

## **“For Jobs & Freedom”**

**Reading & sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno**

**September 1, 2013**

### **From *Blessing the World* by Rebecca Parker**

We need to love from the start – not as an emergency strategy when everything has gone wrong. We need to love our neighbors as ourselves through economic systems that pay a living wage for labor instead of indulging in policies that allow the rich to get richer and the poor to be left behind when the storm comes. We need to love the world through reverence that fosters observant attention to the intricate relationality of life. It is not sufficient to relegate love to a few moments of sentiment or to celebrate it in effusive accolades about the compassion of the American people. It is not sufficient to expect love to be the domestic help that will wipe the tears from the eyes of the children living in the house of a cruel master. It is not enough to address injustice in the moment. The whole pathway – the whole road from Jerusalem to Jericho, as Martin Luther King Jr. said in a 1968 speech – must be just. If we can learn to love first, not last, then love may save us.

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Fifty years ago, under Abraham Lincoln's steady gaze, Reverend Dr. King shared his dream. It is the most stirring part of the speech, the part most often held in the light; the dream that has taken up permanent residence in the heart of every justice-seeking American. The divine crescendo comes at the speech's end and was surely inspired by the Source of All that goes by many names, one of which is Love.

*If we can learn to love first, not last, then love may save us.*

We remember,

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin ..... (but by the content of their character.)”

“Free at last! ... (Free at last! Thank God almighty, free at last!)”

Soaring, gorgeous oration that paints a peaceful and loving picture of the America we hope to create and embody.

And it was the least radical point made by Rev. Dr. King on that historical day.

Fifty years later, President Obama stood on that sacred ground once again and began his own speech with the soaring imagery from which justice is born. And when he settled in, he wended his way to the radical center.

He noted that 50 years ago, 250,000 people did not make their way to the nation's capital "in search of some abstract idea." No, they understood that "one's liberty is linked to one's livelihood." And so they marched. Said the president:

In some ways, though, the securing of civil rights, voting rights, the eradication of legalized discrimination -- the very significance of these victories may have obscured a second goal of the march, for the men and women who gathered 50 years ago were not there in search of some abstract idea. They were there seeking jobs as well as justice not just the absence of oppression but the presence of economic opportunity. For what does it profit a man, Dr. King would ask, to sit at an integrated lunch counter if he can't afford the meal?

Lest the weight of his radicalism and accompanying courage be overlooked or worse, dismissed, this Labor Day Sunday we are reminded that Reverend Dr. King was slain in the midst of his active participation in a labor strike. His broadened focus may've been what ultimately cost him his life because now he was talking about America's economic system - a far touchier subject than the comparatively small potatoes that is racial equality.

President Obama seemed emboldened last Wednesday. He held steady to this point:

For over a decade, working Americans of all races have seen their wages and incomes stagnate. Even as corporate profits soar, even as the pay of a fortunate few explodes, inequality has steadily risen over the decades. Upward mobility has become harder. In too many communities across this country in cities and suburbs and rural hamlets, the shadow of poverty casts a pall over our youth, their lives a fortress of substandard schools and diminished prospects, inadequate health care and perennial violence. President Obama

Sadly, that point is the same thread that connects this speech to the other through time and tragedy. We have fallen short and here is proof positive: last week I delivered ten big boxes of school supplies donated by this congregation and the good people of St. Mary Star of the Sea to two New London elementary

schools. Faith communities have always responded to such need through good works. But we must ask the question: why are New London public schools in such dire need of the basic supplies that buoy a child's education? The simple and despicable answer is that as a country we care less about poor children. Here is proof positive: all Head Start programming has been suspended as a result of grown men and women – our legislators – behaving like children. And who carries the burden of their callousness? Poor children.

And what do faith communities do in the face of such injustice? We march. We march against cold systems that keep some people out while opening wide the door of welcome to those privileged few. We ask questions and seek answers that will inform our response knowing that economic opportunity and stability holds up a just peace among neighbors as well as among nations.

Here at All Souls “we covenant to create a welcoming, caring, justice-seeking community within and beyond these walls.”

*Said the wise woman: We need to love our neighbors as ourselves through economic systems that pay a living wage for labor instead of indulging in policies that allow the rich to get richer and the poor to be left behind when the storm comes. Rebecca Parker*

Two Nobel Prize winning men stood before the nation and the world speaking of the freedom, liberty, and peace that flows from economic justice. They encouraged our better selves to love our neighbors through economic systems that will leave no one behind when the storm comes. Liberty + Livelihood = Peace.

But last Wednesday the pall of irony hung on the president's every word like the nagging humidity of a Washington DC summer day.

*Fifty years earlier there was Rev. Dr. King's plea: “We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.”*

It is often said that war proves a massive lack of imagination. But Rev. Doctor King had a faithful imagination in spades. I pray that the creative and faithful spirit of the 1968 Nobel peace prize winner haunts the 2009 winner of the same as President Obama contemplates whether or not to meet violence with violence. I pray for not only his but also Congress's power of imagination. I pray that they hold onto a faithfulness that says that the whole road from Jerusalem

to Jericho must be just. I pray for the strengthening of soul force. Justice and peace-loving people everywhere know that when we finally learn to put love first and not last, then love may save us.

I have faith that love will save us. I have faith that in our small way we can ask big questions to get at the root of injustice. I have faith in the courage of our convictions. I have faith that doing something in the name of peace beats down the evil of overwhelm that leads to paralysis. I have faith that people of good will can overwhelm the forces that see no way out. I have faith in you and I have faith in who we become when we join together. I have faith that we can build a land where justice shall roll down like water ... and peace like an ever flowing stream.

Peace. Salaam. Shalom.

Amen.