

*A sermon preached on January 19th, 2020 – the Sunday before Martin Luther King’s birthday
-- based upon John 1:29-42 entitled “The Light that Transforms Us.”*

Last week I began my sermon talking about the messiness of the Bible. Some Christians try to deny this messiness by insisting that each word of the Bible was dictated directly from God on high. But the fact of the matter is that the Bible is full of contradictions and is better understood as an ongoing conversation (and sometimes argument) in the community of faith regarding peoples’ experiences of God in particular times and places. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit we listen for God to address us through the words of Scripture.

Some of the messiness can be relieved if we don’t try to get the four Gospels lined up so that they fit neatly together, because they don’t. This year most often we will be hearing from Matthew, but every so often such as today we will venture into John’s Gospel. Each Gospel writer has a different set of assumptions, and this is especially so with John’s Gospel that diverges significantly from the other three.

At the very beginning of John’s Gospel we are told quite clearly that Jesus is none other than God incarnate, the light of God that has come to shine into the darkness of this world.

Here in our passage, John the Baptizer points to Jesus and declares that he is “the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.” For this Gospel writer, sin is separation from God. Jesus is the one who reconnects us to God. John makes this witness to the identity of Jesus, which leads to of John’s disciples set out to follow Jesus. Jesus turns to them and asks, “What are you looking for?”

A couple of weeks ago I talked about how there are two great quests in life. The first is to carve out a place for ourselves in this world. The Prosperity Gospel people don’t get beyond this quest, and their answer to Jesus might be a better paying job or a new car.

But there is a deeper quest that we are called to embrace, and Jesus is asking about this quest. Our deepest search is for a profound sense of belonging, which requires that we be fully known and fully loved. We are searching for a sense of connection to the great love out of which all of life arose. We are seeking a purpose far deeper than gratifying our ego.

The two disciples of John don’t attempt to answer Jesus’ question, but clearly they believe the answer may be found in Jesus, so they ask him where he is staying. They proceed to spend the day in Jesus’ company and at the end of which they seem pretty certain they have found the messiah. Although Jesus surely spoke words to them in their time together, the impression you get isn’t so much what he said but how they felt in his presence.

One of the characteristics of the Jesus presented by the Gospel writer John is that he possesses supernatural knowledge of people. Later in the Gospel he has a conversation with a woman at a well to who he reveals the fact that he knows her deepest secrets.

Imagine meeting a “stranger” but quickly feeling as if this person has always known you, including your dirty laundry, and yet completely loves you. Such I suspect was something of the experience of those two men who spent their day in Jesus’ presence. They sensed that an ongoing relationship with this man they would be made whole.

We human beings are paradoxical creatures, which is to say we are made good, in the image of likeness of God, and yet we all share in this turning in on ourselves as St. Augustine put it that is sin with all its destructive consequences. We are sinners and we are saints. We are light and we are darkness.

Inside of each of us there is a darkness into which we would rather not look. Hidden in the darkness are the flaws and failings we would prefer not to acknowledge. A common way of relating to such things within ourselves is to “project” them onto another. If you find yourself particularly irritated by another person, it might well be that there is something about them that expresses what is hidden deep inside yourself.

But the path to wholeness involves forgoing the need to project these things, and in the loving presence of God’s all knowing, unconditional love to face the darkness straight on. Jesus is the light of the world, the one who reveals the darkness. John’s Gospel tells us later on that some people choose the darkness over the light specifically because they did not want to look within. They preferred the cover of darkness. They rejected Jesus because they didn’t allow themselves to get close enough to him to experience the love that infused the light.

We fear condemnation should the darkness within us be revealed, but Jesus loves us in spite of all that we find difficult to acknowledge about ourselves.

As I was writing this sermon a slogan from AA came to mind that applies not only to recovering alcoholics but to all of us. I came across this quote on the internet regarding this slogan:

“We’re only as sick as our secrets” is an adage known well by those in AA. It basically means that a secret kept in the dark grows and becomes more harmful, but once it is exposed to light or released, its power is lost.

Secrets have the ability to fester negativity and self-loathing, while keeping us sick and trapped in addiction. That’s why the need to get honest is a very important aspect of recovery. It’s all about leaving the deception behind, because deception is something that’s fundamental to keeping an addiction alive.

When you stop lying to yourself (and those you love), you’ll find yourself standing at the gateway to freedom from addiction.”

Within the darkness there are other things they lay hidden. In Psalm 8 it talks about how we were created “little lower than angels.” Part of what is hidden in the darkness is our grandeur – the great capacities for love and creativity that we are afraid to embrace.

The two who have spent the day with Jesus go and find Simon and take him to Jesus. In the Gospels, the personality of Simon comes through clearly, and it involves that paradoxical quality of which I spoke. He takes risks, going where angels fear to tread and demonstrates a capacity for leadership. But sometimes he isn't able to follow through on his initial impulse and he ends up sinking into despair. There is an arrogance to Simon that is expressed when at the Last Supper he declares that he loves Jesus more than the other disciples. Before the night is through he will reveal himself to be anything but reliable.

Jesus sees all this when Simon comes to him, and yet he gives Simon a new name that expresses something solid and dependable: "Peter" – Petros – Greek for Rock. Beneath the unreliability of Simon's present self Jesus sees something solid as a rock that will be revealed over time. The process by which this reliability will come to light will at times be quite difficult, as when Simon Peter was humbled -- brought to his knees – the night he denied knowing Jesus three times. But through it all he will be loved by Jesus.

Tomorrow we celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., a truly great man. He was not, I would argue a great man when he arrived in Montgomery, Alabama at the young age of 25 to become the pastor of a church there. He was exceedingly bright, having already earned a PHD, His intelligence was accompanied by a high dose of ambition and possibly arrogance since there is evidence that he plagiarized portions of his PHD thesis. He was bright and he was a gifted orator, and as a result of these traits he found himself thrust into a the key leadership role in an historic moment in history. The African American community of Montgomery rose up in unison, no longer willing to put up with the injustice that required them to give up their seats to White people, launching the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Initially, I would suggest Martin did not have the depth of character to provide the leadership called for by the moment.

As the leader of this movement Martin found a great deal of hatred focused towards him by white people intent on holding onto the status quo of the oppressive order. He received threatening phone calls, and after one particularly hateful phone call woke him just as he was falling asleep one night Martin felt himself descending into fear, doubt and despair. Overwhelmed by these feelings, Martin felt like a fraud and searched in his mind for some way to slip away from it all. Terrified by the darkness he encountered within, Martin bowed his head in prayer at the kitchen table. He poured his heart out to God. At some point he became aware of the presence of God's love in a way unlike he had ever known before. "*Stand up for justice,*" Martin heard God say, "*and I will be at your side throughout.*" With the light shining in his inner darkness, Martin arose from the table with the inner fortitude to endure whatever would come. The greatness that was Martin's destiny was awoken.

A couple of nights later, Martin was leading a worship service in his church – a nightly tradition by which the people derived spiritual strength to carry the burdens they had shouldered when they began the bus boycott – when suddenly a great explosion. was heard. Everyone rushed outside to discover that Martin's parsonage had been firebombed. Many of Martin's followers

were ready to take up violence in retribution for this hateful act. Standing on the front porch of the smoldering house, the Spirit of God moved through Martin to remind them that they were to follow Jesus in the way of non-violent resistance.

Throughout his leadership of the civil rights movement, one of Martin's core convictions was that they could not succumb to hatred. He recognized the paradoxical nature of those who opposed the justice they sought -- that buried beneath the evil racism that led many White people to act with such cruelty there was a goodness to which they could appeal. By refusing to fight darkness with darkness, they sought to awaken the conscience that had been hidden in their oppressors' inner darkness.

As the church – the body of Christ – we are to be the light of the world. We are to embody a quality of love that creates a safe space where together we can allow ourselves to be fully known, allowing the light of God's light to shine into those places inside us of which our knee jerk reaction is to feel shame as well as on the inner grandeur that is waiting to be revealed.

As we consciously seek to make contact with the unseen but very real presence of Christ in our midst, we engage a process of transformation that in time will lead us to more clearly shine the light of Christ into darkness of this world.