

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Scripture passage Amos 5:24

January 17, 2010

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, and today, many churches, including this one, are celebrating this man's life and ministry. Add to that the fact that tomorrow begins a week that on my church calendar is referred to as a week of prayer for Christian Unity. Of course, Martin Luther King's ministry was all about unity—integration as opposed to separate but equal. For those two reasons, Martin's birthday and Christian Unity week, I want to start us off today by reading a portion of Martin Luther King's open letter from Birmingham Jail. That letter was written in 1963. It was a response to a statement made by eight white Alabama clergymen. In that latter letter, the eight clergymen said that yes, social injustices regarding Blacks existed in their state, and in our country, but these injustices were in no way a religious matter—it was a **social** matter. Martin, of course, thought otherwise.

His own letter was subsequently published in the **Christian Century**—a magazine with which some of you are familiar--AND the **Atlantic Monthly**. And then from those two magazines, it spread throughout the US, and even the world. I thought about reading the whole of Martin's letter today and just skipping the sermon, but I am called to preach. So today, I'll just offer up one paragraph from that letter: Martin says:

“I have heard numerous Southern religious leaders [those eight Alabama clergymen] admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law; but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: ‘Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother.’ In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: ‘Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.’ And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.”

Whew! Poetry, right? Or maybe like a piece of Christian midrash—or holy Bible commentary, if we had such a thing as Christian midrash. If you are familiar with this letter from Birmingham Jail, do you remember the first time you read it? Maybe I'm weird this way, but I know exactly where I was—just like I know exactly where I was when I heard that John Kennedy was assassinated, or when the Twin Towers came tumbling down. Although with this letter, my reaction was much more positive. What I mean is that for me, this letter was pivotal to my life, and maybe it has or can be for you, too. .

I first read the entirety of Martin's letter from Birmingham Jail while I was studying in seminary. I happened upon his letter in a book of historic letters and documents I bought at a used book sale. Oddly, it wasn't even part of the seminary curriculum. As I

read, the tears came streaming down. Why hadn't I been told, why hadn't I realized what a poet, what a visionary, what a solid Christian Martin Luther King Jr. was? I was nine years old living in Richmond, Virginia when this letter was written and it took another thirty before I was finally privy to its contents! Which proves, I guess, that at any moment, even into our thirties, forties, fifties and so on, God's grace and power coming through the words of a holy person—which Martin certainly was, still have the power to transform our lives. We're always being remade, aren't we? And it makes you wonder how often we are just a book, a speech, a scripture passage or a sunset away from having grace fill our lives. Like I said, it's a letter I wish I had time to read to you in its entirety. There are copies of it in the Narthex, though. I urge you to, as Saint Augustine was encouraged to do, "pick up and read."

As you know, Martin Luther King Jr. used the Bible as a platform for his ministry and for his social advocacy, both—it was his feeling that politics can never be divorced from religion—yes, the issue of integration may be a social issue, but it is not solely a social issue—It's a sentiment shared by other great thinkers of the last century. For example, in one of Mahandas Gandhi's letters—I think that's kind of India's version of the Letter from Birmingham Jail, Gandhi says that "Satyagraha (I'm probably doing a number on that word—have never learned to pronounce it) Satyagraha (which translates as soul force)—soul force means nothing without a religious focus." He continues, "I believe politics [including social issues] cannot be divorced from religion."

I know that you share that sentiment. As I look around this sanctuary I see so many of you using your faith as a basis for your involvement with the wider world.—Kelly at Building Goodness; Estelle in her work with Louisa County, Ginny and Susan, Al and Gregg in their work in medicine, Ann and her daughter, Kristen, as teachers. Beth Neville in her work in Guatemala. And all of us are giving our money and volunteer time to efforts that matter; today, of course, that will be by bringing aid to the people in Haiti. Each of us in our own way interprets our faith through our actions. That's part of what it means to be a Christian.

The other thing that this portion of Martin's letter points to is his understanding of Christ's ministry. That's harder to get at from this paragraph I read today, but it's there, behind his words. It's called creative non-violence as a response to conflict—and of course Whites and Blacks were in conflict with each another. Creative non-violence is also called Jesus' third way-- **Jesus'** THIRD way; That of course implies that there are two other ways—and there are! The first way we respond to conflict is through a direct reciprocal response—you know, your little brother hits you—and you hit him back! Or someone calls you a sissy maybe so you call him a sissy right back. Those responses are very intuitive; very basic. That's the first way. The second way is refusing to respond at all—your big brother pummels you as you are curled up in a fetal position whimpering; Or someone spits on you, and you just take it. That's not as intuitive, but it IS a way to avoid violence. It's a totally passive response to conflict. A lot of people think that Jesus was a passivist-- Jesus' way was to stand back in the face of evil. His way was to love, love, love, and avoid conflict at all costs. Nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus' third way is as brilliant as it is uncomplicated. It's difficult, that's all. It takes planning and it's extraordinarily time consuming.

Ok. So, what is Jesus' third way? Well, first of all, in any conflict, you have to make sure that both sides are on equal footing—right? How do you create equals? Well, you have to convince people who are in an inferior position that they ARE equal. That's why Jesus said things like: Blessed are the poor." And he walked the talk by spending time with those considered least valuable in the circles he moved in; He touched lepers; healed widows, befriended tax collectors and prostitutes. You were equal whether you were a new convert, or someone who had been with Jesus since the beginning of his ministry—I'm thinking here of the woman convert who to the disciples supreme dismay, wiped Jesus' feet with her hair.

Once he had created his community of equals—the second part of his non-violent approach to conflict was to sit people down at table together. So, his followers shared meals together, prayed together—and although we aren't really privy to this in scripture, they worked out solutions to conflicts together. What?! The disciples had conflicts with Jesus and with each other?! Surely such spiritual people were always in sync with each other! They could read each others' minds. They walked lock step together in one glorious, God ordained ministry. Hah! As one theologian has brilliantly said (although I wish I could claim his insight as my own), "A partnership society is not a society devoid of conflict. It values conflict as the inevitable price of freedom. That's important enough to repeat. A partnership society is not a society devoid of conflict. It values conflict as the inevitable price of freedom." That's it. The essence of Jesus' third way. Easy on paper, difficult as heck to carry out. And time consuming definitely.

Jesus' third way—that's what Martin adopted in his own campaign to gain greater freedom for Blacks. First he made them feel important. He told them, "Look. You don't deserve the putdowns. You don't deserve your second class status. You are children of God." It took time, but finally the truth of Martin's words sank in. That is when the conflict got turned up several notches. African Americans had the nerve, for instance, to buy their lunches at a lunch counter in Birmingham, and then sit there and eat it! A novel idea! And when they got thrown out of a diner, they just went to another lunch counter and the same scene happened again. Eventually Birmingham slapped Martin in jail for being an outside agitator. He was making the Blacks just a little too proud. Putting Martin in jail, though, didn't stop the movement he had started. In order to come to some sort of resolution Whites and Blacks had to come together as equals to the table. They talked things through, creatively, nonviolently-- which was what Martin had been working toward all along. And the country is better for it. A whole lot better.

Friends—the ministry of Martin, based on his acute understanding of Jesus' third way, is our Christian legacy. It is ours to follow whenever we are at an impasse with others. First, make sure your response comes from your deep abiding faith; then follow Jesus' third way—come together as equals to the table, face to face, to share a meal, to pray together and talk things through. By the way, this little two part plan works in marriages—it works in churches, and of course, as we know, it works in nations.

All of this is a very long way of explaining why it is that churches are celebrating Martin Luther King Day this Sunday—and Christian Unity this week! Happy MLK DAY!

Let all the people say, Amen

