

The Pastor's Reflection

January 17, 2021 – Second Sunday After the Epiphany

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. will be posted in a written form and also an audio form as part of a devotional service on www.firstcommunitychurch.com.

Scripture Readings: Matthew 15:21-28

Once again, this has been a difficult, a painful week. We have learned more and more about the extensive planning that led up to and that fueled the riot that took place last Wednesday, the assault on our Capitol, our elected Senators and Representatives, and our democracy. We have heard of the death threats that have been made and continue to be made toward our elected leaders, death threats that, because they are the outward expression of a deep hatred toward those whom the alt right perceive as “the enemy” of what they view as America and the American way of life, need to be taken very seriously.

This has been a sad week for America. It has been a dark week. Around our beloved nation, State houses and Capitol buildings are being boarded up in anticipation of the threatened assault on these seats of power as we approach President-Elect Biden's Inauguration. Already, twenty-five thousand men and women of the National Guard armed with rifles are stationed around Washington D.C., especially in and around government buildings to protect that which most of us hold dear. President Trump has been impeached for “high crimes and misdemeanors,” his second impeachment, for inciting and fueling last Wednesday's riot, for attempting to subvert democracy in his (taped) request that Georgia's Secretary of State find some way to fabricate enough votes to overturn the recent senatorial elections, and for raising baseless and false claims about the recent presidential election, an election that, despite having been reviewed by every state and approximately 80 courts, including many judges he appointed, he still claims was rigged against him. We are somewhere between a puzzle and the laughingstock of countries around the world. Here at home, few of us are laughing.

What irony—or perhaps it is another example of synchronicity—that as we work our way through the next few weeks, we pause for a moment this coming Monday to celebrate the life and legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It may be synchronistic because I believe that his message, his vision of America, his vision of world community, is exactly what we need to hear. It is what we need to take to heart.

I was thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. the other day when I was taking our dog, Brie, out for a walk. Yes, that's her name—Brie, as in the French cheese. Kristen, who had just completed a year of study at the Sorbonne in Paris, suggested the name “Brie” because “it was French” and “it sounds good.” I had several other suggestions, but they were voted down by Kristen and Darlene. I thought a good name for a collie would be “Flower” (get it? *collie flower*). I also suggested “Melon” (get it? *melon collie*). Both of my suggestions were vetoed under the (highly questionable) reasoning that “the other dogs in the neighborhood would make fun of her.” There are times when I chafe against the constraints of democracy.

I like to walk Brie every morning. Actually, I have not been walking her *every* morning or, to be perfectly truthful, most mornings, but that's not the point. Brie likes to roam free in the woods around our house, which is possible because we live near the end of a dead-end street. She likes to explore, to experience different sights and smells, and to

run up to our neighbors and joggers in search of a hug or a kind word. Most of all, she likes to chase rabbits, squirrels, and an occasional deer. Brie, considering that she is now almost eleven years old, runs like the wind!

She doesn't fare well with the rabbits and squirrels, at least if her goal is to catch them. I have told her that it is a good thing she is living with a family that loves her and feeds her, for if she had to catch her food in the wild, she would be a very hungry dog. Brie is so friendly, gentle and loving that I am not convinced that she is really out to catch and kill the rabbits and squirrels. I believe that the initial pursuit is from instinct, for she takes off like a shot. If she were to actually catch the animal, however, I have a hunch that she would just like to be friends. Since the rabbits and squirrels have no way of knowing her intentions, they keep their distance.

On one of our morning walks some time ago, I stopped to chat with a man who attends a little church in our town. The church is a community church, like ours, but their theology is much more fundamentalist and conservative. When I first moved to Foxborough forty years ago, I was invited to preach at their church. This lasted until they discovered that I am a liberal, which apparently didn't take too long. Then I never got invited back.

The man, who has a reputation for being outspoken and opinionated, knows that I am a pastor. He proceeded to express his unsolicited opinion that the greatest threat to mankind in our century is the existence of denominations. I must confess that I have found my denomination, the United Church of Christ, to fall somewhere between benign and moderately helpful on a spectrum of influence in my life and ministry. I can think of far greater threats to humanity than the existence of Protestant denominations!

For some unknown reason, (perhaps I was in a bad mood that morning), I returned the favor by expressing *my* unsolicited opinion that a far greater threat to humanity is the existence of the kind of radical fundamentalism in religion that leads to fanaticism, to people who want to cram their religion down other people's throats, and to religious wars. After a somewhat awkward silence, we parted company. As I mused on our little exchange, it dawned on me that we were targeting the same type of threat, though our focus was somewhat different.

I believe the greatest threat to humanity is not the existence of Protestant denominations; it is tribalism. Tribalism, the radical identification with a single group that defines one's identity, gives rise to a splitting of the world into two camps or groups--our group and the other group. When we split categories into opposites, we invariably assign a positive value to one and a negative value to the other. We define ourselves as not-the-other and not-like-the-other. The "other" then becomes a threat to our basic values, to our way of living, thinking, or believing, and, consequently, the "other" must be controlled or eradicated.

The tribal way of viewing life is deeply imbedded in our Bible. The ancient Israelites divided the world into Jews and Gentiles, Gentiles being non-Jews. It followed, of course, that God loved the Jews and hated the Gentiles. This led to the self-righteous slaughter or enslavement of the Canaanites, the people whose territories the Israelites conquered. This dynamic is still a barrier to the realization of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

We Christians carried on this shameful part of our Judeo-Christian heritage. Our division of the world into Christians and non-Christians led to the misguided missionary efforts to convert the heathen, by force if necessary. Our division of the world into Christians and Jews contributed to the mentality that gave rise to the Holocaust. The division of the world into Christians and Islamic infidels led to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Muslims during the Crusades. Our division of the world into Christians and pagans set the stage for the torture and death of women who were branded as

witches in the Middle Ages. When we divided the Christian world into orthodox believers and heretics, we opened the door to the tortures of the Inquisition.

This week, as some denominations celebrate a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we should reflect on how we Protestants divided Christianity into Protestants and Catholics, leading us Protestants to view Catholics as the enemy, and how Catholics did the same thing when they divided Christianity into Catholics and non-Catholics, with the belief that only Catholics went to heaven. Tribalism, not particularly between denominations as my acquaintance believes, but as a ubiquitous psychological and sociological phenomenon, has proved to be the greatest impediment to the creation of world community in the history of the human race.

Tribalism is not the exclusive possession of religious groups, though religious groups have certainly championed it throughout history. When our western European ancestors, those who became Americans, divided the world into civilized and primitive, their division led to the genocide of the Native Americans. Our division of the world into white and black led to the enslavement of Blacks and the terrible damage to the cultural and psychological dominant of African Americans.

In this century, we divided the world into capitalists, who are the good guys, and communists, who are the bad guys. This led us to view the Soviet Union, in the words of President Reagan, as "the evil empire," overlooking, of course, the evil that is attendant to free market capitalism. This projection of our shadow onto the Soviet Union was proposed as a justification for a preemptive nuclear strike that would blow them off the face of the earth. Concurrently, of course, communists were projecting their shadow onto us, just as several Islamic groups do today in their depiction of the United States as Satan.

Whenever we split the world into two groups, we invariably assign a positive value to one group and a negative value to the other. This judgment on the native inferiority of the other then becomes a justification for abuse or eradication. The Jewish theologian Martin Buber says that when we engage in this kind of dichotomizing, we are viewing the other person not as a "Thou," a person who is an end in his/her own right, but as an "It," as a thing. It is well known that in order to kill an enemy, we must first dehumanize him/her.

This tribal mentality, this arbitrary dividing of the world into two groups, seems, however, to evolve in the life of Jesus. At times, Jesus talks about the world and his ministry in this primitive tribal way, while at other times he moves past it and encourages us to move past it.

A statement of the tribalism inherent in the religion within which Jesus was raised is found in II Kings 5.15. Here Naaman, whom Elisha has cured of leprosy, confesses: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." Naaman divides the world into two groups--Israel and the rest of the world. God is in Israel, but nowhere else. This implies that only the Israelites have a relationship with God. This makes God a very small God, the possession of a single tribe. This belief also leads to an inflated sense of importance, to seeing oneself as special in the eyes of God. It justifies the domination or forced conversion of other religious groups.

In Jesus' time, the primary split was between Jews and Gentiles. The most commonly mentioned Gentiles in the New Testament were the Samaritans, the people of neighboring Samaria.

In Matthew 10.05, we read that Jesus split the world into these two camps, or at least the person who wrote this gospel split the world into these two camps. We read: *These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the*

house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.

This passage speaks to the theological issue of whether Jesus is to be seen as the Messiah, the one from the line of King David who was sent by God to redeem Israel, or whether Jesus is the Christ, the Logos, the Word of God whose identity and mission were much bigger than this. This passage shows that, at times, Jesus seems to see himself and his disciples as ministering only to Israel. At other times, he broadens his focus to include all people, even people who were enemies of the Jews.

Jesus' conflicted understanding of his identity and his mission is beautifully illustrated in our scripture reading from the 15th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. In this passage, Jesus confronts the limitations of his tribal perspective and begins to understand himself as part of a bigger picture.

The woman who comes to Jesus to seek healing for her daughter is a Gentile, more specifically a Canaanite. In this passage Jesus refers to her as a dog. He refers to the Jews as children, the non-Jews as dogs, and he declares that his ministry is intended as food for the children, not food for the dogs. If he really said this, if he really referred to the woman and her daughter as dogs, it was clearly not one of his finest hours.

The woman confronts him on his tribal perspective, gently calling him forth into a bigger picture both of himself and of all the children of God, when she says, "Sir, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Jesus, moved by her answer, says, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Her daughter was healed instantly. I have a hunch that when confronted by the woman's faith and her humility, Jesus found himself ashamed of what he had said. If he wasn't, he should have been.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan as recorded in Luke 10:25-37, the priest and the Levite, both of whom are Jews, pass by the man who had been beaten by robbers. By contrast, a Samaritan, one who was not expected to show sympathy to Jews, is "moved with pity" and ministers to the man. In this parable, Jesus challenges the Jews to think of the Samaritans as neighbors, to see them in the context of an "I-Thou" relationship, to see them as human beings; not to see them in the context of the "I-It" relationship which Martin Buber tells us prevents the creation of world community.

In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 17, we find the story of the healing of the ten lepers. Luke tells us that of the ten who were cleansed, nine were Jews and one was a Samaritan. Of the ten, only the Samaritan returned to Jesus to thank him. Once again, Jesus dissolves the split, the categories of Jew and Gentile that we find in other passages of scripture.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life we celebrate this coming Monday, preached and lived that bigger picture which Jesus came to teach us. He tried to dissolve the tribalism and its accompanying judgments of superior and inferior that plagues our society. Although he fought for equal rights for blacks, he did not split the world into black and white. He reminded us that we are all children of God. It is because of this vision and his tireless efforts to this end that he was killed, just as Mahatma Gandhi was murdered by a Hindu nationalist for suggesting that Hindus and Muslims shouldn't have to be separated; they should be able to live together in peace and harmony.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream was a dream that prejudice and racism could be eliminated, that black people and white people could live together as brothers and sisters. He reminded us that this dream is deeply rooted in the American dream. He spoke to both whites and blacks from the steps of the Lincoln monument when he said:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all people are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and girls and walk together as brothers and sisters.

This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountains of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

*This 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 fathers died,
Land of the Pilgrim's pride,
From every mountain side,
Let freedom ring.*

Brie realizes that rabbits and squirrels are different from her, just as people are different from her. However, I believe she only has two categories: friends whom she knows and friends whom she doesn't yet know. I really believe she just wants to be friends with the little rabbits and squirrels she encounters on our walks. I don't think Brie has a category for enemy. There are just friends we know and friends we want to get to know. We can learn a lot from dogs.

My prayer for us as individuals, for our church, for our world, and perhaps especially for our nation is that we will set aside this myopic psychology of tribalism, a mind-set that has shaped our perception and our response to those whom we perceived as members of the "other," the "inferior" group throughout history. When we dissolve this tribal perspective, we live the vision to which Jesus calls us: we see all the peoples of the world as children of God and thus as our brothers and sisters. When we do this, we carry forth the legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of our greatest Americans, who called us, who challenged us to live together as brothers and sisters.

We are living in a time of darkness. We feel we are surrounded by darkness. At time, we are even conscious of the darkness within us. Deep down we know that this darkness will never completely go away. As John Piper, an Evangelical pastor whose

theology is admittedly on a very different part of the theological spectrum from mine, has said,

Darkness comes. In the middle of it, the future looks blank. The temptation to quit is huge. Don't. You are in good company... You will argue with yourself that there is no way forward. But with God, nothing is impossible. God has more ropes and ladders and tunnels out of pits than you can conceive. Wait. Pray without ceasing. Hope.

While we can never totally eradicate the darkness, we can seek to balance the darkness with light. We can seek to balance the darkness of ignorance with knowledge. We can seek to balance the darkness that comes from a lack of consciousness with enlightenment. We can seek to balance judgment with acceptance. We can seek to balance the darkness of despair with the bright light of hope. When we do this, the prejudices that are the outward expression of our pathetic need to claim racial superiority will dissolve.

Let's make the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream, his vision of world community a living reality for us and for our children. This is what we need in America. Above all, don't let the light go out.