

Lent 2 Year C: 16 / 17 March 2019
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Reverend Gary Cyr

“The good Paul speaks of to the church at Philippi when he says for them to imitate him, is the good that Jesus embodies – a good predicated on a self-emptying love. A good predicated upon the cross of Christ, to which all of Lent points.”

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18
Philippians 3: 17- 4: 1
Luke 13: 31-35
Psalm 27

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. . . With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”

In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke those words during a march in Washington, D.C. calling for civil and economic rights and an end to racism. It was a call to and for justice. Over fifty years later, the dream is yet to be fully realized. Two generations since that speech and that dream appears to have faded from the soul of our society, from the social consciousness of a nation. It seems that Washington, like Jerusalem of Jesus' day, can a place where dreams sometimes go to die or to be diminished.

Jerusalem, the city that kills its prophets; stones those who call for justice and righteousness. It is a city where dreams sometimes die, where hope can fade, where the less fortunate live in misery. The powers that be taunt Jesus, ridicule his message of love, seek to silence his voice of hope all in a vain effort to maintain power in the hands of a few all in the name of social order, and they use God to help justify this inequality. It was religious and political systems that were institutionalized so as to control the population. In the midst of this milieu Jesus dared to dream of a world focused not on the material, but on the needs of the

people, especially those rendered mute by oppression and marginalized accordingly. St. Paul gets Jesus' message. He understands what Jesus is about.

When Paul speaks to the people of Philippi and asks them to imitate him, he is not speaking of mimicking, of mimicking him or Christ. Paul is not talking about being a parrot; about habitualism as in ritually brushing your teeth daily. Rather, Paul is speaking of imitating Christ in a sacrificial way. After all, Paul's theology, which is found in all his letters, is a cruciform one, where the cross of Christ challenges our relationship with the material world, as it should. That's what the cross challenges. In this way, Paul invites us to take seriously Jesus' kenosis – how he emptied himself and became a servant to others. Jesus sacrificed for the life of the world. Paul sacrificed intentionally in following Christ. Are we willing to do likewise?

I believe we don't like to speak about sacrifice much because it entails a real deep sense of personal loss. In a world that tells us we can have it all, sacrifice, as loss, is not something that markets or sells very well. We often hear of someone sacrificing themselves for their country, or in the line of duty. These individuals are often referred to as heroes, but I don't see folks rushing out to imitate them. We may hear of folks who risk their lives to rescue a pet that is in danger, sacrificing their own well-being for the love of their fur-baby. Sacrifices, such as these examples, are tinged with a somewhat negative attribute of loss. However, there is also a positive connotation as in the sacrifice parents often make for the sake of their children. I know my parents sacrificed in order that my brother and I would have the opportunity for an education – something that was denied to them. Being raised in poverty as they were, they knew the importance of education and that meant providing my brother and me with that chance, and they were willing to do without to make sure that happened.

Though modernity may cast a critical eye of suspicion on any notion of sacrifice, biblically speaking, sacrifice is simply to give up something one loves for a love that is greater than us. However, this idea of sacrifice does not necessarily equate with the ethics of utilitarianism, nor is it aligned with a Kantian sense of duty. Though both of these ideologies are not mutually exclusive, the kenotic love Paul embraces and advocates, as does Jesus, is egalitarian and serves a purpose well beyond any notion of a simple "greater good." The good Paul speaks of to the church at Philippi when he says for them to imitate him, is the good that

Jesus embodies – a good predicated on a self-emptying love. A good predicated upon the cross of Christ, to which all of Lent points.

Be imitators of me, says St. Paul. Dare to dream of a better world says Jesus to the principalities of his time. Over fifty years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. was preaching this vary radical idea on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Though time, aligned with the engine of conformity, has sought to derail this dream of justice steeped in the love of Christ, the dream remains and gives hope for a better world where sacrificial love prevails.

Sometimes, we have to look well beyond any expression of comfort we may have to find that kind of love. But it's there. I witness that love in the dreams and hopes of those who have been excluded in our civil discourse by the hand of political expediency, social convention, and religious purity. Those who have been excluded due to our gender identity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or ethnicity, understand sacrifice, a sacrificial love that enables them to dream of a better world where acceptance is the norm rather than the exception. After all, is that not God's dream too?

God's dream is to gather us all under God's wings of justice and peace, where no one is excluded and all are loved by God equally. Too many people have been sacrificed on the altar of power and privilege. God's dream is to transform that sin by the grace of the cross. That is what I feel Martin Luther King Jr. meant when he said "hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope." It entails sacrificial love. It entails imitating Christ. Are we willing to walk the way of the cross?