

Second Sunday After The Epiphany: January 17, 2021

Sermon: God's Way is the Way of Love

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my rock, and my redeemer. Psalm 19:14

It's hard to believe that it was just eight years ago that we witnessed three historic events on the same day: the remembrance and celebration of the life of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; the second Inauguration of President Barack Obama, our nation's first African-American president; and the 150th anniversary of The Emancipation Proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln that freed men and women enslaved in America.ⁱ That historic occasion had provided an opportunity for Christians across the nation to renew the church's historic commitment to justice, peace, and the equality of all people created by God.

This weekend we remember and celebrate the life and legacy of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. just one week after a riotous mob of people who support white supremacy, stormed and desecrated the national Capital building while carrying the Confederate flag and trying to violently overturn the results of the federal election. What are we as faithful Christians to do?

We can and must continue to work to achieve the vision of God's dream of the beloved community. The Rev. Dr. King in his famous "I Have a Dream Speech" 58 years ago shared his dream of a different world in which:

all persons are treated as being equal,

the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners sit down together at the table of brotherhood

injustice and oppression are transformed into freedom and justice

our children live in a nation where they are not judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character

little black boys and black girls join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers

and one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.ⁱⁱ

Dr. King's vision of the beloved community was deeply rooted in God's vision of a more equitable and just world for all of God's people. Through the passion and commitment of many dedicated people thankfully things have changed in the last 60 years. Schools and public places are no longer segregated by law. There has been an increase in the number of minority students graduating from college and there are more minority-owned businesses. Public and elected offices are held by an increasing number of minority men and women, including the office of the President and soon the office of the Vice President. We can see God's movement toward the beloved community. And yet much remains to be done.

Many people are still denied opportunities simply because of the color of their skin or because they were not born in America. Far too many people who labor in back-breaking work for low wages with no health or pension benefits are persons who belong to a minority race or ethnic group. If you are not a U.S. citizen, you are denied many rights and protections that are freely granted to others who simply have the good fortune of being born on American soil. Problems of racism, inequality, and injustice persist in our community and nation.

Dr. King said that the most segregated hour in America is on Sunday morning. Sadly, this is still true today. Dr. King challenged us to live out the full meaning of the Gospel. He preached the Biblical truth that the Gospel is about God's love for all of us. Throughout his life, his thoughts, words, and actions were a compelling witness to the ability of love to change the world. In 1957, he said:

"Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the 'fight with fire' method, which you suggest is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method, is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community. Physical force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything permanent; only love can do that. Yes, love—which means understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one's enemies—is the solution to the race problem.

Dr. King understood that Jesus's teaching introduced a way life that could change the world, and the individual, for the better. Changing laws is important, but real progress comes when we can change hearts.ⁱⁱⁱ To change people's hearts you need love. Love is the foundation for creating the beloved community in which all people are loved, respected, and treated with equality and justice. Our job as Christians is to share the good news of the Gospel of Jesus and to do our part in God's great movement of love in this world.^{iv} That doesn't mean that it's easy; but we can all sow the seeds of love. We may not see the full fruits of our labor, but we labor trusting that God will make possible an abundant harvest.

The beloved community is created right here as ordinary people like all of us do ordinary things with great love. We all have a role to play. Let me share the words of Katherine Hawker in her Litany of Call:

A child once dreamed the Voice was calling his name... 'Samuel';
Fisherman once heard the Voice when a young man bid them follow;
And still the Voice beckons today... can you hear?

Here I am. Send me.

Moses protested vehemently as the Voice spoke at the burning bush;
Mary stood amazed as the Voice proclaimed impending birth;
And still the Voice beckons today... can you hear?

Here I am. Send me.

Rosa Parks followed the Voice to the front of the bus;
Martin Luther King, Jr. heard the Voice as the bullet shattered;
And still the Voice beckons today... can you hear?

Here I am. Send me.

The Voice beckons from humble places...
In the tears of hungry children,
In the cries of the frail and frightened elderly,
In the pleas of those whose dreams have been too long deferred;
And still the Voice beckons today... can you hear?

Here I am. Send me.

A timid believer pauses to listen to the Voice;
A struggling church hears the Voice and turns;
And still the Voice beckons today... can you hear?

Here I am. Send me.^v

Can you hear? Are you willing to say, "Here I am. Send me"? If we honor our baptismal vows, we are continually committed to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. We are committed to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. When we say "all people" we mean "all"; there are no exceptions. We do not exclude anyone because of their race, ethnicity, place of birth, sexual orientation, economic status, or people we disagree with. We welcome and respect all persons because they are all created and loved by God.

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry in his most recent book, Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times, provides a powerful testimony of how love can change and transform people's lives and in turn change the world. He offered these words of wisdom and hope:

"When God, who is love, becomes our spiritual center of gravity, and love our moral compass, we live differently, regardless of what the world around us does. The world changes for the better, one life at a time.

So don't give up on love.

Listen to it.

Trust it.

Give into it.

Obey it.

Love can help and heal when nothing else can. Love can lift up and liberate when nothing else will.”^{vi}

Gracious and loving God, teach us your way of love, help us to bring healing and hope to our divided and hurting nation, guide and sustain us in all we do to follow Jesus and the way of God’s love. Amen.

ⁱ The Emancipation Proclamation was an order issued to all segments of the Executive branch (including the Army and Navy) of the United States by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, during the American Civil War.

ⁱⁱ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/17/i-have-a-dream-speech-text_n_809993.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Bishop Michael Curry, Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times (New York: Avery, 2020), p. 104.

^{iv} Ibid. p. 135.

^v <http://liturgyoutside.net/MLK.pdf>

^{vi} Bishop Michael Curry, Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times (New York: Avery, 2020), p. 248.