

January 17, 2016
Luke 4:14-24
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, Me
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Spirit Filled

INTRO TO SCRIPTURE

Today's scripture reading is Luke's description of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The reading begins: *Jesus is filled with the power of the Spirit.* It's a heads up that something's brewing. The Spirit is on the move. Things will never be the same. There will be great new possibilities, but it will be challenging for those who like the status quo.

Jesus is Spirit filled and Spirit led. When he returns to his home town it is a mixed experience. As we will hear people are amazed by his words while at the same time they find his prophetic claims challenging. It is hard for the people who have known you all along to make room for the person you are becoming. A Spirit filled proclamation can be quite unsettling.

SERMON

Last Sunday in the gathering of confirmation youth and mentors after church, Geoff asked them to outline a worship service for Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend. They rightly asked if we were going to use their suggestions. Needless to say we have...

- The hymns today are ones they suggested.
- The Introit and call to worship are based on Micah 6:8 – do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.
- They suggested a “stretch time” in the sermon – that will be coming in a bit.

On this MLK weekend we are mindful of the intensity of racial conflict that has been part of our national discourse in the past year. Some neighborhoods and cities have roiled with anguish and turmoil at the deaths of black citizens at the hands of police officers, leading to the “Black Lives Matter” movement. We are still very much in a conversation about race in America.

In a recent conversation I had with Clayton Rose, the new president of Bowdoin College, I thanked him for having a town hall meeting on campus concerning race. It was his first real public initiative. The students I have spoken with have expressed how much they appreciated this. Students tell us that there has been a lot of conversation about race on campus this fall, reflecting the national conversation. It is a challenge for students from different backgrounds to find a common forum and language for conversation. As I mentioned last week some students also have experienced racial harassment when they come into downtown Brunswick. This is a conversation that affects us all.

It was in the midst of similar conversations and struggles in 1964 that a student organization on campus invited Martin Luther King Jr to speak. To their surprise he accepted the invitation. As the time drew closer and people began to realize how many people were coming the venue was switched to this sanctuary.

The record says there were 1100 people here, which is hard to grasp since the seating capacity is supposedly 750. But I understand the pews were packed and people were standing everywhere. It was a moving experience for those who were here. It was a challenging experience for some in the congregation who were upset that the speech was allowed to happen here in the sanctuary. If you would like to hear the speech you can go to the Bowdoin College website. They post it each year at this time so you can listen.

In some respects we have come a long way since 1964. One of the most obvious images of that change nationally is an African American president. However, in other ways our racism has moved more underground in our culture and maybe in ourselves.

Although we may not believe they are we are intentionally using racial profiling, the statistics show that we are incarcerating young black men at an alarming rate, and that generally our schools, our neighborhoods, and our churches around the country continue to be racially segregated, in some instances even more so than in the 60s.

How is that we humans pay so much attention to skin color, when it is just a blip on the genetic code? In a recent episode of *Finding your Roots*, actor Ty Burrell of *Modern Family*, learned that he has a great, great, great grandmother who was a slave. He had heard stories but never was sure. There was a day when this news could have ended his acting career.

On another show I saw some time ago I was moved by the experience of a teenage girl, who agreed to learn her genetic heritage profile and discovered that even though she experiences herself as African American and indeed that is part of her heritage, more than 50% of her genetic heritage is European. This new knowledge was clearly a challenge to her self-perception.

How is it that we pay so much attention to skin color? Maybe it is a cultural choice related to our

- tribal character- a perverse extension of our desire to care for our own
- our desire for power – which perversely often becomes power over others.

Yet it is a cultural choice that has become so subliminal that we are sometimes unaware of our own bias.

Our governor has been in the limelight recently for comments that reflect an underlying racial insensitivity. It is inappropriate to imply that “white” and “Maine” are synonymous, no matter what the ratio of diversity in our state. Some of our church families who live with racial diversity in their own homes were deeply offended and one posted that they are grateful for their family’s “mixed up spicy goodness.”

In spite of the fact that much of our church art depicts Jesus as looking like a fair skinned Anglo-Saxon with a long Roman nose, the actual person Jesus of Nazareth would have been an olive-skinned Middle Easterner. Encountering him today could bring us right up against some of our prejudices and preconceptions.

Yet today's passage about Jesus is not about how he looked, it is about how he lived. It says he lived in the Spirit. What does that mean for Jesus? What does it mean for each of us?

So I'm going to stop here for a "seventh inning stretch." As I invite you to stand for a few moments to stretch, I also invite you to take a moment to turn to someone beside you and share an insight or pose a question about what it means to live in the Spirit.

..... (pause for conversation)

One of the things that living in the Spirit means is paying attention to personal and social transformation and how they intertwine.

In the reading from Isaiah, Jesus notes that being Spirit filled means caring for the poor, the blind, the imprisoned, and the oppressed.

People often quote Gandhi as putting it this way,

Be the change you want in the world.

Those words don't exist as an exact quote. They appear to be a conflation of what he did write,

If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him... We need not wait to see what others do.

What we wish for ourselves we must wish for the world. What we wish for the world we must wish for ourselves.

So I leave us with this prayer that is from a book that Susan Fitzgerald gave me many years ago. The book is called *Incarnation* by Irene Zimmerman.

*Our Father Our Mother,
so wholly in heaven,
so on-the-way,
so be-coming
in every him-her-you-me
that ever on earth
was, is, will-be,*

*knead us every this-day
into one bread.*