

THE TREASURE WE HAVE TO GIVE

Psalm 50:1-6 and II Corinthians 4:7-5:1

Today we are mid-way between the celebration of the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the anniversary of his assigination on April 4, 1968. On February 1 of this year I had the privilege of attending the Sixth Annual C. S. Lewis Legacy Lecture Series at Westminster College and hear Dr. Marvin McMickle, President of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School speak on “To Serve the Present Age: Addressing Racism, Poverty and Militarism Fifty Years After the Death of Martin Luther King, Jr.” In his speech Dr. McMickle spoke to King’s speech often referred to as the “I Have A Dream” speech – his actual title was “The American Dream” – and McMickle reminded us that the speech is much more than those five words, “I have a dream”. In the first part of the speech King said, “You see, the founding fathers were really influenced by the Bible. The whole concept of *imago dei*, as it is expressed in Latin, the “image of God”, is the idea that all have something within them that God injected. And we must never forget this as a nation: there are no gradations in the image of God. Every [one] from a treble white to bass black is significant on God’s keyboard, precisely because every [one] is made in the image of God. One day we will learn that. We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers [and sister] and to respect the dignity and worth of every [one].”

King brings together the basic foundation belief of God’s people – ancient people and modern people and all people – from Genesis 1:26, “Let us make humankind in our image...” AND the basic premise of the founding document of this nation, that “all men [which I believe means all people – men and women] are created equal.” Today I take these two – created in the image of God and created equal, and add to them a third foundational belief of our faith from the apostle Paul in II Corinthians 4, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God, and not to us.” That is, when God created us, and created us all equal, God created each of us – all of us – all humans - with the treasure of a soul which comes from God and is called to serve God and will return to God.

That’s why I often read these words from II Corinthians 4 during Funeral Services and Memorial Services, those occasions of celebrating the earthly life of a person who has – at that moment – has left behind the “earthen vessel” we call the human body – and has made the transition to be with God through eternity. Over and over again as I sit by the bedside of folks who know that their earthly body is giving out and the time they have remaining in this body is ending, I speak to them from the words of Paul here in II Corinthians. Paul reminds us that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God, and not to us”. Paul reminds us of a truth we know intellectually – but often fail to honor in our lives. That we are not in control of our lives – we don’t determine the beginning of our lives nor do we determine the end of our lives. That “transcendent power” belongs to God – and not to us.” But Paul doesn’t leave us there – with the despair of losing this earthly body with nothing beyond. No, Paul also speaks boldly – and with great faith and assurance – reminding us that “if this earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens”. This is a truth that guides our understanding of this life. This is what Paul emphasizes in Romans 14:8, “If we live we live to the Lord, and if we die we die to

the Lord; so then whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." In this life – lived in this earthen vessel we call the human body – we are called to “live to the Lord” – that is, dedicate our lives to living as Jesus lived, in faithfulness to God and with compassion and love for all. And when we die – that is, leave this earthen vessel behind – “we die to the Lord”, that is, we are received into the eternal presence of God where Jesus is “sitting at the right hand of God.” The Brief Statement of Faith of our denomination – the Presbyterian Church (USA) begins with these words, “In life and in death we belong to God.” Life – as we know it here on earth ends for all of us – but our lives do not really end. They are transformed by that “transcendent power” which “belongs to God and not to us” and that transformation from this “earthen vessel” to that “building of God, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” will bring a joy we cannot imagine here on this earth.

What a wonderful promise this is for each of us! To know with certainty that those we have loved and cherished on this earth – those who have made a positive impact on our lives and have blessed us in infinite ways, are, at this moment, with God and their lives are now “eternal in the heavens”. Their bodies in which God placed the great treasure of their kind and generous and loving souls are no longer needed. Their souls - filled with the love and care and concern for family and friends - are now in the care of our loving God. Over and over again we are reminded through the Word of God that death is not the final word – for beyond this life, when this earthly vessel has given out, and this earthly tent has served its time, there is life eternal, life in that place “prepared for us”, spent in the presence of our loving and gracious God. A place – literal or spiritual – where we will no longer experience pain or hurt or crying – for all these things will be left behind with this earthen vessel in this early realm.

We know that many of the songs – first sung by slaves in the cotton fields of this nation – were songs sung to acknowledge that the unfathomable pain of this world – being owned by another of God's creations and forced to work day and night – or be whipped if you didn't – that this pain experienced in this earthen vessel – would one day end. And beyond would be a glorious new life “eternal in the heavens.”

They sang, “I looked over Jordan and what did I see, coming for to carry me home. A band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home.” Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home, swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.”

And they sang, “Life is like a mountain railroad, with an engineer that's brave; We must make the run successful, from the cradle to the grave. Watch the curves, the fills, the tunnels, never falter, never quail; Keep your hand upon the throttle, and your eye upon the rail. Blessed Savior, thou wilt guide us, till we reach that blissful shore; where the angels wait to join us, in thy praise forever more.” Life was hard – life was “hell on earth” – but it would not last forever. The “blessed Savior” whom they knew and trusted would “guide us till we reach that blissful shore.”

The image of “reaching that blissful shore” or “crossing over Jordan” is an old image in the Christian church – referring to that “journey from this life to the next.” For many years I taught Confirmation the lessons – of which there are many – from John Bunyan's classic book, *Pilgrim's Progress*. In the book, Christian, the main character, is on his way to the Celestial City – Bunyan's title for the heavenly or eternal home of God. After enduring many afflictions and trials and wrong paths along the way – those things which Paul refers to in II Corinthians when he writes, “we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;

persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” – Christian and his new friend Hopeful finally come to a place where “ahead, there was a perfect view of the Celestial City, a City founded higher than the clouds. Its walls and towers shone in the sun, so dazzling that the pilgrims had to look at it through clouded glass, until their eyes grew more accustomed to the light.”

The Celestial City was in sight – the blissfulness and blessedness of their eternal home so near – but “just as they imagined they were safely there, they all at once stood still, quite stunned by what they saw. For, between them and the City Gate, flowed a deep, dark River, over which a mist forever swirled. They looked to the left, and they looked to the right. But the men on the bank said, ‘You have to go through it. There is no bridge.’”

This is John Bunyan’s way of describing death – but both Christian and Hopeful make it through the mist covered River because there was “no sign that God had forsaken” them.

Before them the Celestial City, yet they are not quite there, for it stands “upon a mighty hill”. But there are “glorious companions to take them by the arm...as the pilgrims neared the Gate” and “the whole Heavenly Host must have known of their arrival. For they were greeted by the King’s Own Trumpeters, who made all Heaven echo with their sound.”

We may have differing images of that place where there are houses “not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” waiting for us. We may have differing views of that “place prepared for you” which Jesus spoke of at the Last Supper. We may see that heavenly home in the words of the Negro Spiritual “Trampin” – “I’m trampin’, trampin’, tryin’ to make Heaven my home.... I’ve never been to Heaven, but I’ve been told. Tryin’ to make Heaven ma home. Dat de streets up dere are paved wid gold. Tryin’ to make Heaven ma home.”

We “make Heaven [our] home” not by any of our actions. No, the “transcendent power belongs to God” – by God’s grace we receive the gift of that eternal dwelling place. But this Wednesday many of us in the church will begin the season of Lent. It’s easy to think of this period as a time when we have to “get it right with God”, that this is a valley between the peaks of Christmas and Easter that we have to trudge through. That it’s a time for us to put away the fancy things - the silver and the flowers and the Alleluias and withhold guilty pleasures like chocolate or caffeine. A six week period of time to add disciplines like prayer and fasting.

I mentioned earlier that today is Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday – a remembering of the day when Jesus took Peter, James and John to the mountain and suddenly Moses and Elijah were with them and Jesus was suddenly “transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.” And the lives of Peter and James and John were transformed through that experience. Peter wanted to “make three dwelling places, one for [Jesus], one for Moses and one for Elijah” so that they could stay there on the mountain – it would become their eternal home.

But Jesus would not allow that – there was still work for him – and the transformed Peter, James and John to do.

In the forty days of Lent which lie ahead for us, we do all the things we hope will somehow transform us and we will be transfigured - made into shining examples of Christian disciples who have “done it all right” to reserve our ticket on that heaven-bound train or assure us that companions will be waiting for us with an outstretched hand when we cross the Jordan.

But we know that that’s not the intent of Lent. Truly it is not. So, maybe we need to rethink our understanding of Lent. Instead of it being a valley we must pass through – observing certain

rituals and doing certain things to “earn” a heavenly home - what if we truly believe the words of Paul that the “transcendent power” – and power to take our sin from us – belongs to God and not to us? What if we really believe the words of the writer of Genesis that we are all created in God’s image? What if we truly believe the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. that “all have something within them that God injected. And we must never forget this.....: there are no gradations in the image of God. What if we really believe the words of Jesus that he has gone “to prepare a place for us”?

Then, this Lent, instead of believing that we are failures because we cannot do all that “stuff” that we have somehow convinced ourselves we must do – or not do – instead of trying to blaze our own path to some sort of perfection and achieve some sort of transformation all on our own - let's train our ears and our eyes to the presence of God in our midst and receive God’s transcendent power. We don't have to create a perfect world or lead a perfect life or live a perfect faith to experience the presence and power of God.

We are God’s treasure – and within us is the “treasure” of our love and compassion which we “have” to give.

Let’s pray. Holy God, your light shines on us and your power transforms us. Your call guides us through all the mountaintops and valleys of our daily lives. Help us to trust in you to lead us – at last – to our eternal home with you. Amen.