

Sermon, Commemoration of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, 2018
Luke 6:27-36, Ephesians 6:10-20

The Martin Luther King Memorial in Washington, DC, honors The Rev. Dr Martin Luther King, who we are commemorating today in this fiftieth year since his assassination. The artists who designed this memorial created it around one of Dr King's memorable quotes—"Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope."

A resolute and thoughtful statue of Dr King, over 30 feet tall, towers out of the stone of hope that makes up a central part of the memorial.

This statue of Dr. King makes me think of an illustration from the book, What Will They Say About You When You Are Gone? Creating a Life of Legacy, by Rabbi Daniel Cohen.

Cohen quotes Michelangelo, a Renaissance sculptor, and one of the most famous artists in Western civilization.

Michelangelo said of himself, "In every block of marble I see a statue as though it stood before me., shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the others' eyes as mine see it." (pg 209)

Martin Luther King, Jr was also a sculptor and an artist.

With God given vision, he could see in the seemingly unmovable granite mountain of racism and the injustices it created in American society the potential to become something different, something beautiful.

With his artist's eye, King could see that we have the potential to become a society in which liberty and justice for all are not just a dream, but reality.

And so he went to work. With his words and his actions, he hewed away at the rough walls of discrimination and inequality that kept liberty and justice imprisoned in stone in this nation for anyone who wasn't white. He hewed away at the hatred sown in human hearts by those caught up in fear and stuck in the prejudice which they had been taught.

His sculptor's tools were "unarmed truth" and "unconditional love." King said in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech that "unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. That is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant."

Only four years after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, King was assassinated in Memphis, TN, on April 4, 1968.

Fifty years have passed since his death. And if Dr. King were alive today, he would still be wielding his sculptor's tools of unarmed truth and unconditional love to work for justice, equality and peace; "peace that is not merely the absence of tension, but the presence of justice." He would still be at work, because in this nation we still live within the rough walls of discrimination, injustice and inequality that imprison not just some of us, but all of us, as long as those walls that divide us continue to stand.

In today's gospel, Jesus begins by saying, "But I say to you that listen...." And as Christians, we are the ones who are listening to Jesus.

Jesus tells us about our purpose in life as Christians. In today's passage from the gospel according to Luke, Jesus describes the sculpting tool of unconditional love.

Our purpose in life, as Christians, is to love one another as God has loved us.

That means loving the unlovable—our enemies, those who hate us, those who curse us and abuse us.

“Do to others as you would have them do for you,” Jesus tells us. “And be merciful, just as God is merciful.”

How we carry out our purpose, to be unconditional lovers and people of mercy in our society, is our mission. For instance, currently, some of our missions at St Peter's are to hold our food distribution each month, to help people with money from the discretionary fund, and the men do the work of helping local families at both Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Our mission as the Church in the world is always changing, though. We may not always be able hold a monthly food distribution. Maybe our discretionary fund will run out of money-- but our purpose, as Christians, will not change, because our purpose is to love one another as God loved us.

In fact, God may be calling us to do more, to be even more intentional about our mission and to create the beloved community that King often talked about, “a completely integrated society, a community of love and justice wherein brotherhood would be an actuality in all of social life,” in which everyone has the physical and spiritual necessities of life.

Our mission at St Peter's has been to provide the physical necessities of life to those in need. But now, maybe God is calling

us to use our artists' eyes and our tool of unconditional love to provide the spiritual necessities of life in this community, joining with one another in love and hospitality, and being proactive about getting together and doing things together, beginning with our Christian neighbors, the people who attend Memorial Baptist and Shiloh Baptist.

If we are listening, we may hear God calling us to the places in this area that we might not usually find ourselves. What would it be like to develop ongoing relationships with the children in this town?

What would it be like to get to know the people who live year round in the Four Winds Campground, a hidden pocket of poverty tucked away on Skinker's Neck Road? I know from conversations I've had with a person there that the spiritual necessities of that community are unrecognized and unaddressed. How could we provide the spiritual necessities of life to people tucked away out of sight all over this county?

If you've been listening, you may have heard God speaking to you about your own mission, or maybe you've heard something specific as you've listened to God about the mission of this church. If you have heard something that you'd like to share, please contact me or any Vestry member about what you've seen and heard.

What dreams has God given you about your purpose in this place and in this lifetime?

In his famous speech at the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington in August of 1963, Martin Luther King shared his dream of what the world would look like if Christians everywhere lived into their purpose of loving one another unconditionally.

His statement, “I have a dream today!” has become an unforgettable sentence in our shared history as Americans.

King's dream is of freedom for us all. As he put it, freedom will be the day "when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, 'My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my father died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.' And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true."

Maybe at this point you are thinking to yourself that you have heard nothing from God, that you don't remember your dreams, that life is fine as it is, that you have fulfilled your purpose. Maybe you feel too tired, too busy, too young, too old, too sick, or too cynical to listen or to dream. Maybe you feel that your purpose has been fulfilled, and God has nothing left for you to do.

If this is you, then I commend to you the stirring words from the letter to the Ephesians which we heard today. "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power."

God's strength in us gives us the courage to listen.

God's strength in us gives us the desire to dream dreams of transforming love and to act on them.

God's strength gives us the courage to struggle against the evil all around us, to tear down the walls that divide us, and to actively resist the cosmic powers of the present darkness in our society because we know as Christians that our very purpose and the most creative way to transform this life into something beautiful is to live in love with God and one another, with no conditions attached.

The legacy of Dr Martin Luther King, his striving for equality and justice through non-violence, reaches far beyond our shores.

But the most long lasting part and most important part of his legacy is his exhortation to us, to each one of us, to be dreamers, to look around us with the eyes of artists, to see in the mountains of despair that can hold us captive the stones of hope that can build the roadway to freedom for us all.

Have a dream today.

Look around you with the eye of an artist. Look beyond what you see, and imagine what can be.

And then take up that sculpting tool of unconditional love that God has put into our hands.

Let's do our part to help create in this town and in this county and in this nation the beloved community of equality, liberty and freedom that God desires for us all.

Amen.