

St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247

Allen M. Fluent, Transitional Pastor

**Order of Worship for Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 17, 2021**

(As our congregation returns to holding worship in our building, we are conscious of the many people who will not be able to be physically present. Therefore, we will be continuing the practice of sending a worship bulletin to all who are on our mailing lists for email or hard copy. Those who will be worshipping from home and who have computer access will also be receiving a recorded version of the service that will be sent out by email on Sunday afternoon and also can be seen on our Facebook page. We welcome your participation in any way that is convenient for you, and we encourage you to share our worship service with any person you know who may appreciate receiving it.)

Morning Announcements and Prayer Requests

Prelude (recording begins)

Morning Praise: Psalm 136:1-3

O give thanks to the Holy One our God, for God is good!

God's steadfast love endures forever.

O give thanks to the God of gods,

For God's steadfast love endures forever.

O give thanks to the Lord of lords,

For God's steadfast love endures forever.

Hymn

"Hope of the World"

#404

Hope of the world, O Christ of great compassion; speak to our fearful hearts by conflict rent;

Save us, your people, from consuming passion, who by our own false hopes and aims are spent.

Hope of the world, God's gift from highest heaven, bringing to hungry souls the bread of life;

Still let your Spirit unto us be given to heal earth's wounds and end her bitter strife.

Hope of the world, afoot on dusty highways, showing to wandering souls the path of light;

Walk now beside us, lest the tempting by ways lure us away from you to endless night.

**Hope of the world, who by your cross did save us from death and dark despair, from sin and guilt;
We render back the love your mercy gave us, take now our lives and use them as you will.**

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures:

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Listen to this story that is told in Scripture about a time when the world had not been listening to the word of God among them. The story is about the prophetic re-awakening in those days to the word of God.

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel, Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!", and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." (But then, when Samuel had heard the voice a third time) Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down and if he calls you, you shall say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Prayer for Reconciliation

(a prayer for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day by United Methodist Pastor Safiyah Foster):

Speak, Lord, for your children are listening
for a word of encouragement, for a word of instruction
about how we ought to live in these troubled lands.

Speak, Lord, for your children are listening,

as we drift off to sleep in down-covered beds
in marble palaces
or in sawdust padded pallets
on dusty floors.

We are listening, rich and poor, we are listening, young and old for a word from you that will heal our lands.

Eternal God, lover of our souls, we come to you this morning hungering for something from you that will change the rest of our lives. We come hungering for honesty instead of corruption; for generosity instead of greed; we come hungering for integrity instead of intrigue. We come hungering for our neighbors to be fed and for all to have enough honest work to provide for the basic needs of their families. We come this morning hungering for righteousness to flow like rainwater and for the justice like an ever flowing stream described by the prophets.

We come hungering and we come listening for your words to us, describing how we can participate in your great work of re-creation. We come listening for ways that we can become part of the solution and not part of the problem. We come listening in fear and trembling, praying that we will have the courage to respond and act if we hear a clear word of instruction from you.

Speak, Lord, for your children are listening.

Hymn Response

“Open My Eyes, That I May See”

#480

***Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth you have for me;
place in my hands the wonderful key that shall unlock and set me free.
Silently now, on bended knee, ready I wait your will to see;
open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!***

***Open my ears, that I may hear voices of truth you send so clear;
and while the message sounds in my ear, everything false will disappear.
Silently now, on bended knee, ready I wait your will to see;
open my ears, illumine me, Spirit divine!***

***Open my mouth, and let me bear gladly the warm truth everywhere;
open my heart, and let me prepare love with your children thus to share.
Silently now, on bended knee, ready I wait your will to see;
open my heart, illumine me, Spirit divine!***

Epistle Lesson:

2 Corinthians 5:13-21

For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God

Hymn

“Community of Christ”

#615

***Community of Christ, who make the cross your own,
live out your creed and risk your life for God alone:
the God who wears your face, to whom all worlds belong,
whose children are of every race and every song.***

***Community of Christ, look past the church’s door
and see the refugee, the hungry, and the poor.
Take hands with the oppressed, the jobless in your street,
take towel and water, that you wash your neighbor’s feet.***

***Community of Christ, through whom the word must sound –
cry out for justice and for peace the whole world round;
disarm the powers that war and all that can destroy,
turn bombs to bread, and tears of anguish into joy.***

***When menace melts away, so shall God’s will be done,
the climate of the world be peace and Christ its sun;
our currency be love and kindness our law,
our food and faith be shared as one forevermore.***

Sermon:

*Lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring,
ring with the harmonies of liberty;
let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies,
let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,*

*Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.*

James Weldon Johnson

On this weekend that remembers the prophetic ministry of The Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., I've been thinking about the text that inspired one of his greatest sermons. It is taken from the Book of the Prophet Amos:

*I hate, I despise your festivals and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them;
And the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Amos 5:21-24

The prophet Amos had been listening carefully when he wrote the words he heard God speaking to him in a deceptively peaceful time, only a few years before the land would be conquered by the army of the Assyrian Empire. Amos was not, by his own admission, a formally recognized prophet of Israel. He was a shepherd, but one who heard God calling God's people to justice; and he saw a connection that was not perceived by many of the other political prognosticators of his day: that a people's strength to withstand the threats from outside depended upon a spirit of harmony and justice within the land. He saw that people tried to keep the peace by covering up what was wrong; he knew that real peace has to be rooted in a spirit of fairness and mutual compassion. It disgusted him when he saw wealthy landowners taking advantage of peasant workers and enjoying great luxury while their fellow Israelites were suffering from poverty. He saw something else, too. He recognized the great temptation of the divine temple itself to cover over unjust conditions in an effort to maintain the illusion of peace, while something continued to feel wrong.

Those of us who are of a realistic bent are conscious of the underlying existence of injustice in human affairs of any place and time. We shake our heads at the way some people take advantage of others. If it's something that happens to someone we know, we often intervene. We might even put our well-being or our reputation at risk to do it. But our experience of the way the world is tells us that these things are going to happen, and some people are jerks; and there is little we can do about that.

Sometimes though, as history unfolds its gradual revelation, there is a moment when things add up; and there is a realization among a large number of people – not always the majority but often first among those who can closely identify with those who are harmed – that a violation of decency has occurred that is more than individual wrongdoing, because it implicates us all, giving us advantages we never asked for or disadvantaging others, and it makes us uncomfortable when we realize that we weren't paying attention when some of our neighbors were suffering.

In the mid-twentieth century, the time of Martin Luther King's public ministry, the people of our nation had such a moment of recognition. It isn't that the era was the worst of times; one could argue that things were better for people of color in those days than they had been in some previous periods. But somehow the long accumulation of gross injustices became a weight too great for African American communities to tolerate any longer; local protests began with largely black participation. Then, as repressive measures were used against them, and brutal attacks against the protesters leading to injuries and deaths were covered on the news, white people too began to take notice. Those of us from northern communities noticed and responded mostly by condemning the sins of southern whites, whose legacy of racial violence was truly terrible and easily condemned. Images of police dogs and hoses, lynchings and segregated drinking fountains filled our minds. It was later, much later, that we realized our own complicity in a racially divided and unequal society, with employment discrimination, housing segregation, separate and unequal classrooms, hospitals, and even parks and swimming pools. It didn't matter what our politics were or whether we were conservative or liberal in our viewpoints, the truth is that most of us who are Americans of European background were almost universally late to acknowledge, even then, how bad the problem was or how we fit into it; but we began to be aware that something was wrong that would require extraordinary effort to overcome.

I was not an activist in those days. I was a divinity student from suburban Chicago, studying at a St Louis seminary that was rooted in the German Evangelical theological tradition. I didn't think about my teachers or my classmates as white people. I just thought about them as people. But there was one student of color there, and I thought of him as black. There were other limitations at that time; there were no women studying for the ministry in those days. But, in spite of all that, even there, the study of the Scriptures was inevitably influenced by the ferment of the time, and God began to speak to us from the prophets and from the social teachings of Jesus. In the spring of 1965, not long before my graduation, I flew to Montgomery, Alabama, with a group of my classmates to participate in the Selma to Montgomery march led by Martin Luther King. We were motivated by King's faithful Christian preaching, and by people

like the late John Lewis who endured brutal treatment on the Edward Pettus Bridge. I'm glad to say that history has borne out that we were on the right side that day we joined the march, but I also have to confess that we didn't know what we were doing, and we felt way too righteous about what we had done. Still, the movement inspired by Dr. King defined for our generation of preachers the beginning of our journey in ministry.

In the years since 1965, there has been incremental progress in American race relations, and some have concluded that the work is done. Educational opportunity, if not yet equally available to all, has been expanded. Residential segregation, if not yet eliminated, has been diminished. Access to jobs and economic mobility for non-white Americans has improved, but equality of opportunity has not yet been achieved. In urban America, inequality has too often led to poverty, loss of safe housing, the disruption of families, mass incarceration and death.

Are these political problems? I don't know. There are those who will propose political solutions, of course, and all of us should exercise our responsibilities as citizens to seek constructive solutions. But we're not politicians here. Our job is dealing with spiritual problems.

So I want to propose to you that right now America has a spiritual problem – and I wonder if a large part of that problem is that our religious institutions have been spending so much effort on trying to get us into heaven or increasing our lagging membership roles that they haven't been doing a very good job of teaching us how to listen when God is speaking to us in the voices of those who are suffering in our communities. Sometimes I wonder if we're in the days of Samuel again, when “the word of God is rarely heard and visions are not widespread”? And I wonder if we need an Amos, or a Martin Luther King, to jar us into sensibility and remind us of the community of justice and grace that was the heart of Jesus' message.

*God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
thou who hast, by thy might, led us into the light,
keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee,
lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee;
shadowed beneath thy hand, may we forever stand,
true to our God, true to our native land.*

Musical Interlude

(music only - #729 “Lift Every Voice and Sing,”
music by Rosamond Johnson)

Our Time of Prayer

Holy God, on this day when we remember Dr King and the other great leaders of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, and when we recognize the freedom movements that have emerged in history throughout the world, we give thanks for those who have bravely engaged in nonviolent protest to end all forms of oppression and ensure individual liberty for all people. We are conscious in our own time of many places around the globe where the rights and freedoms of people are being tested even today. We pray for the people of those troubled lands.

In the knowledge that the quest for freedom and equality in our own land is tested in every generation, we also pray for the wisdom to continue our own efforts on behalf of our neighbors' welfare.

We thank you, God, for this congregation, for the fellowship we enjoy with one another and with you, and for the work that is done by members of our church who reach out in many ways to help those in need around us.

We pray for those among us who are ill or recovering, those experiencing grief, those confined to home because of the virus, and all who miss the comfort of family in this difficult time.

We give thanks for the health care workers and all others who are engaged in work that keeps us healthy and safe.

God bless the ministry of this congregation and all our ministry partners in the fellowship of Christ. Today begins the week of Christian unity, so we pray for the world wide ministry of Christ's Church in all its many expressions.

As Jesus has taught us, so we pray:

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Closing Hymn

“For the healing of the nations”

#621

*For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord,
for a just and equal sharing of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love in action help us rise and pledge our word.*

*Lead your people into freedom, from despair your world release,
that, redeemed from war and hatred, all may come and go in peace.
Show us how, through care and goodness, fear will die and hope increase.*

*All that kills abundant living, let it from the earth be banned:
pride of status, race or schooling, dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice may we hallow life's brief span.*

*You, Creator-God, have written your great name on humankind;
for our growing in your likeness, bring the life of Christ to mind;
that by our response and service earth its destiny may find.*

Benediction

*Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the
Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.*

Postlude