

If You're Out There

A Sermon Celebrating The Life and Ministry of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sunday, January 17, 2009

Scripture Readings:

[Isaiah 58.1-11](#)

[Luke 4.13-19](#)

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at First United Methodist Church
Portland, Oregon

I had planned this morning to begin with a series of jokes. I'm not talking your regular run of the mill jokes. I'm talking knock down fall off the pew funny jokes. These jokes would have been non-stop hilarity and any joke Dr. Luchs told in the future would simply pale in comparison but the service is already running long so I'll forgo with those.

Let me say, however, that I know I bring prayers today from the people of the United Church of Christ to the people of the United Methodist Church over [the loss of The Rev. Sam Dixon](#) and other mission personnel in the earthquake in Haiti.

And while I am happy to be back in this church and to see so many people who are such good friends I would be remiss not to point out that someone is missing: [Dr. Bill Connor](#). Dr. Connor exemplified the spirit of Martin Luther King. We thank God for the promise of eternal life knowing that Bill's spirit is still with us and with God today.

This morning – in the midst of all the world's difficulties – it is right that we pause to remember the life and ministry of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

It has only been a generation since this martyr for Christ was gunned down in Memphis but in that short time there has been remarkable progress in America in regards to race relations. Before Christmas I went to a holiday reception at the White House – a building that symbolizes our democracy but that was built by black slaves – and told our nation's first African-American president and our first African-American First Lady that I prayed for them.

Rev. King, with the eyes of a prophet, looked at the world as it was but envisioned the Kingdom of Peace that God so wanted it to be. And we are a little bit closer to

that Kingdom today because of his ministry and the ministry of so many others that walked alongside him.

But it was a long march from the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 to the inaugural parade of Barack Obama in 2009. Some of us, me included, were not yet born when Rev. King preached his final sermon in 1968 and it is difficult to look back on the period of segregation and to fully comprehend the evil it represented.

It was a time when blacks could not eat alongside whites at restaurants, that colleges and high schools were segregated and that blacks received inferior education and that African-Americans in many communities were denied access to hospitals and even the right to vote.

Do you remember how the prophet Isaiah envisioned what the Kingdom of God would look like? He said that it would be a place where:

6The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
7The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
8The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
9They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah was saying that the Kingdom of God was a place where all creation would live in divine harmony.

Slavery has been called America's "original sin" and despite our lofty ideals and the highest aspirations of our leaders we founded not a new Eden but a nation built on the backs of slaves and on land that was stolen in the midst of genocide of the native peoples of the continent. Divine harmony has not been the history of the world or our country.

Rev. King helped us to see that. Like Lincoln, he appealed to the "better angel's of our nature" and envisioned for us anew what it meant to be a Kingdom people.

When he accepted the [Noble Peace Prize](#) in 1964 he said:

I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear

destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. I believe that even amid today's mortar bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men. I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down men other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive good will proclaim the rule of the land. "And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid." I still believe that We Shall overcome!

So we can look back on the past generation and say that progress has been made. And it is right, as I said at the beginning of this sermon, to pause and remember Rev. King, his legacy and the legacy left to us by all who marched, and suffered, and even died in America's Great Civil Rights Movement. And I know that some of you here today were part of that movement.

I wish, I wish, that I could stand at this pulpit today and tell you that the work of building the Kingdom has been accomplished and that all that was left to do is to celebrate.

But we are a Christian people and so we must reflect further on the state of world and bring forth into the light the teachings of Jesus for the times in which we now live.

We heard in the reading from the Gospel of Luke that in Jesus' inaugural sermon he reached back to the words of the Prophet Isaiah and said:

18'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
19to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

That same Spirit of the Lord is upon us, as well. We are called forth to use whatever gifts we have to address the injustices of the world just as Isaiah, Jesus and Martin Luther King did. If we are going to claim the name "Christian" it has to mean more

than just attending church on Sunday mornings. Christianity isn't just a way of life, it is a movement to change the foundations of human existence so that all of creation is lifted up and bound together in what Rev. King often called the "Beloved Community."

If I had bothered using the lectionary texts for this Sunday you would have heard these words from 1 Corinthians, Chapter 12:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

I believe in Luther's "priesthood of all believes." All of us are called to ministry and we are equipped with different gifts, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians, to live out that ministry. You have to discern for yourself within this community what your gifts are and then apply them because our world is truly in peril and God is calling us now, in the word's that Micah spoke, to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.

Jesus was not a patient man, you know. Perhaps it was because the Spirit burned so brightly within him. Perhaps he saw the oppression and suffering of his day and his heart broke with agony. Maybe he recognized the anger his words provoked from the powerful and knew his days on earth would be short. People cautioned patience, I'm sure, but he continued to preach and to build a movement that in time would shake the foundations of the earth and that even today guides many across our globe.

Dr. King was also not a patient man. He saw injustice and he tried to end it. He said patience was the enemy of justice.

We all remember his famous "[Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#)" but with the passage of time do we remember why he wrote it or what it said? The letter defended the use of non-violence resistance to create "constructive" tension in society that would ultimately lead to progress. And it was written in response to white ministers in Birmingham – those that would have been called liberals or moderates – who urged Rev. King and the civil rights movement to be patient....to wait for change to come.

He responded:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate.... who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season."

And he went on to say:

More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.

Do we not now face the same rhetoric from those who are either uneasy about change or who in some way profit from the status quo?

After nearly a century of debate about the moral obligation our society has to provide health care for the sick we still hear voices loudly saying "Wait!"

Even as progress has been made in the struggle for equality for gays and lesbians there are those who when confronted with the question of marriage equality say "Wait!"

As the polar caps melt, as genocide rages in Dafur, as wars rage across the globe, as the Dalit people of India struggle for economic equality and religious freedom, there are still voices, many in the Christian church, who still argue that the fight for justice is "unwise and untimely." Wait, they say.

Our response to the Gospel must be like Rev. King's. When people argue for patience we must argue that "the fierce urgency of now" argues that "the time is always ripe to do right."

And if in this moment of history you are waiting for a great prophet from God to arise and led us from darkness to light remember that God is calling us all to this struggle. We are the inheritors of the dream and whether we like it or not, whether it is

convenient or not, whether we are ready or not, for the future of our children and their children and their children, for the future of creation itself, we must loudly answer God's call by saying: Here I am, Lord.

So go out after this service and live out your faith by becoming a volunteer at the Goose Hollow Family Shelter. Work for police accountability so that no more people die in Portland the way James Chasse did. Fight against racism that still lives in our nation. Join the effort being led by Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon to provide support for the 18,000 homeless children in Oregon's public schools. Sign up with Basic Rights Oregon and fight for marriage equality. If you can, get on a plane and go to Haiti and help with the relief efforts. If you can't, give money.

I had dinner with The Rev. Jesse Jackson a few years back and he told me that Rev. King always worked on his birthday. So Celebrate the Martin Luther King holiday tomorrow by canvassing with the Yes on 66 and 67 campaign, backed by Ecumenical Ministries and other faith groups, and help with the effort to reform Oregon's tax system so that our schools and vital human services have some stability in their funding remembering "if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday..."

John Legend, the R & B singer, wrote a song last year that I'm quite fond of called ["If You're Out There."](#)

The lyrics include (and you'll be happy I'm not going to try and sing this)...

If you're ready, we can shake the world.
Believe again, it starts within.
We don't have to wait for destiny.
We should be the change we want to see.

If you hear this message, wherever you stand.
Calling every woman, calling every man.
We're the generation, can't afford to wait.
The future started yesterday and we're already late.

Amen.