

“Welcome: The New Jerusalem”

Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated 50 years ago – on April 4, 1968 after he had worked for justice for many years. He “used to tell the story of **Sister Pollard, a seventy-year-old African American woman who lived in Montgomery, Alabama during the now famous bus boycott.** One day, after walking significant distances daily for several months, Sister Pollard was asked if she wanted a ride. When she answered, ‘No,’ the person responded, ‘But aren’t you tired?’ To which Sister Pollard answered, ‘My feet is tired, but my soul is rested.’”

After telling that story, Joel D. Kline wrote, “Resurrection living, moving beyond our fears and trusting that God is fashioning a way out of no way, celebrating the promise that a new world is unfolding - this leads us to affirm as well that our souls are rested. We will continue to face all kinds of challenges and struggles along the way; ‘our feet will be tired,’ but our spirits will be strengthened through the presence of the risen Christ.” Kline concluded, “This is the good news we celebrate this Easter morning: There is no tragedy that God cannot redeem, no dream - even the elusive dream of peace on earth - that the God Who raised Jesus from the dead cannot energize and advance. Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed!”_(Joel D. Kline, Frightened Out of Our Wits)

I would go further to say, **Sister Pollard understood the connection between God’s Demand for Justice and the Death and Resurrection of God’s Son, Jesus Christ.** She endured hardship because of her participation in the boycott and her protesting against injustice but she did so with complete assurance that Jesus Christ and our Divine Parent would bring about the fulfillment of Justice when the Risen Jesus returns to usher in the Fulfilled Kingdom of God.

Sister Pollard tapped into the Prophetic Tradition and Jesus’ teachings, healings, life, death, and resurrection. She clearly understood they are founded on the Divine Parent’s Demand and Promise of Justice, God’s Agape Love for all people, and God’s Invitation into the New Relationship with the Creator through the Almighty’s Radical and Extravagant Forgiveness and Welcome proven through the Death and Resurrection of God’s Only Son.

The Prophetic Tradition frequently points to God’s Demand for and Promise of Justice, to God’s Constant and Self-Giving Love for all people, and to the Promised New Relationship with God, which is given to us through our Divine Parent’s Love. Our Reading from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah illustrates these points. Christians claim the promises to the People of Israel – the Children of God also belong to us. Let’s examine what God spoke through Jeremiah in **verses 3-6,**

*“People of Israel, I have always Loved you,
so I continue to show you My Constant Love.*

Once again I will Rebuild you.

Once again you will take up your tambourines and dance joyfully.

*Once again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria,
and those who plant them will eat what the vineyards produce.*

Yes, the time is coming when sentries will call out on the hills of Ephraim, ‘Let’s go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.’”

The New Relationship we have with God comes from our Divine Parent’s Love and is metaphorically referred to as the New Zion or New Jerusalem. For example, in **Isaiah 65:18 God said, “Be glad and rejoice forever in what I create. The New Jerusalem I make will be full of joy, and her people will be happy.”** Another example is found in the Book of Revelation of the New Testament in **chapter 21, verse 2, “And I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared and ready, like a bride dressed to meet her husband.”**

The connection between the New Jerusalem, the New Relationship with God, and the Death and Resurrection of Jesus is God’s Constant and Self-Giving Love for and Demand of Justice for all people. **On that first Easter morning, when Mary Magdalene and others went to the tomb of Jesus, they were oppressed by grief and the fear the Jewish religious authorities would do to them the same injustices, which had been inflicted on Jesus.** So, it should not be surprising that among the first things taken care of for the women at the tomb was the quelling of their fear and the Good News that Jesus was alive! **In Matthew 28:5-6, “The angel spoke to the women. ‘You must not be afraid,’ he said. ‘I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has been raised, just as he said.’”**

The question of who is helped through Jesus’ Death and Resurrection is one which has been debated by many different people. Those who follow the legalistic path, like the Pharisees, say only certain people are worthy of God’s Love and Forgiveness. For them, God required a sacrifice to enable Jesus to obtain forgiveness for those who are contrite and faithful enough.

On the other hand, the Prophetic Tradition and Jesus declare God already loves everyone. **Jesus came to demonstrate – prove, God Loves everyone so much that we are all already forgiven.** His Death was to prove the depth of God’s Agape Love for us. His Resurrection was to demonstrate God’s Victory over injustice, death, and the oppression of judgmentalism. **It is the ultimate sign of our Divine Parent’s Agape Love for all people and of the Almighty’s Radical and Extravagant Invitation and Welcome into the New Relationship with God.** This invitation is for everyone! Remember, even Peter, who had denied three times even knowing Jesus after his capture, was welcomed back by the Risen Jesus Christ. Further, in those days, the societal structure of things was to put little credence or authority in women, yet Jesus first appeared to the women, who had gone to the tomb and he said to them in **verse 9, “Shalom” or “Peace be with you.”**

Another woman, who fought oppression, Sister Pollard, was committed to Justice and she recognized God's Love for her and all people was proven through the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's Son. She, like Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb of Jesus, believed God's Love for everyone includes sharing the Good News with all people that Jesus and the Divine Parent invite them to live the New Life in Christ and the New Relationship with God and all humanity. Our **God Is Still Speaking** emphasis – our Radical and Extravagant Hospitality through which we welcome all people – no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey – is one expression of Round Grove United Church's commitment to God's Demand for Justice and the Divine Parent's Forgiveness and Invitation for everyone.

As our Feature Song declares, we and, especially, the downtrodden and outcasts are all welcome – loved and forgiven! The song shares:

**“Let's walk together for a while
and ask where we begin
to build a world where love can grow
and hope can enter in.
To be the hands of healing
and to plant the seeds of peace,
singing welcome,
welcome to this place,
you're invited to come
and know God's Grace.
All are welcome,
the love of God to share
'cause all of us are welcome here,
all are welcome in this place.”**

**“Let's talk together of a time
when we will share a feast,
where pride and power kneel to serve
the lonely and the least,
and joy will set the table
as we join our hands to pray,
singing welcome,
welcome to this place,
you're invited to come
and know God's Grace.
All are welcome,
the love of God to share
'cause all of us are welcome here,
all are welcome in this place.”**

**“Let's dream together of the day
when earth and heav'n are one,
a city built of love and light,
the new Jerusalem
where our mourning turns to dancing,
ev'ry creature lifts its voice,
singing welcome,
welcome to this place,
you're invited to come
and know God's Grace.
All are welcome,
the love of God to share
'cause all of us are welcome here,
all are welcome in this place.”**

Who needs to hear this message of welcome? Who needs to know they are welcome as a Child of God, as a part of the Beloved Community, as a part of the answer to death, destruction, prejudice, violence and oppression? **Easter People, Messengers of Hope, who needs to hear us sing?** Let's join in singing the refrain of the Feature Song, *“Welcome”*. Amen.