Monday we celebrated the life of Martin Luther King. I know this church has a long history of active involvement commemorating him, striving to carry on his legacy. Each year amid celebrations and more somber remembrances, I think back to the course I took in divinity school on the ethical and religious thought of Dr. King. In addition to the classic sermons and speeches, we read oft overlooked ones. The texts that tied militarism, capitalism and racism together. Speeches decrying the Vietnam War. Talks that revealed Dr. King's growing weariness, even despondency. He may have glimpsed the Promised Land from afar but few of his countrymen and -women had the vision necessary to imagine it into being.

Last August, I had the great privilege of preaching at St. James Episcopal Church in Keene for Jonathan Daniels' Feast Day. Like James Reeb, the Unitarian minister martyred in Alabama after heeding Dr. King's call for help from northern allies, Jonathan Daniels left the same Episcopal seminary Frank attended to join Civil Rights workers in Selma. After marching to Montgomery, he spent the spring semester of 1965 working to integrate the local Episcopal Church and returned to New England only to write his divinity school exams. He could have stayed home that summer but he didn't. He went back to Alabama to tutor children, register voters, help people get services. Along with twenty-eight others picketing whites-only stores, he spent a week in jail, refusing release until everyone who had been arrested got bailed out. After the group got released, Jonathan and three others went to fetch cold drinks from Varner's Cash Store. When a white man with a shotgun threatened them, Jonathan placed himself between Ruby Sales and the barrel of Tom Coleman's shotgun. At twenty-six, Jonathan Daniels became a martyr for Civil Rights, and an exemplar of courage.

Jonathan Daniels traversed the rockiest of roads proverbially barefoot. Clearly, he understood what God meant when God directed Moses to remove his sandals because the ground beneath his feet was holy. Jonathan Daniels removed every barrier between himself and danger, between the illusion of justice for some and the injustice that infected all. Daniels experienced firsthand a battle of terror waged by state and local police against its own citizens, African American men and women whose taxes paid the salaries of sheriffs and deputies who tormented and arrested them.

Earlier this month, I saw "12 Years A Slave." Some of you may have seen it as well. We shudder to imagine how ordinary humans were capable of enslaving—brutalizing, exploiting, murdering— their fellow humans for generations. Witnessing dignified African men and women stripped, on display as if they were cuts of meat at the butcher shop sickens us. Watching an enslaved man forced to flay an enslaved woman unhinges us, leaves us weeping in our cushioned theatre seats. In Lee Daniels' film, "The Butler," the archival footage of freedom riders unprotected by police as their bus was blown apart, and scenes of police knocking unarmed peaceful people to the ground with fire hoses and batons provides the same inescapable evidence: domestic terrorism began on North American soil with the arrival of so-called explorers who colonized indigenous people and then brought Africans here as slaves. That the terrorism unleashed on African Americans has extended into our lifetime remains an inescapable blight on our nation and ourselves.

I grew up in Nashville during the era of the struggle for Civil Rights. My friend's father performed the autopsy on Martin Luther King. My sister was born three days after his

assassination, as the city lay under curfew for fear the mortal wounding of a people might implode.

I have long pondered what seeps into human consciousness or shuts it down so as to allow one set of humans to believe themselves not only dominant but exclusively human. What must happen for the plantation owner to become a slaver? Out beyond the fields of cotton, in the killing fields of Cambodia or the genocidal terrain of Rwanda, where child soldiers play football with a baby's head, it appears as though some inexplicable evil creeps into the heart of humanity; but sadly, and horrifyingly, our yearning to paint the world with brushstrokes of good or evil reveals a pentimento of something else. Underneath the layers of theological dualism: good and evil, the Godly and the heathen, the pre-ordained and the damned, us and them, the inextricably interwoven nature of life discloses itself. King wrote, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

In a similar vein, Alice Walker began one of her novels with this epigraph: "When the ax entered the forest, the trees said, 'The handle is one of us.'" Margaret Mead wrote, "We make our own criminals, and their crimes are congruent with the national culture we all share. It has been said that people get the kind of political leadership they deserve. I think they also get the kind of crime and criminals they themselves bring into being."

What is it about our culture that compels us to hew ax handles from trees? It is all too easy to curse the slaveholders, the bigots and despots who wield weapons—separating ourselves from those who perpetrate great harm. As tempting as it is to divide the world into the heroically brave ilk of Martin Luther King and the countless African Americans who risked their lives for freedom who we hear far less about than James Reeb and Jonathan Daniels, and those can't muster their courage or evince their faith, let us not succumb to temptation. Instead, let us summon the will to acknowledge our complicity, the seemingly small, often unnoticeable accretions that create the national culture and global paradigm we inhabit.

Let us face the harsh, discomfiting, unsettling truths that our consumption, mobility, and deepening spiritual disconnection from the ground of being that sustains us—contribute to violence, injustice, and desecration of planetary proportion. According to *The Washington Post,* of the almost thirty million people enslaved worldwide today, sixty thousand reside in the United States. While the West African nation of "Mauritania has tried to outlaw slavery three times it remains so common that one out of twenty-five are enslaved there." In one hundred and sixty-two countries people live "as forced laborers, forced prostitutes, child soldiers, child brides in forced marriages and, in all ways that matter, as pieces of property, chattel in the servitude of absolute ownership."[1] In the U.S., the most common forms of slavery involve those caught in sex trafficking and "illegal migrant laborers who are lured with the promise of work and then manipulated into forced servitude, living without wages or freedom of movement, under constant threat of being turned over to the police should they let up in their work." [2]

[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/10/17/this-map-shows-where-the-worlds-30-million-slaves-live-there-are-60000-in-the-u-s/
[2] *ibid*

And though we are able to correlate modern slavery of humans with the historical slavery that repulses us, we tend not to connect the ubiquitous exploitation of animals despite all the new scientific research documenting the complexity of emotion, cognition and relationship among our sister beings. Be it the orca, octopus, or orangutan, sharks, dolphins, whales, elephants, or closer to home, cows, pigs, and sheep, we ignore the findings in print and deep moral truths buried within us. Most if not all of us here can attest to the feeling of gazing into our dog's eyes, or the way our cat intuitively leaps into our lap when we are crying. We've witnessed mother animals protecting their young but also delighting in them. We've seen the television documentaries on grieving elephants and signing apes. We may have even read Barbara Kingsolver's account of the bear nursing a lost toddler in a cave in Iran.

When we recall the cattle cars crammed with Jews during World War II do we stop to realize cattle cars existed because cows preceded Jews as chattel? When I first read Will Tuttle's book, *World Peace Diet*, I found his analogy of Nazi Germany to the industrial food complex hyperbolic but watching scenes in a documentary of tens of thousands of live birds dropped in dumpster and gassed, after a tornado damaged the buildings where the birds were kept, the comparison felt chillingly apt.

Just as slaveholders surrendered their humanity every time they denied the humanity of the people they enslaved, we diminish our connection with the ground of being whenever we erect the construct of *us* and *them.* Whether *they* are animals we call livestock or people we consider expendable, the comfort of our lives belie the harsh reality of someone else's.

And though I prefer to distance myself, when I read Annie Leonard's book, *The Story of Stuff: The Impact of Overconsumption on the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health-And How We Can Make It Better*, I cringe because the way I live is so entrenched. Consider how we have collectively created a reality in North America not just normalizing but exalting a way of life where we literally dump waste into the world's most precious, and increasingly scarce element, fresh water—and use the flesh of trees, with their amazing capacity "to make oxygen, sequester carbon, distill water, accrue solar energy as fuel, make complex sugars and food, create micro-climates, change colors with the season and self replicate"[3] to wipe up our spills and our tushes. Imagine explaining to a sub-Saharan woman who walks six hours round trip for a jug of water that we use that to flush our toilet—once.

Who questions golf courses? Paper towels? Plastic water bottles? Aluminum drink cans? PVC pipe? Colorful cheap cotton clothes? Electric toothbrushes? New iterations of smart phones and tablets every year? None of these serve the planet but to us these are inalienable conveniences—part of life as we know it. As God and ingenuity intend, right?

We don't feature ourselves bullies or bigots like Tom Coleman who shot Jonathan Daniels or Sherriff Bull Connor who unleashed firehoses, dogs, and a rain of batons on the soft bodies of African Americans in Alabama. But we don't like folks messing with our way of life. Sure, we might buy a Prius but don't ration our fuel. Don't discuss how offshore drilling, the laying of ocean floor cable, undersea military maneuvers and the massive increase in commercial

[3] http://www.ted.com/talks/william_mcdonough_on_cradle_to_cradle_design.html

shipping are disrupting mammalian marine life to point of potential extinction. Don't mention the five to seven million tons of electronics made obsolete each year or the environmental impact wrought by a single tee shirt. Chances are good a child in Uzbekistan picked the cotton for it instead of attending school. The young woman hunched over a sewing machine in China, Malaysia or Bangladesh who stitched the fabric for pennies so that we could walk into Target or Walmart and buy three tees for twenty sees no compassion in our eyes.

It's wretched to watch the footage of flayed slaves, gassed children, crushed garment workers yet acknowledging our culpability, complicity and collusion is the first step in that march Martin Luther King called on us to join fifty years ago. We need not leave our families or communities behind as Jonathan Daniels and James Reeb did. If we dare to stay home and realize how our choices— economic, social, political, and ethical— fashion ax handles, if we consider the clothes, the electronic devices, the jewelry we buy, the fossil fuels we consume, the mono-culture crops and factory feed lots we rely on, the disposability of products, people, fellow creatures we so readily accept, perhaps we can avert irrevocable havoc on a planet we did not make but may well destroy.

Sitting in the movie theatre, tense against the impending violence sure to erupt in every scene, I longed for the film, "12 Years A Slave" to end, all the while thinking it would last a couple of hours while the slavery it depicted lasted for centuries, and its aftermath continues still. For those who still live in the shadow of Jim Crow, in a jail cell, a Florida suburb or a New York street, the movie never ends. There are backs that bear the scars and palms that bear the imprint of a handle—the lash connects us all—even those of us consigned to watch.

If we are to do more than simply commemorate Dr. King's legacy, we must leave the comfort of our cushioned seats—whether we travel to places teeming with the harsh effects of our chosen lifestyle, or wrestle at home with the inconvenient truths of unsustainability. Our task is to be as brave as the trees declaring as the ax enters the forest, "The handle is one of us." Amen.