

Twenty-second Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Paul Eldred

October 16, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Monuments and museums. That's basically been the summary of my last few days. Ryan and I just got back last night from a short vacation to Washington, DC where we were visiting one of our best friends. And while we were there, we spent a lot of time visiting monuments and museums. But before you ask, no – we did not get to go into the new Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture – the tickets are booked for months in advance, so we missed out for this trip. Hopefully next time.

DC is one of my favorite places to visit, but Ryan had not spent much time there, so I had fun showing him around the Mall and guessing who that statue was and so on. And yes, we had a great time looking at the Washington Monument and visiting the Lincoln Memorial, but perhaps the most striking monument I saw this trip was the relatively new one dedicated to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. If you haven't seen it, it's amazing – a giant figure of Dr. King chiseled out of a mountain of granite gazing out into the distance and surrounded by some of his best-known and most impactful quotations. But one of the things that hit me most about the MLK Memorial was its placement. It sits right on the Tidal Basin and just across the water is the Jefferson Memorial – a

beautiful building in itself, but the tension between the two monuments really struck me this time. There was a temple to Thomas Jefferson, the man who wrote, “all men are created equal” and “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever. Commerce between master and slave is despotism...these people are to be free,” but also is the man who held hundreds and hundreds of slaves. And just across the Tidal Basin – a short distance in feet, but nearly two centuries in history – stands Martin Luther King, the man who strove to fulfill the vision that Jefferson proposed of true equality under the law and the man who said, “We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” Gazing from one monument to the other shows how far this country has come since the founders, but also how long it has taken us to get from there to here. How the persistent work of people like Martin Luther King who constantly pushed this country towards justice moved us a little farther along that arc of the moral universe.

It is also painfully clear that the work of leaders like Dr. King is still not finished. The effects of individual and institutional racism are still so pervasive throughout our society no matter what the laws say or who our president may be. The number of people dying on the streets from violence continues to rise. We still have people living in abject poverty, not only in far off lands, but here in the richest country in the world. Our world is still ravaged by warfare and suffering that never seems to cease. We see evidence of these injustices everywhere – on the news, in our streets, in our social media feeds. And even though we are all very aware of all these things, we still allow them to happen!

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus tells us of a widow that goes constantly to this judge “who neither feared God nor had respect for people.” Day after day,

she came to him and demanded justice, but the judge ignored her. Finally, because the woman was pestering him enough, the judge relents and grants her justice. Now for centuries, people have said that we should be like the widow constantly coming before God in prayer so God will grant us justice too. And while the message of constant prayer is certainly a good one, I wonder what this interpretation means for how we view God. Do we see God as the unjust judge who will only grant justice if we pester God enough and bother God enough and force God's hand? What does that say about our God? Jesus says after the parable that God will grant justice quickly to God's people. So I wonder if this is not so much a parable that tells us about God, but more one that tells us about...us. What if God is not the unjust judge who is so unwilling to grant the widow's petition, but instead God is the widow? What if it is God who is constantly coming to *us* demanding justice but we are the ones ignoring her?

Throughout the entire Bible, we can hear God's call to us: In the Law that demanded the fair treatment of the outcast and the widow, through the Prophets who called for justice and fairness for all people, and through Jesus who showed love and compassion to the poor and oppressed. God has made it clear throughout history that we worship a God of justice. But our history has also shown that we are a people who "have no fear of God and no respect for anyone." We don't listen to our God who comes to us day after day! And yet our God keeps coming to us, demanding that we see the racism, the violence, the poverty, and the war. Our God keeps coming to us urging us to speak out against hate speech, to advocate for safe streets, to work for fair wages, and to fight for peace. Our God keeps coming to us, determined to get through to us, because even though our God is demanding justice, it's also true that our God does not

give up on us no matter how long it takes for us to get it. And as we see in the parable, God eventually does get through to us – the judge will finally grant justice to the widow. We do eventually free the slaves and pass civil rights legislation. As we have seen through the work of Dr. King and other leaders, this persistent advocacy and work eventually pays off. And this is where I see the hope in this parable – that God will not give up on us even when we refuse to hear. That God will keep coming to us, pestering us until we finally listen. Coming to declare God’s love for us in the waters of baptism. Coming to be fully with us in the bread and the wine of Holy Communion. Coming to appeal to our hearts to listen.

And so maybe we should be like the widow and be relentless in our pursuit of justice. Maybe we should be like Dr. King and other civil rights leaders preaching love and justice until the world hears us. Maybe we should be like our God who keeps coming to us and appealing to us to love our neighbor. And we should listen and finally do justice.