

Texts: Psalm 127:1-2; John 2:13-25
Subject: Jesus Cleanses the Temple
Theme: Just Us

Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 16, 2022; *Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and God With Us, Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I began my career as a college radio DJ, I would scour the stacks and shelves of records and CDs we had at the radio station on the top floor of the Diffenbaugh building at Florida State University for new music and old stuff I didn't know about. I loved being exposed to those works of art - they made me feel alive. But it was more than music - we had in that cramped record closet a box set called "Great Speeches of the Twentieth Century." I would on occasion pick one and play it - usually during an overnight shift as a break in the din and dirge of college rock. Nelson Mandela and Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King's words transported me to a different time and place and brought history to life.

This weekend, and tomorrow our nation and the world will remember the life and ministry and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Many of us will share our favorite quotes from his well known speeches, sermons, and letters. His words live on and continue to inspire all of us, young and old to believe that King's dream of freedom and justice is possible, and to recognize that the hard work of change is our responsibility. Since 1994, the third Monday in January has been known as a national day of service, encouraging all people to get out into the community to volunteer and participate in opportunities to care for the world around us.

King's faith drove him to take action when he witnessed the injustice of inequality all around him. The reality of racism and the lie of "separate but equal" existence in the

south, along with the inspiration of those who put their own bodies on the line to make change, like Ghandi and others, sparked his passion and led him to become the most prolific leader in the movement for civil rights in America. King's dream was not the American dream, but a vision for a new reality for all of God's people. He knew that our lives were not separate from one another but that "whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Cornel West writes that, "King's dream was collective. The American Dream says, "I can engage in upward mobility and live the good life." King's dream was fundamentally Christian. His commitment to radical love had everything to do with his commitment to Jesus of Nazareth, and his dream had everything to do with community..."

Since his voice and life were taken from us in April of 1968, we can only wonder about what Dr. King would have to say about the divisions that still plague us in this new century. Just days before he died he said that "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." I want to believe that is true, and we can say that this nation has seen progress in many ways in the last fifty years, but the reality is that our siblings of color still suffer violence, inequality, and incarceration at a higher rate than those of us with white skin. And the church is not immune from the sin of racism that clings to us.

King warned about the passivity of the white moderate. I have been that. There is in my own body a reluctance to upset the status quo and the systems that exist by which I can and do benefit. I am often afraid to say the wrong thing, to say too much or not enough, but I realize that God's call in my life is the center of my identity, and to proclaim God's love to the captives, to feed the poor and to work for justice means that I have to get real about the ways I have participated in the systems of injustice in our

world. We have seen in the last two years how “Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.”¹ It’s easy to justify our own actions and allow others to do the work while we sit aside and watch, or from the safety of our homes post some snarky tweet or status update on social media. I am still learning that to love and serve one another means to take seriously the voices of those who cry out for justice, to see the pain that exists just beyond our own fences, and to realize that justice is not about “just us” but about all people living in a way that honors one another and the world we live in.

This story of Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem looks on the surface to be a story of the warrior arriving to stamp out injustice, and there are hints of that here. The temple system included ways for people to come and pay for their offerings, birds, sheep, and cattle in the outer court, to do what was required according to the religious custom. The coins that featured the image of Caesar had to be changed to be acceptable - this was the role of the money changers. Many people came from a distance - they couldn’t bring their own animals for the sacrifice, as they might become blemished and unclean. The system existed for a reason and did what it was designed to do. We can expect that there were those who took advantage and profited more than others. Jesus has a powerful reaction to the presence of these animal sellers and money changers, and with a whip in his hand, creates a commotion, overturning tables, and driving out those who were “just doing their job” during the passover holiday.

In a majority of John’s Gospel, we get unique material - stories and signs not featured in the works of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Last week we heard Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee - we can’t find this story anywhere

¹ Martin Luther King Jr., [Letter from the Birmingham Jail](#)

else. Today, we hear of Jesus in the temple, reported in all 4 gospels, but John gives us these events in a different order, with a different emphasis. The first three gospel writers present this story toward the end of their proclamations, when Jesus goes up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Overturning tables serves as the event that prompts the religious leaders to call for his execution. We get it. In his final sermon, Dr. King shared that, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land."² King was convicted by his faith in God, to speak truth to power, to do what was needed at the risk of his own life, for the sake of his children and grandchildren, as well as yours and mine. Truth telling is a dangerous business.

But rather than makes this event for Jesus' condemnation, John moves the story to the *beginning* of his version of the good news, which will mean that some other event will cause those in power to seek his death. Last week we heard Jesus, reluctant to draw attention to Himself saying, "my hour has not yet come." Today, he is in the temple in Jerusalem, at the center of the spectacle. Here we see Jesus zealous for God's house - Himself - *the* living word of truth - deconstructing a system that is no longer needed. *Jesus is God with us!* Dismantling the sacrificial system was needed to redirect the focus of the people from the temple to the presence of God among them in Jesus. The people want Him to show them a sign - some show of authority that would justify him doing such a thing. Jesus responds cryptically, answering ""Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." We hear *three days* and know Jesus is talking about his resurrection, and the text tells us - He's talking about "the temple of his own body."

² Martin Luther King Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," April 3, 1968

Jesus *is* the new temple - all that is needed to bring humanity into the presence of the Divine. Look - here up in Jerusalem at the Passover, the Lamb of God is shooing away the doves and pigeons - turning out the cattle the sheep, calling the people to faithful love and devotion to God who is right there with them. Some of them understood - they came to believe in him, because of what they saw him doing.

What Jesus did got people to notice something new was happening. But He knew that would not be enough. Just like he told Nathanael - there is more to this than what we can see. King's work made the world take notice of the struggles of the black community in America. The marches, the bus boycotts, the speeches and the service he gave were a clarion call to action for those who had been oppressed, and for those who benefitted from their oppression to change their ways. But that was not the end. The promise of liberty and equality for all people *is a work in progress* that takes faith, righteous anger, truth telling, and intentional action to bring change.

As followers of Jesus we ought to know that God's presence lives in and among us. Christ is alive and risen and the Spirit of God that dwells in all of us makes us one people, one church, one body. And when one part of the body suffers, we all suffer (1 Cor.12.26). You don't have to be woke, but only be awakened to Christ who is near to us all, in our suffering, in our fears, in our disabilities, dysfunction, in our disasters, and our disease. The world is changing rapidly and change is difficult. Jesus proclaims a new reality, and as the righteous judge, upsets the tables to which we cling and calls for us to see it too.

Jesus' own body is the temple - the place where God lives, and He comes to us as a baby, as a teacher, as our friend and protector, speaking truth and love for a

hurting world. Jesus knows our fears and our reluctance to upset the status quo and forgives us, but continues to call us out from ourselves. He sees the need of all the people to be reconciled to God, and demands not sacrifice but gives freely his own body, and has already rebuilt the world in the light of the resurrection. We are made new - not into *them and us*, but into the body of Christ and we - all of us - are called to love and serve in radical new ways, to look past old divisions and live in the kingdom inaugurated in his body.

God is with us. God is for us - but not "just us." With all the people of God, we can agree with Dr. King that "the time is always right to do what is right." We have been forgiven for our complacency, our complicity, and our complaining, and freed from our selfish needs and desires - to be for one another - to be for freedom - and to live faithfully in the presence of the King of all Kings. Amen.