

“Dangerous Spirituality”
Micah 6:6-8; Amos 5:21-24
January 23, 2022
First Presbyterian Church

Intro to the Readings

Well, the pandemic continues to keep your pastors on their toes. Thursday morning, Heather texted to say she would be in quarantine through tomorrow... which meant that since she was scheduled to preach today, we had to look to the bench for a substitute. I'm not accustomed to starting a sermon on Thursday... and since I am retiring in a few months, I can be completely honest and confess that I turned to what we preachers call our “barrel” for a “previously preached” sermon that I might adapt for today. (Like a “pre-owned vehicle,” I searched for a “pre-preached” sermon.) As you may know, the high infection numbers and last Sunday’s winter weather caused the cancellation or postponement of most celebrations Dr. M L King’s birthday in our community. It also caused us to miss a special anthem that Kiki and choral scholar, Dakota Duncan, had planned for last week. So, I believe the Spirit led me to a sermon I preached the Sunday before the holiday almost fifteen years ago to my congregation in Iowa. I have adapted that sermon and very much look forward to Dakota sharing the song after the sermon.

Two Scripture passages that shaped Dr. King’s life’s work.

Micah 6:6-8

⁶“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Amos 5:21-24

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Sermon

Most of you know that I grew up in Atlanta, GA. in the age of the civil rights movement. I was born in 1955, the year the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott catapulted Dr. King to national prominence. I was eight in 1963, the year of the Birmingham, Alabama campaign and the horrific bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, which resulted in the deaths of four little girls who were simply waiting for Sunday school to begin.

I was nine when Dr. King became the youngest person ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. And I was thirteen, when in Memphis, Tennessee to support black garbage workers, he was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. I would like to be able to tell you that I have vivid memories of these events and that the Malone dinner table was a place where African Americans were regular guests or at least a place where the events of the day were discussed. I would like to be able to tell you that my pastors and the members of the Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church were involved in the struggle to end racial discrimination in Atlanta and the South. I would like to tell you that, but I cannot. Though I remember some talk of rioting in downtown Atlanta, we lived in the suburbs. I do remember that whites and blacks lived very separate lives... but I do not remember segregated bathrooms or lunch counters or water fountains... I had no understanding of red-lining neighborhoods or employment discrimination. Though Dr. King and I both grew up Baptist in Atlanta, I have no childhood memory of ever being on Sweet Auburn Ave or knowing anything about the Ebenezer Baptist Church where King and his father were pastors. And I don't remember ever hearing anything about civil rights from the pastors and deacons of the Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church. My hunch is that some of them might have been sympathetic to the movement... but I imagine they would have been like those eight white pastors King wrote to in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"... folks who agreed that racial injustice was real and wrong, but who thought these issues should be addressed more slowly and in a more civilized manner in the courts rather than in the streets.

So, it's not that my parents were bad people – they were actually very good people... compassionate and willing to serve those in need, regardless of skin color. Neither were the people of my church bad people; they weren't. They were just people of their time and place – white, suburban, Baptists, from the Deep South – who may have sympathized with the plight of those less fortunate but were just not the type to join the struggle to end racial discrimination. And in this sense the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. In many ways, I am much like my parents, much more a pastor and priest than a prophet. Well, enough about me. Let's turn to Dr. King.

Of course, there are many aspects of Dr. King's work that we remember. **There is his oratory giftedness.** Though he was a theologian and a movement strategist, King was first and foremost a preacher of the Word of God. He used human words in very creative ways to confront, to encourage, to persuade, to give hope and vision.

There is also his unwavering commitment to non-violence and civil disobedience. In the way of Jesus, King answered to a higher law and believed that whenever human law came into conflict with divine law, the faithful action was to disobey the unjust human law. He once said: "An individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law." And when Dr. King did that... when he deliberately disobeyed what he considered to be unjust human laws... he provoked violence from others, but never responded with violence himself.

But the aspect of his work that I want to lift up this morning... an aspect that stretches both me and this congregation... is that his faith was a public faith.

Though nurtured in private prayer and devotion, his was a public faith that led him out into the world. Vincent Harding writes that from the beginning of the movement, King's spirituality came right out of the Gospel of Luke: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." And what is the spirit upon me for? So, I can jump and scream and shout and sing? Yes, maybe that. But right then, in Montgomery, Alabama, King was given a different answer. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me" so that I can go and stand with the poor, with the messed up, with the beaten up, with the downtrodden.¹ That was Martin King's spirituality... and that's what led him to say again and again that life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?' For Dr. King, a public faith will inevitably have political implications... and the movement he led clearly had political ends. You may have heard his response to those who complained that changing the laws was never enough. He is quoted as saying: "It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important." Yet, even as he pursued political ends, he never spoke simply as a politician. Always he was the prophet and the preacher who could see God's hand at work in human history and who gave voice to God's demands upon human life.² He was particularly pointed in his word to his Christian brothers and sisters in the church... especially those who were content to remain silent. "The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people, but the silence over that by the good people. We will remember not the words of our enemies," he said, "but the silence of our friends." And to the church community, he also reminded us that we are neither the master nor the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. The church must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.

It was this moral and spiritual authority... this "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" kind of authority that gave King his untiring confidence that the injustice of racial discrimination would finally end. "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love WILL HAVE the final word in reality," he said. "The arc of the moral universe is long," he said, "but it bends toward justice." "This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant." And it was this moral and spiritual authority that he worked so hard to nurture and protect by taking the high road of love and nonviolence. In his very first public statement as leader of the Montgomery bus boycott, he said, "We must keep God in the forefront. Let us be Christian in all of our action. We must not hate our white opponents, but always be guided by Christian love while seeking justice... Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. I have decided to stick with love," he said. "Hate is too great a burden to bear." Rev. Woodie White is a now-retired United Methodist bishop who has been writing a "birthday letter to Martin" every January since 1976.³

¹ Vincent Harding in "Dangerous Spirituality," *Sojourners*, January-February 1999.

³ Bishop Woodie W. White's annual birthday letter to Martin Luther King, Jr. 2007http://www.gbod.org/worship/default.asp?act=reader&item_id=6497&loc_id=733,1151,54

He said he writes these letters that he knows will never be answered, to update King on how our nation is accomplishing and not accomplishing his dream. He does it to affirm the progress and to not get discouraged by the setbacks... and he says that as a nation, we are light-years ahead of where we were in King's day. But he also writes this letter to remind himself that there is still so much work to do. Some of that work is clearly political... you cannot follow the news and not know that. And yet, some if that work is personal... and that's where I want to end this morning. Allow me to read to you from Bishop White's letter dated January of 2007. Bishop White wrote to Martin:

*We seem to be at a curious juncture in America
in the area of race.
On the one hand, systemic and institutional racism
are giving way to a more racially inclusive society.
On the other, individual daily acts of prejudice and racism
can still be encountered routinely.
White America, I believe,
does not fully appreciate
that black Americans live with the uncertainty
of where and when these acts will occur.
They could show up in the actions or comments
of a waitress, taxi driver, supervisor, co-worker,
clerk or even a "friend." And they most often do!*

I've had the privilege of being a part of racial reconciliation conversation groups in three cities where I have served. Inspired by the awareness that the only way things are going to really change is if we actually talk to one another and really know one another, these groups have taught me many things, yet one thing especially. It is that what Bishop White says is still true:

*... individual daily acts of prejudice and racism
can still be encountered routinely.*

Friends, you and I don't even see these acts of prejudice and racism... and because of that, we should never assume they don't happen just because they don't happen to us. What my African American pastor friends ... men and women who are well-educated and religious leaders in their communities... and who look just like you and me except for their skin have opened my eyes to these individual acts of prejudice that occur on the street, trying to rent an apartment, buying groceries at the local store. People of color are treated differently in Louisville and in Ames and in Hickory.

Then Bishop White continues:

*Martin, I have arrived at the sobering conclusion
that individual acts of prejudice and racism
will have to be confronted for a long time.
They seem endemic to the human psyche
and they can run deep.
They do not automatically disappear with succeeding generations.*

*Indeed, I have sadly noted that some grandchildren
are more prejudiced than their grandparents!
The issues of racism and prejudice must be addressed
in every generation.*

*Then he speaks to the church:
But changing policies and procedures to create a new order
is not the same as changing the persons
who must implement them.*

*I have long held that saying nothing about race
does not assure a positive climate.*

*On the contrary, the church, schools
and other character-forming institutions
must be pro-actively positive
in fostering favorable racial attitudes,
images and experiences.⁴*

Friends, Bishop White gives us our marching orders:
Character forming institutions (such as the church)
must be pro-actively positive
in fostering favorable racial attitudes, images,
and experiences.

Well, the purpose of celebrating Dr. King's life should never be only about praising a great man. Charles Willie, one of Dr. King's classmates at Morehouse College, said, "By idolizing those whom we honor, we do a disservice both to them and to ourselves. By exalting the accomplishments of Martin Luther King, Jr. into a legendary tale that is annually told, we fail to recognize his humanity – his personal and public struggles – struggles that are similar to yours and mine. But even more, by idolizing those whom we honor, we fail to realize that we could go and do likewise."⁵ I'm sure that Dr. King himself would not want us to dwell on his accomplishments. Instead, this Baptist preacher would invite us to turn our attention from the messenger to the message... and to invite the God whom he served to work as redemptively and powerfully in our own lives as he did in his. "Take the first step in faith," King said. "You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."

⁴ Bishop Woodie White, again.

⁵ David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 625)