

Sunday, January 23, 2016
All Saints Episcopal Church
San Leandro, California
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon

Bound as One

Last Sunday, when I preached on the ministry of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I included a quote from his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” After one of the services someone asked me for the quote and, in part, because of that I posted the quote to our Facebook page where it has garnered some likes. The quote is part of a letter that Rev. King wrote, so naturally any reference to it is incomplete without the whole letter, but it is part of a larger thought within that letter. He writes, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Having been reflecting on this all week, I was struck by the parallel in Saint Paul’s letter we heard today. Saint Paul writes in the First Letter to the Corinthians, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” As a minister of the Gospel, it would not be surprising if this Scripture were one of those that Rev. King had in mind as he wrote his letter. This sentiment is also present in the famous quote attributed to Chief Seattle, the leader of the Suquamish and Duwamish Native American tribes: “Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.”

There is an idol of individualism that is continuing to draw believers in our culture—the heretical notion that I am autonomous from the rest of you. Our culture promotes this me-centered approach based on my whims, my desires, my comfort and my fancies. The cost of this me-centered approach to living is devastating damage to other human beings and the earth in exploitation of immigrants, overseas workers, and fragile ecosystems. The opposite of this idol of autonomy is nothing other than community, a model of living that has slowly been disintegrating in our culture, as more and more people succumb to the temptation of insular lives, each living in our own bubble or refuge from the world. I am thinking of how multiple generations of a family used to live in one home, all pitching in to care for the elderly members and the youngest all under one roof. I am thinking of tribal cultures or life in the Wild West before we had the sky rise condos where one and two bedroom apartments are packed as tightly as ice cube trays, yet people do not even know their neighbors. An understanding of our interconnectedness is at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ— recognition that we are all tied together in one destiny. The early Christians recognized this, and in the Book of Acts we learn of how they radically adjusted their lifestyle to accommodate this reality. If you’ve never read the Book of Acts, I highly commend it to you.

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands

or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed" to each as any had need."

And no, that was not the *Communist Manifesto* I just read from, but the early Book of Acts and its account of the earliest Christian communities. They recognized that because of our interconnectedness, each one of us to the other, there is no way to live the Christian way outside of true intentional community.

Earlier this year when you were preparing the search for a new rector, the vestry and search committee put together a parish profile that tells all about the congregation. There is one thing in that profile that struck me more intensely than the whole rest of the booklet. It was in the section about your dreams and it read as follows, "The last wish we saw repeatedly expressed was simply for more opportunities to be together. Our lovely congregation wants to mix more within the two services. We'd love to worship in other settings, like family camps, and parish picnics. We'd love to attend church wide retreats and any number of other events that allow us, though we are many, to be one."

We are called into a oneness not just in our faith and beliefs, our worship and profession of faith, but also in a shared life together. And if we are, indeed, the Body of Christ in this world, then you and I have been woven together into a oneness— into a divine fabric intended for the healing of this world. The word *salvation* comes from the same root as salve, the modern word for a healing balm or ointment that you spread on a wound. Salvation is about healing, which takes me to our Gospel lesson today. Jesus enters the temple, goes up to the podium, seeks out the scroll from the prophet Isaiah and reads:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

He rolls up the scroll. Sits down. And then says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This scroll had been regarded as one of the prophecies pointing toward the coming Messiah—the anointed one of God—and Jesus reads it pointing towards himself as the fulfillment of the prophecy, the long awaited one. But in doing so, he also reveals part of the mission statement of his ministry.

*to bring good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*

I want to caution us, however, from reading this through a lens that creates an "us/them" dynamic, since we just learned about our oneness and interconnectedness. I also think isolating

the poor, captives, blind, and oppressed can too easily lead quickly to a dangerous way of thinking about us the ‘privileged’ helping out them, the ‘underprivileged.’ This way of thinking might lead to a temporary emotion of ‘feeling good’ about ourselves, but in our service, I believe we are called into a deeper place of recognizing our common brokenness, our own woundedness, and common need for healing and transformation. And in doing so, we begin to identify with the lowly and see the struggle as a shared human struggle. We come into relationship with the oppressed, and perhaps find in serving the neediest we also are receiving and learning. There is poverty that is easy to see, but there is also spiritual poverty. There are captives held in prison cells in San Quentin, but there are captives held in abusive relationships, and the tight grip of guilt. There are the blind who cannot see through their eyes, but there are also those who are blind in their hearts to suffering, there is blindness to the damage we do to one another and the earth.

I believe there is good news of healing that Jesus offers to each of us. If we can be honest enough with ourselves and vulnerable enough in our journey with one another, this Way of the Gospel that we walk can be for all of us a Way of Healing, of growth, of transformation of our innermost self, as we support one another through the essential fabric of **community**. We come to this altar today not for sentimental reasons, nor to receive mere bread and wine, but a sacramental mystery, an encounter— bread broken before us as none other than the Body of Christ to bring healing to our own brokenness, and wine poured out for us as none other than the Blood of Christ, that it may become within us a wellspring of grace and newness of life. God offers us transformation of mind, body, and spirit—to leave here today with anything less than that is to deprive ourselves of the inner working of the Holy Spirit. Come my friends and surrender yourself, that in Christ we might find all of ourselves . . . not alone, but bound as one.

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