

“Living water: a revival of the Poor People’s Campaign”
Auburn First Church of God in Christ
43rd Annual Citywide Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration
January 14, 2018

John 4:4-30, 39-42

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

When I was invited by the Honorable Bishop Murray and the Rev. Dr. King Committee to speak before you today, I was humbled. Honored. Excited... And conflicted. White allies for justice have a tendency to occupy spaces that don’t belong to us. We assert ourselves as leaders and end up perpetuating the very privilege we’re trying to undermine. It’s your voice—the voice of a people still dreaming, still marching, still fighting—the voices of people of color, of women, that need to be heard. Not another white man’s. Your experiences are the fuel for this movement. And if I’m standing up here and talking, those experiences are shut out, and this just becomes another white space.

I accepted the invitation, though, because I believe that the preaching endeavor isn’t about talking. It’s about listening. Listening for the breath of the Spirit among us. For the Word of God that comes down through history and her-story and the people of this community. For hundreds of years of slavery, Jim Crow, mass imprisonment, redlining, rape, and hate. For even more years of a people standing up—in poetry, song, philosophy, religion, activism, and womanism.

I have endeavored to listen. And I want to share with you what I’ve heard.

I heard a story about divided people who came together 2,000 years ago in the sandy hills of Palestine.

A line, a scar, ran across that land, separating Judea from Samaria, the “chosen people” from the “rejected people”. Two groups of people ideologically and ethnically opposed. Segregated. They drank from separate fountains, went to different schools, worshiped on different mountains. For hundreds of years, the Judeans hated the Samaritans, hated them for their racial mixture and religious syncretism.

Then, one day, a man—whom some reputed to be the Messiah—crossed that line. A poor man, a day laborer, a Jew from Nazareth, about my age. He sat down at a well, at midday, tired and thirsty. He had no bucket to draw water, so he asked a woman to give him a drink.

He asked a Samaritan woman, who was there at that well, alone. Maybe she was divorced or widowed. If so, she had no economic power of her own. Or perhaps her five husbands refer to the five nations who conquered and settled Samaria (see 2 Kings 17:24). Either way, she was a woman whose body, history, and people had been colonized.

She was the kind of person others helped as an object of charity and pity. And yet Jesus wanted *her* help. And when she registered her shock, Jesus—her supposed enemy—did something even

more surprising. He talked to her as an equal. They talked about faith and theology, about the future of their two peoples. They talked vulnerably as two people who needed each other.

It wasn't easy. Trust had to be earned. Over and over again, the conversation threatened to veer into racist claims and sectarianism.

But Jesus just kept talking about that water. The kind of water that life—I mean, real living—isn't possible without. The kind of water when you drink it, you're never thirsty again. The kind of water that gushes up inside of you, springing hope. The kind of water that, when you drink it, you know you're somebody because you're loved and protected by the only Body that matters.

And oh, she wanted this water. She was tired of dreams deferred, weary of the prison bars of poverty and stigma.

To this woman, for the first time in the Gospel of John, Jesus spoke the divine name, the name uttered to Moses in Egypt, the name that cried for a people's freedom, the great I AM.

And when she heard this name, she dropped her jar and left it behind, and with it, all the shame, invisibility, and rejection that made it so heavy. She left that water jar and ran back to the city, where she told her people to come and see the Messiah.

For two days, Jewish and Samaritan disciples ate, worshiped, learned, and worked together.

Rome may still have been in power, but the people they sought to rule had changed. Two peoples long divided—one clearly with more power than the other, but both marginalized, both with less power than Rome—were now working together, inaugurating a moral revolution, in pursuit of living water.

And it all started with a woman who persisted—with two people with seemingly nothing in common, talking and drinking together, seeing one another, as real people.

If I listen closely, I can still hear her calling her people. I can still hear the slosh of the sand as Jesus' foot crosses that line, that scar, between two peoples, and plants his foot into holy ground.

I hear it in December of 1967, when the Rev. Dr. King stands up and announces a new march on Washington. A march that would unite two opposed groups: poor people of color, who, like the Samaritans, were systemically colonized and marginalized; and poor whites, who, like the Jews, had power because of their racial privilege but still were oppressed and suffering. Together, as poor peoples, they would seek out living water. The living water of hope and that kingdom which allows no child to go hungry or hated, no person to be rendered inferior, no man or woman to be without a future of their own.

It would be a Poor People's Campaign, similar to King's work with the poor and black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. It would draw on experiences in Chicago, where a \$4 million renovation project converted crumbling buildings into homes, no longer rented but owned by the tenants—and where Operation Breadbasket created 2,200 new jobs, brought millions of dollars

of new income into the African American community, and created African-American-operated banks to raise assets and increase loan opportunities. But this time, King set his sights higher.

Together, black and white, Latinx, Asians and First Peoples, farmers and factory workers, would demand better jobs, better housing, better education, better healthcare. They would call for an Economic Bill of Rights, guaranteeing a \$30 billion annual appropriation for a real war on poverty, a Congressional commitment to full employment and an annual wage, and the construction of 500,000 low-cost housing units per year until all slums were eliminated.

It was to be a moral revival, a fight for the soul of America.

It was to strike at the heart of our division and reveal the lie: that poor whites are poor because of immigrants, or black people, or women. It would reveal the truth: they are poor because Rome wants them poor. Because the wealthy and the powerful want to keep them there. Because policies have been made to keep them there.

The dream was a multi-racial “nonviolent army of the poor, a freedom church of the poor.”

They would stream in from all parts of the country, converge on Washington, and with permits, occupy the National Mall with a shantytown called Resurrection City. Nonviolent civil disobedience would then compel the attention of the nation. Finally, they would launch a nationwide boycott to pressure Congress.

Rev. Dr King, in the last sermon he ever preached, said, “We read one day: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But if a man doesn’t have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists... We are coming to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that it signed years ago. And we are coming to engage in dramatic non-violent action, to call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment; to make the invisible visible.”

Five days later, Rev. Dr. King was assassinated. The campaign continued, with 3,000 people occupying Resurrection City, and 50,000 more joining a Solidarity Day Rally for Jobs, Peace, and Freedom. Through rain and mud, the poor of the nation gathered and heard the Rev. Jesse Jackson say, “I am. Somebody. I am. God’s child. I may not have a job, but I am somebody.”

But with King’s death, and the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy, the work crumbled.

Today, tens of thousands of people across the country are choosing to cross that line, that scar, again. They are picking up where Rev. Dr. King left off. At the helm of this movement is, among others, the Rev. William Barber, formerly head of the North Carolina NAACP and the visionary behind the Moral Monday movement. The goal is to unite and mobilize as poor people, across racial and geographic lines, in acts of social change.

We are people ready to drop the cracked and heavy jars we each carry. We want to leave behind a nation that once deemed the enslaved African only 60 percent of a person and still today only affords the median black household 60 percent of the income of white households. We want to leave behind the poverty and low-income status that have captured 95 million Americans and 30 million children, the largest group of which are white.

Today, roughly a third of Americans are just a couple paychecks away from poverty.

I see these families every week. They walk into the church in need of help. They are men and women who have lost sons and daughters to hunger and lack of healthcare, to prisons and addiction, to stillbirth and the miscarriage of justice, to violence and despair, and to the thirst for dignity that the world refuses to quench.

They are our neighbors. They are us. White, black, Latinx. Our fates are bound together.

And I hear, among them, a people dreaming. I hear talk at the board meetings of the NAACP, among members of the Rev. Dr. King Committee, and at gatherings of Auburn clergy—talk of taking what we do tonight and expanding it, so that we gather as a community, not just one night of the year, but many times, to worship and sing and eat together, and then serve and advocate for our community.

It won't be easy, in this polarized time, to come together. We will begin where Jesus started with the Samaritan woman. He began with something very basic, something everyone needs: water.

It will not be a commitment to justice or the common good that brings everyone to the table. We will come together, at first, out of shared self-interest. We will come to survive. We will come for our children. We will come with biases and ignorance and suspicion. But I believe that some grace will work among us, and as we work together, we will come to know each other's common humanity.

People who don't know each other don't care about each other, so they don't stand up for each other. If people worship together, if they break bread together and get to know each other as people, with a shared fate, then they'll advocate for each other.

Last year, I stood from the pulpit of Westminster Church and looked out at this same celebration. And what I saw was the world as it's supposed to be. People of different races, denominations, politics, and economic strata gathered together for a common purpose. And I saw us taking a step, crossing over that great scar, into holy ground, into living water. We were singing, because we were not afraid. **Amen.**