

Sunday, February 6th, 2022

5th Sunday of Epiphany



Black History Month - Fishing so others can have a meal

Scripture: Luke 5: 1-11

Reflection: At the King Centre in Atlanta, across the pool in which the crypts of Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King are pedestaled, sits a stand which showcases the splendor of The Eternal Flame. The Eternal Flame which dances 24/7 symbolizes the continuing effort to realize Dr. King's dream of the "Beloved Community", which was his vision for a world of justice, peace and equality for everyone everywhere. And if you visit the King Centre at night, the Eternal Flame would draw your eye in a magical way, summoning you to it, perhaps as way to call you to prayer, to kindle hope within you, that our world could indeed unite into one Beloved Community of love, kindness, respect, fairness and justice.

All people of the world, and especially people of African descent yearn for this world that Dr. King imagined, and ultimately sacrificed his life for. What would it be like to live in one Beloved Community?

There's an eighties song by the band The Bangles that shares its title with Dr. King's alluring fire monument. The writer invites a partner to explore a world with her, a world that is passionate and filled with love and excitement and mutual understanding. A world for lovers.

"Close your eyes
Give me your hand, darling
Do you feel my heart beating?
Do you understand?
Do you feel the same?
Am I only dreaming?
Is this burning an eternal flame?"

This is perhaps a little romanticised to what black people are seeking and what Dr. King was envisioning in his longing for a Beloved Community. But still, many parts of this one verse

rings true... People of African descent distressingly wonders quite often “Do you see us?”, “Do you hear us?”, “Do you understand the suffering we endure that often times feel like it’s never ending?” “Are you able to imagine my pain, will you stand with me, are you willing to be partners in a Beloved Community?”

In our scripture today we read of Jesus’ first encounter with, and introduction to Peter. Jesus was being pressed upon by a large crowd that gathered to hear him preach, and at the water’s edge he decided that it may be best to borrow one of the boats to speak from, to possibly gain a better vantage point to speak to the people, and also as a place to sit as he preached.

The borrowed boat belonged to Simon Peter, and perhaps out of gratitude, Jesus wanted to gift the weary fisherman. He suggested that Peter put the boat back out into deep water, but Peter thought it was pretty pointless, considering he had fished all night long and yielded nothing, yet Peter decided to humor Jesus. He took the boat out and lowered his nets, and whoa!... Verse 6 of our texts says that so much fish was caught, that the nets were unable to hold the multitude of it, and they began to break... What a wonderful problem for a fisherman to have....

But it’s the next verse that is extremely applicable to our theme today of creating a Beloved Community. Verse 7: “And they beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other boat, that they should come and help them. And they came, and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink.”

A Beloved Community cannot be created without partnerships... In the coastal villages of Gambia, West Africa, many fishermen need to form alliances when fish is scarce. They often combine their nets to cover a larger area to secure as much fish as possible, then they split the catch at the end of the trip. It’s a successful fishing strategy that enables each fisherman to make a little money or at least feed his family.

Partnerships are necessary for survival. Partnerships between people of other races, backgrounds and cultures are necessary for the survival of each other, and for the progress of our world, to combat things which would destroy us all. This world pandemic that we’re just wading out of comes to mind. World scientists have had to work together and share data to properly understand the virus, and to come up with ways and measures to control it.

We also have seen governments of the developed world share vaccines with the developing world nations, because it is evident that no country could declare one hundred percent victory over the virus, unless it is eradicated from every corner of the earth. A Beloved World Community requires partnerships.

Peter’s call for help from the other fishing boat was to ensure that his nets did not break all the way through from the weight of the big haul. People of African descent have been in Peter’s boat more times than can be counted. Bodies and minds have felt the pressure in nets that are too full of debilitating systemic racism. The rips and tears in the nets are the rips and tears in communities, struggling to breathe and struggling for basic fairness and justice.

Members of a Beloved Community are called to help to secure the nets, so that they do not break all the way through and become totally destroyed. Beloved Community members are called to take some weight off the boat, so that it does not capsize. And when the load is eased and the boat is stabilized, the Beloved Community is summoned to participate in the mending of the broken nets.

Peter also wanted to share his bounty. What good was it to benefit from that amazing gift from Jesus and not share it with the others? What does sharing the bounty of Jesus look like?

In Windsor Ontario right on the Canadian/American border, from Spring to Fall, hundreds of people gather daily to fish from the beautiful Detroit River. The bounty of the Detroit River consists of a diversity of fish, which includes whitefish, sturgeon, silver bass, perch, northern pike, walleye and countless others. But there is a phenomenal Beloved Community that is being fostered by fishing along the Detroit River.

Many of the people along the river fish for sport, to try to capture the biggest and most elusive of the river fish, and they use a catch and release system. Then there became a growing realization that many others who fish the river do so out of necessity. Low income and homeless members of the community stand along the river day after day, trying to catch as much as they can, in an attempt to address their food insecurity.

Over time, the focus of the folks who primarily fish for sport shifted, from trying to catch the biggest fish, to catching as many fish as possible, to fill the coolers of the folks who fish for food security. It's a beautiful example of how members of a Beloved Community work to care for each other, in the securing and sharing of bounty.

It is also an interesting twist of how we could think of the phrase 'Fishing for men'. In this Beloved Community in Windsor, Ontario, along the Detroit River, 'Fishing for men' is simply about fishing for others to have a meal.

Dr. King's vision of a Beloved Community was one for a world of justice, peace and equality for everyone everywhere, and the Eternal Flame at the Centre blazes to maintain hope in the hearts of everyone, that his vision could be realized. This is Epiphany's light, guiding us into Black History Month. May we all celebrate as a united Beloved Community, Thanks be to God, Amen.

Prayers:

God of all, we come in prayers today, in this time of celebration to give you thanks. We thank you for the spirit of a people who brings the world to life in many ways, and whose spirit pushes through crippling oppression and adversities. We give thanks that we get to be in community with each other, where we celebrate together in your light.

We pray for African refugees everywhere, struggling to get to a place of safety and security. We pray for wrongly and unfairly sentenced imprisoned black men and women who have fallen prey to an unjust system. We pray along with their families, seeking justice and resolution. We pray for your people, who are still struggling to breathe, and we ask you for courage and compassion to be allies, not just for one day, or one month, but on-going, honouring our call to follow Jesus in a commitment to love.

We thank you for all people, everywhere, who carry an eternal flame of hope, and who urges us to believe and participate in Martin Luther King's vision of a united Beloved Community. It's a beautiful community Oh God, and it is possible through the workings of your Spirit. We give thanks in the name of Jesus, Amen...