



race Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

ANOINTED TO BRING GOOD NEWS

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Epiphany, Sunday January 24, 2016

Readings: Nehemiah 8:1-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Luke 4:14-21

Sermon text: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Luke 4:15-20

We have our Annual Meeting this morning after church, so I thought at first to read my seven page rector’s report on 2015 as my sermon. But Mary, wise as always, said don’t do it; or at least just do the highlights. But 2015 was a good year—there are lots of highlights. So I think I will just preach the gospel, the good news that Jesus was anointed to bring, and invite you to read the report on your own. Did I hear a thank you, Lord? Please do read it.

More good news: Snowzilla didn’t step on us—and so we do not need to reschedule the Annual Meeting or the jazz Epiphany Evensong later this evening. Not so good news for the city; just hammered by a record snowfall—and some of our members are stuck there.

Among those are Larry and Martha Graham who have been attending the Trinity Institute’s annual conference (Trinity Institute is a program of Trinity wall St). This year the subject is “Listen for a Change: Sacred Conversations for Racial Justice.” A group of us from here also attended, via a webcast at a partner site across the river, Christ the King, Stone Ridge. Powerful stuff, beginning with an opening sermon by Michael Curry, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church—our first African-american presiding bishop.

His sermon had a long title: “Before you March, Meditate on the Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ.”

He explained: the title is taken from a booklet that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in Birmingham Alabama in the summer of 1963 as set of guidelines for those who were protesting segregation. 1963. You will remember that was the year the four girls were killed in the bombing of 16th St. Baptist church. That was the year Martin King went to jail—and very few followed at first. That was when and where he wrote the classic “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” That was also where he wrote this booklet, or rule of life, for those about to begin the famous children’s

march. The year when hundreds—and then thousands—of high school students snuck out of school on a prearranged day, to meet in the 16th St Baptist church and then go out, fifty at a time, to get arrested. More and more until the jails were filled. Day after day until Sheriff “Bull” Conner finally unleashed the dogs and the fire houses on them. 1963, the year that scandalized America, opening eyes to the harsh reality of racial injustice, and brought a hard won victory to the civil rights movement.

Our youth group visited Birmingham as part of our civil rights pilgrimage last summer, honoring the fiftieth anniversary of the killing of Jonathan Daniels.

And fifty years later the march goes on. But now it goes by the name of Black Lives Matter—and is still made up of ranks of young people willing to go into the public square and fight for justice.

Perhaps all who march would benefit from rereading the guidelines Martin King offered for those preparing to march. Reminders of the need to be civil, respectful, nonviolent.

But the first rule was this: “Before you march, meditate on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.”

Before I get into what this means—and connect it with today’s gospel—let me touch a bit on the lesson from St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians—and some of the lessons from the other speakers at the conference.

Paul reminded the church at Corinth—divided over arguments and behaviors at odds with the unity and love of Christ—that the church is the body of Christ—one body, united by one Spirit. But it has many members, many distinct parts and groups, each of which has a distinct role, none of which can be neglected or dismissed. Just because the foot is not an eye, it is not therefore less—the body needs both feet to march and a vision of where to go. The lesser are honored along with the great, and none can say to another, we have no need of you. Together they work, all parts for the common good, for the common mission. Some for this task, some with that gift—all important.

But human nature divides and diminishes the other. According to Nicholas Kristof, the Times journalist and one of the speakers, research shows humans are hardwired to detect differences, to identify us versus them. Skin color is one such marker. And we all have a large number of unconscious biases for or against different groups. For instance NBA refs, trained to be objective in calling fouls, working in public, nevertheless were shown in a careful study to call more fouls against players of different color than their own. The good news: they got better when they were shown the evidence and convinced it was real. They improved through training. Maybe we can too.

Kristof said there is an online test you can take to find out your unconscious biases. For instance, part of the test involves briefly seeing a picture of two men, one white one black, the white man holding a knife. But a large number of people tested afterward mis-remember the picture as showing the black man with the knife. This reveals a widespread and deep-seated unconscious bias among those tested (Americans generally): we see the black male body as somehow more likely to be dangerous or criminal.

Another of the speakers gave us deep historical reasons this has come to be the case particularly with the black body. The rise of colonialism and African slavery were massive changes in world history—and the roots of the terrible problem of racial injustice in America. Slavery, followed by Jim Crow segregation, continuing through federal and state housing discrimination and the continuing nightmare of a virtual

“school to prison pipeline” and the current scandalous disproportionate incarceration of people of color (people of color convicted of crimes are much more likely to be incarcerated than whites committing similar crimes and for a longer sentence). The “new Jim Crow” as it is called by Michelle Alexander in a book of that name.

The easy part is identifying obvious racism: blatant discrimination, hardcore white supremacists. The coded language of “those people” and soft racism is a bit harder to pin down. But the real challenge—and I will include myself in this learning curve—is to recognize the continuing existence of structures and systems of white supremacy. White supremacy goes hand in hand with unconscious bias to lead to such tragic outcomes as the shooting of Tamir Rice, the twelve year old boy with a toy gun in Cleveland. Had he been a twelve year old white boy he would not have been so quickly and unconsciously assumed to be a dangerous adult criminal and shot within two seconds of encounter.

That is as clear as sparkling Catskill Mountain water. And as foul as the tainted water of Flint Michigan.

My beloved friends and fellow disciples of Jesus Christ, we cannot let racial injustice continue to eat away the heart of America, to waste the lives of so many young people. Black lives matter because black children matter because all children are my children and your children and all of us together are members of one body—Americans, humans. And we, members of the body of Christ, have most the responsibility of redressing the situation. We cannot stand idly by. We must march hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters of all colors. Do I hear an amen?

And so we come, at last (remember I could have reading my annual report) to the gospel. To the reminder of Bp. Curry and Dr. King that before you march, meditate on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Luke 4:15-20

Here is Jesus, come back to his hometown. (I know the feeling—I used to be a carpenter too. Off he went to study theology—with John the baptist, me to Union Seminary. That is pretty much where the similarities end.) He unrolls the scroll of Isaiah—selecting the passage where the prophet writes he has been anointed to bring good news to the poor.

Blessed are the poor, and the poor in spirit, Jesus will teach—and woe to the rich who rest in their wealth and do not share, who are not a blessing to others.

Anointed to bring release to the captives. Who are the captives today but those caught in webs and chains of historical and cultural oppression—a school system that seems to cherry pick a few gifted kids but consigns many to impoverished visions of the future and present realities of criminal gangs and chimeras of magic release—sports! A system that tells kids misbehaving that there is a cell waiting for them when they turn eighteen.

Sight to the blind. And who are the blind but those who think themselves innocent? The slave ship captain John Newton who came to see how he had been blind—a wretch—but amazing Grace had set him free, given him sight.

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Forgiveness of debts and reset of right relationships. Possible, not easy. it will a lot of work. A long march.

But before you march, meditate on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. He raised the dead.

What Jesus did, we are called to do also—as a body. All of us together, each in our way. To bring hope and light to the darkness. Life where there is death. Good news to the poor, release to the captives.

In the name of Christ, amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY