

The Federated Church of Hyannis

Sermon for January 17, 2021 – Reverend Derek White

A New Start: Part 2

Message from Dr. King for today

In seminary I was advised to pick a theologian and thoroughly study their works, so as to be mentored by them in the formation of my theology. While I have read the writing of many theologians, the one that spoke most closely to my heart was Martin Luther King Jr. We remember his life this weekend with the letters he wrote for the churches. I have picked excerpts from his letter he wrote in jail in Birmingham. I picked excerpts, because if I read the whole letter we be here for a while.

Let me share the back story behind the letter. He wrote the letter to white clergy in the south who criticized him for organizing rallies that lead to scenes of police brutality on the news. Rather than siding with the victims of the abuse, they sided with the law enforcement who were doing their job to stop unlawful protests. They were unlawful because they couldn't get permits to peacefully assemble.

This letter is Dr. King's response to those who questioned his tactics in battling segregation in Birmingham. Here is his response:

One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

"Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a manmade code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."

One of the things Dr. King is famous for saying came from another inspirational leader. And that inspirational leader got it from another inspirational leader. And so, and so on. Do you remember when King said, *"Any man's death diminishes me, because I'm involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."* Those are the words of John Donne, a 16th century philosopher, theologian, and poet. The theologians that influenced King were John Donne, Henry Thoreau, and St Augustine of Hippo. All advocated for justice through non-violent civil disobedience. St. Augustine of the 4th century introduced this theory of peaceful resistance looking at Christ's sacrificial death upon the cross as the means through which God grants forgiveness while not allowing justice to be subverted. The wages of sin is death. Therefore it was necessary for Christ to pay for the wages of our sins. This was done so God may restore us and raise our status from a fallen state. They all believed to die

for a just cause was better than to live in silence that allowed the wicked to pervert justice and oppress others.

King goes on to say,

“Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.”

“We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's antireligious laws.”

King brilliantly uses this tactic to speak to those who supported the war against Nazi Germany. Pastors supported the war against Nazi Germany by using St. Augustine's writings on just warfare. King draws the parallel that if it was just to liberate ethnic groups of people in Europe from the Nazis, then why didn't people in this country fight against ethnic oppression here at home.

He goes on to share in his letter how much the lack of understanding frustrates him:

“Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

Perhaps this is why King speaks to my heart so much. He goes on to share that he is more frustrated with white moderates and fellow clergy than he is with the Klu Klux Klan. He understands why they will never get it because their hearts are hardened. But he can't fathom why he is being criticized for being in jail by his fellow clergy colleagues telling him to ease up and give it some time. He believes waiting 340 years is long enough and time is a tool of the oppressor to diffuse the discontent of those who have a moral right to object to oppression. He says this:

“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."

Some of you here at the church may notice that I act pretty quickly. If you wonder why I act so quickly, it is because I believe King is right in that time is the ally for the force of social stagnation. It took the Holy Spirit on Pentecost to get the disciples to come out of hiding and stand up and proclaim the Gospel. It took them 40 days to speak out against the injustice that sent our Lord and Savior to the cross. A month and a half had gone by before they found the strength to challenge the persecutors. What would the church and the world look like today if it took them 40 years to speak out?

These are the words of Dr. King that cut through my heart as I look at the Church today.

"So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are."

"But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust."

Do those words pierce your heart? He said this over 60 years ago and we are now living in the 21st Century. Still churches tell their Pastors not to preach political sermons that challenge the status quo. Many Pastors were fired from their churches during the Civil Rights movement because they choose to be actively engaged in challenging the status quo. The great saints of the Church were instigators for social change. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ challenged the authority of the Roman Empire and the Religious Leaders who served the Romans with their silence. They killed him to silence him. And in the ultimate act of defiance to them he rose from the dead. You can't silence God's message by killing his messengers. His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

'Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . ." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love?"

We need more extremists in the world today. Those who practice extreme love like Christ. As 1st Peter 4:8 says, “Love covers a multitude of sin.” It confounds me why people in the church get so angry over change. It is not like change is the result of some malicious act seeking to destroy the church. It has been my understanding that change is the work of passionate people seeking to include new people into the life of the church. King argues that the Church once upon a time was an extreme group of Christ followers who transformed the world for peace. The Church was fast moving as it swept across Asia Minor. He states he is unhappy with the cautious approach of the modern church that changed from its early roots.

“All too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.”

“There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.”

We the Church need to get back to the heart of Christ’s message and live out the words of the Prophet Micah. We need to do what the Lord requires of us; to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with the Lord our God. It was Christ who walked to Calvary for our sins. We each have a cross to bear, but if we have to choose one, let it be the one Christ bore for us.

Here are the final words of King’s letter to the church leaders from his jail cell in Birmingham Alabama.

“I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr. ”

I will say this for Dr. King and his message, it never gets old. For over fifteen years now I have preached excerpts from Dr. King’s sermons. Every year I think we must have made progress from the previous year. And every year I come to the conclusion we have not reached the mountain top yet.

We can protest, we can march, we can write Black Lives Matter on Pennsylvania Ave. We can watch a black man be choked to death on YouTube by police officers. We can, we can, we can, we can, we can, we can.

But the final word I will leave each of us with is this.

But will we make a change?