

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 September 3, 2017; Matthew 16: 21-28; Romans 12:9-21
 Proper 17A, "You are Somebody!"
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When I was growing up the Associate Minister at my home church in Farmington said something I'll never forget, and what I hope has informed my way of living – remember who you are and whose you are. I guess at the time I didn't really understand what he was saying to all of us teenagers, but it does make sense now. In the context of Paul's letter to the Romans – it has been reinforced this morning again – for this passage is an instruction manual on who we are as Christians – how we are to act, how we are to treat each other, how we are to live, how we are to love.

These instructions are not "should" or "oughts" but they come from this simple statement: because you're who you are, this is the way you are to act. Paul is telling his audience including us – do not be conformed to this world because you are in a new world. Serve God because you have been served by God. Practice hospitality because God has been hospitable to you. Bless those who persecute you because Jesus has blessed you, even when you crucified him.

If we call ourselves Christian, it's really pretty simple: we deal with others as God has dealt with us: that basic commandment: do unto others as God has done for you and then, do unto others as you would have done unto you. We remember who we are and whose we are! Somebody named and claimed by God! Stop and think about that for a minute....you are somebody! You are a child of God!

This week I had a phone call from someone at the UCC office in New York – she'd seen that I'd applied on behalf of St. Paul's Church for a matching grant to help us with our hurricane relief collections of cash and items for Clean up kits for Church World Service – you have a flyer in your bulletin explaining our efforts to help our brothers and sisters in Texas. Anyway, she wanted a interview, to know why we felt called to help in this way – my immediate response was, because Jesus tells us to. It was quiet at the other end of the phone for a couple seconds – I don't think she expected that answer at all. But that's really the only reason we do what we do, isn't it. Because we are disciples, trying to follow Jesus as best we can. Because we are brothers and sisters in Christ. Because we know whose we are. We had a good conversation after that silence and I'll be interested in what she ends up writing.

Well, we, you and I, are somebody! We're all children of God! We all have something to offer to make this world a better place, to treat each other as valued human beings, to do our part in bringing God's realm on earth as it is in heaven.

Many years ago Jesse Jackson made a campaign stop in Hartford – he was to speak at the Old State House during the noon hour directly across the street from the Bank where I worked. I didn't have much use for him or his politics and didn't think I'd attend this lunchtime rally. But then I decided that since he was here so close I'd wander

over and take advantage of hearing one of the presidential candidates first hand – I thought I’d just listen; I wasn’t about to get caught up in it all. Well, I don’t know if you’ve ever heard Jesse Jackson speak – the better word is preach – but that day he was really quite amazing. And his message of “you are somebody” was exactly what people in this crowd wanted and needed to hear. The passion, the emotion was palpable on that summer day in Hartford and I do confess, I felt it too.

In Christ we are all somebody – and we’re called to act like it.

This past Monday, August 28, was the anniversary of a world changing event - it was 54 years ago that hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Washington DC for the March on Washington. Remember that? It was not without risk to be there making that statement of equality for all – and I thought again about the senior minister of my home church in Farmington who went and almost lost his job over that. There were those who felt he shouldn’t have been there and began a move to dismiss him from our pulpit. It didn’t happen, thank God – but what a lesson for me and other young people to learn about the cost of discipleship, and about responding to God’s call, regardless of what could happen when we act based on who we are.

And it was on August 28, 1963 - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his most famous and memorable speech – the “I have a dream” speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. I remember watching it on television - and as I hear those words, I can’t help but think of Paul’s letter not only to the Romans, but to us as well today, to compare the timeless lessons to us all.

Dr. King says: “So I say to you my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed – we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!”

Then listen to Paul’s words: live in harmony with one another – contribute to the needs of the saints. Extend hospitality to strangers. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that, you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

I need to be reminded of all this – I need to slow down and remember who I am and whose I am.

And I also need to hear Dr. King’s words again: “That one day little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.” Those words still give me goosebumps.

Dr. King goes on: “This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the south with. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into

a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”

And Paul tells us to rejoice in that hope – rejoice in that hope that we as disciples can change the world, in fact are called to change the world! We as disciples are called to contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to the stranger. Like those thousands of people gathered in Washington 54 years ago, we need to be swept up – and not turn our backs on what we value deep inside of us – even, or especially when those values don’t seem to be in the forefront today.

Following Christ can be difficult, at the very least, countercultural. We can all get overwhelmed by the call to discipleship – we turn away or at the very least are tempted to turn away. But Paul encourages us: do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Sometimes the cost is terribly high – I wonder what went through Mr. Lewis’ mind when he decided to go to the march on Washington even when he knew it could cost him his pulpit. What was the vision that kept him on that path?

What’s the vision that kept Dr. King on that path? What’s the vision that keeps you and me on our path? What’s the vision that informs us as church? What gives us the strength to hear and act on Jesus’ call to overcome evil with good and not be overcome by evil.

We are named, and claimed, and called – called to be disciples – that’s why we’re here today – we’re called on this path of discipleship together. But I wonder if you, like me, wonder sometimes if we really can make a difference. The world is so big and we’re so little.

The news can be so grim today – hate-filled speeches we’ve heard lately, frightening rhetoric of nuclear escalation from North Korea and at times from our own government, continued deaths from wars around the world, the terrible flooding devastation in our country and around the world, dire warnings about climate change, political fighting about any number of issues – we get discouraged and maybe we sometimes don’t believe that our voices and actions can make a difference. But they do! And then hope shines brightly as we watch neighbors launch boats to save neighbors in Texas, when we see the outpouring of help to those who need it so badly – we can make a difference.

And, furthermore, if we stop pursuing justice, peace, healing and wholeness for our lives and for our world, we become supporters of that which we oppose.

We can give up and be silent – or we can keep on making noise. We can be tempted to give up – but that’s when we need to remember those who have gone before; that’s when we need to re-read this passage from Paul; that’s when we need to reach out to each other for strength; that’s when we need to ask God to help us be who we are.

Because, discipleship isn’t about you or me – it’s about God. We are to figure out who we are through Jesus and as people carrying the name Christian. Disciples are witnesses, speaking what they see even when they don’t feel anyone is listening, or even harder, when they feel people don’t want to hear it. Disciples are those who hear and respond to the words – if your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

In a couple of weeks we begin a new program year here – and I have a hope that everything we do and everything we are is based on Paul’s instruction: be of those who

are in Christ. Deal with others as God has dealt with you. That our ministry here be one of making disciples, supporting each other on that awesome journey, teaching and modeling for each other what that means – and going forth wherever God has called us to serve. We have all kinds of opportunities to do that as we share in the ministry of this church – serving and being served. And of course, at the core of our life together is worship – coming together to praise God, in prayers of thanksgiving, intercession, and dedication, in hearing the Word, in music, so we might live as disciples; we need the strength and grounding that worship brings us. We need to be reminded that God loves us, and that there is nothing that can separate us from that love. In good and bad, God is with us.

We're here to claim our calling as followers of Jesus and then to live it out – to become the people God wants us to be – a vibrant and loving community – a people who shine with his light and declare with both our words and our lives – all the wonderful things that God has done and will continue to do. I have a dream – don't you? May each of us walk together on that path, never lived outside of God's love. That's the promise. That's the joy. That's how we can rejoice in hope. So may it be. Amen!