Second Sunday After the Epiphany
January 14, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Each week, we, as a community, come together to worship and praise God. We listen to the Word of God, we proclaim our faith, we offer our prayers, we share God's peace with each other, and we eat a meal of sacred food in common. But what is it that actually defines our faith? Is it being an Episcopalian and worshipping the way that we do? Is it professing our common faith in the ancient words written at the Council of Nicaea, or some other proclamation? Is it the form of our prayers take, or the confession of our sins? Or is it the act of coming to the communion rail and partaking of bread and wine that has been transformed into the sacred elements?

Yes, this is our worship. Certainly these are essentials of our faith. Surely this is the way that we, in this community, express our devotion to God. Yet, our faith is much more than just the way we worship. It has to be about the way we live our lives. It is about our relationships with each other, and with God, and with the world that God has made. It is about seeking to do God's will.

This morning I read from the first chapter of John's gospel. You may remember that it begins with the Prologue ... "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Following the Prologue there begins the narrative about Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist and the several days following the baptism. John the Baptist points beyond himself to Jesus and tells his disciples that this is the one he has been talking about: the one who will take away sin, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist does such a convincing job that two days after the baptism, when they see Jesus again, two of John's disciples ... Andrew and his brother Simon Peter ... leave John's entourage to follow Jesus. In the reading we heard this morning Jesus calls Philip and Nathaniel. But, when Jesus notices them following him Jesus turns and asks, "What are you looking for?"

That is a question for us: "What are you looking for?" In our spiritual journey there is always something out there ahead of us drawing us forward. There is always something calling us to go beyond where we are now, to leave the status quo and the comfort and security of our lives as we know it to a place of radical fulfillment. Sometimes it is a calling to be healed of past wounds. Sometimes it is a call to sacrificial service. Sometimes it is a call to a deep and profound relationship with the holy. Sometimes it is a call to seek God's justice in the world.

This weekend is one of those three-day holiday weekends interspersed throughout the year in this country. This weekend commemorates the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. But like most of our three-day holiday weekends the reason of the holiday is often lost with only a token tribute to its origin. Presidents' Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, all become times for extended travel of mini-vacations. Only rarely do we give a nod to the events behind them.

For me, this weekend is different. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of my spiritual heroes. His life, and his death, influenced my decision to enter the ministry. His quest for justice in the face of racism, and his fight for human rights, and his protest against war, and his choice of nonviolence to accomplish peaceful ends helped form my Christian ethics as I was maturing as a young adult. When I finally asked myself the question, "What am I looking for?" I could see Dr. King's deep faith as a path to follow on my spiritual journey.

Much has been said in the news this week about the vitriolic ... and at times vulgar and profane ... rhetoric that has become a part of our political process. I believe we must put an end to hateful rhetoric that has become the norm. However, I also believe that we ... as peacemakers ... must actively promote nonviolence and understanding. On this Sunday of the weekend honoring the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I think his words can still act as a guidepost.

In 1957, reflecting on the Montgomery, Alabama Boycott, King said:

"The nonviolent resister does not seek to humiliate or defeat the opponent but rather seeks to win his friendship and understanding. ... The end of violence or the aftermath of violence is bitterness. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community."

I know I have told this story before, but I believe it is worth repeating. In 1951 my family moved from a suburban home on Long Island to a 46-acre farm in racial segregated North Carolina. My father was an executive with a large corporation and had been transferred to Charlotte, and my mother thought the idyllic life of living on the land would be a good life-lesson for me and my five younger siblings. It was a lesson, but not the one my mother had imagined. Like neighbors around us we had a tenant house on the farm and that is where Jean ... our new household maid ... Jean's three children, and Jean's mother lived. At eight or nine years-old I was only partially troubled by the fact that Jean and her family did not have indoor plumbing; that water came from an open well in front of her house; that they heated their house and cooked on a wood stove; and that her children went to a different school than I did. I was confused when Jean's children started school in early August so they could get off in September to pick cotton. Yet, in spite of the difference in the color of our skins, I became close friends with Jean's son Robert who was a year older than I.

It wasn't until a neighboring classmate of mine, Bobby Simpson, shot Robert with a BB gun that I really understood the racism that permeated this small rural crossroad 20 miles south of Charlotte. As Robert cried from the pain and humiliation I angrily confronted Bobby ... and in defense he arrogantly claimed, "I'm allowed to shoot him, he's a ..." and he used the "N" word. At nine years old I didn't yet know about nonviolence, so I'm still proud to say that Bobby Simpson went home that day with a bloody nose. However, I don't think my actions changed Bobby Simpson's mind about Robert and others who shared Robert's skin color.

Over a decade later in grad school, with a black man as my roommate, I read the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his letter from the Birmingham Jail:

Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

In a later speech, Dr. King phrased it this way:

The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be... The nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

It would be years later when I would give up the pursuit of a doctorate in mathematics to attend seminary. By then I had marched against racial segregation and I had protested against the war in Vietnam. At the time I had only a nominal relationship with the church, although I was deeply embedded in a spiritual journey. And I kept asking myself, "What am I looking for?"

I knew I could no longer stand on the outside of institutions and merely criticize. This time the voice I heard was not my own, but the same voice that Andrew, and Simon Peter, and Philip, and Nathaniel, and the other disciples heard: "What are you looking for?" I knew that for me to live my life in wholeness ... if I really had "faith" then I had to be willing to see the life, ministry, and death of Jesus as a path for my spiritual journey. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. lived his faith in Jesus Christ to the fullest ... even unto death. What was I looking for? A life in which I felt I was contributing to God's creation, not destroying it. What was I looking for? A way to invite others into a faithful spiritual journey that would play a significant role in them finding healing and wholeness in their lives.

Our faith is much more than just the way we worship. It has to be about the way we live our lives. It is about our relationships with each other, and with God, and with the world that God has made. It is about seeking to do God's will.

So, “What are you looking for?” What is the longing in your heart? What relationship do you want with God, and how, in your life is that expressed? Who are your role models ... your heroes of faith? How have you lived your life as a legacy of those spiritual ancestors who have gone before you? If Jesus were to ask you, “What are you looking for?” what would be your answer?

Yes, I certainly believe we must put an end to the hateful rhetoric that has become the norm in our political discourse. At times when we find ourselves in deep disagreement with or distress over an idea it can be powerfully enticing to feel hateful, and to express that hate. Unfortunately, that does little to change the idea or improve the discourse around it. Instead, we must continue to reject hate and all its expressions, including racism, misogyny, xenophobia, homophobia, sexism, and intolerance. I believe that we as peacemakers must actively seek out ways to promote nonviolence and understanding. It is not enough to just be passive in the face of violence ... even verbal violence. We must find peaceful ways to promote acceptance, and tolerance, and respect of differences of all kinds. Speak with care, work in positive ways, share messages of hope, bring people together. We make the difference. We make things better

I end with one last quote from Dr. King:

Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you refuse to hate him.

So, what are you looking for in your life ... in the world around you, in your relationships with others and with God, and in yourself? This is the questions Jesus asked his disciples ... and he asks us today.

Amen.