

Sermon
January 14, 2018
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50 years ago this year in April the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated at a motel in Memphis. He was on his way for a planned march to Washington for what was to be The Poor People's Campaign and had stopped in Memphis to support the sanitation workers strike.

Tomorrow would have marked Dr. King's 89th birthday. There are many events this weekend to highlight and honor Dr. King's legacy and work. Many church and civic services this afternoon - the national Cathedral at 4pm - and I will be participating in a service at Metropolitan AME Church sponsored by the Washington Interfaith Network. There are a number of parades and opportunities for service tomorrow as well. Between now and April there will also be a number of ways for involvement to bring attention to inequity in the areas of education, employment, housing, and transportation. A google search will offer you more information about how to participate in these efforts if you are interested.

Dr. King's final book was titled "Where do we go from Here, Chaos or Community," and he offered a speech in August of 1967 to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The speech is comprehensive and the book profound. I read it for the first time a few years ago as I was reflecting on recent events in Baltimore. In April of 2015 Freddie Grey died as a result of injuries sustained while in the custody of Baltimore City police. This wasn't the first time that this type of death had occurred since I moved to Baltimore City in 2009. In fact, in the neighborhood where my previous church was located, there was a pervasive distrust of the police. One of the young men who was also a parishioner was filming an arrest when a police officer detained him by pinning him on the ground and repeatedly kicking him and this was right before I arrived. Police and community relationships were tenuous at best. And there had been at least two other questionable deaths of people while in police custody. In April after Grey's death there was a breakdown in city and public communication resulting in the busses being shut down right as school was getting out. Someone threw a brick and angry people flooded the streets. Through the night fires lit the sky, sirens filled the air, angry people of color were raging, the National Guard was called in, the mayor appeared inept and detached, the city council president came across as angry and resigned, the Governor reverted to a tired refrain of what did anyone expect from the people in Baltimore.

In 2017 the nation elected a new president. A person who has shown repeatedly that he does not respect the worth and dignity of every human being. He has even gone out of his way to dismantle any type of legislation that would enhance the lives of those who may have found themselves at some type of disadvantage. Any positive federal reform that has included LGBTQ or Trans people, women, elderly, poor, Muslim, black, brown, public subsidy, children who have immigrated, refugees, any semblance of compassion of those who are struggling to survive in this world has been stripped away by our current President, his administration, and a republican run congress. These latest insults, and I am only concentrating on the last 4 days, stripping away protections for those who found refuge here after natural disasters in their home countries, namely El Salvador and Haiti and then resorting to name calling of those citizens and those from

African countries, painting the countries and the people who live there as less than human. – unfathomable.

Right, “Where do we go from here, Chaos or Community?”

(King) Where do we go from here? First, we must massively assert our dignity and worth. We must stand up amid a system that still oppresses us and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values. We must no longer be ashamed of being black. (All right) The job of arousing manhood within a people that have been taught for so many centuries that they are nobody is not easy.

Now, we’ve got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. (Yes) Power at its best [applause], power at its best is love (Yes) implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love. (Speak) And this is what we must see as we move on.

It takes strength, it takes courage, and it takes fearlessness fierceness to love like this.

(King) And I say to you, I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. (Yes) And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today. (No) And I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. (Yes) For I have seen too much hate. (Yes) I've seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the South. (Yeah) I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South to want to hate, myself, because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities, and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. (Yes, That's right) I have decided to love. [applause] If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love. And the beautiful thing is that we aren't moving wrong when we do it, because John was right, God is love. (Yes) He who hates does not know God, but he who loves has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality.

In my mind I hear the words of Maya Angelou and Ghandi, who both say something to the effect that “it starts with me” – Angelou said that we are the one we are waiting for, and Ghandi said we must be the change we wish to see in the world. And this is of course possible because we are wonderfully created by a loving God.

I find myself asking where does the community of Epiphany go from here as we reflect on how we love God, ourselves and our neighbor? What is the story that we want people to tell about us? Where do we go from here? 175 years of ministry in Downtown D.C. So much has happened in that time frame with many of the decisions that have impacted generations happening in rooms a couple of blocks from here. This time frame was fraught with women demanding equality at the voting booth and in the church, with African Americans demanding the end of segregation in the public square, in the education system, and in the church, with LGBTQ and gender non conforming people fighting for civil liberties as it regards to healthcare, military service, and respect and

dignity in the public sphere and in the church. The church, the larger church, can be complicit or prophetic. This is clearly evidenced as we watch what's unfolding with Christian Evangelicals who are supporting vile and dehumanizing rhetoric, juxtaposed with faith communities that are standing in solidarity with the marginalized from Standing Rock, to Flint, MI, to Ferguson, MO, to Sandy Hook, CT. Epiphany too has been on both sides of this coin as this was the worshipping community that supported the President of the Confederate State, who at one point, history affirms, owned at least 74 slaves. This is also one of the first communities where black and whites were able to worship together – not separated with black folks in the balconies. Yet, we must be constantly aware that there are ways in which we are complicit in maintaining unequal power structures. And so we must ask, “Where do we go from Here, Chaos or Community.”

It is my offering for conversation today that while we may want to jump up and shout community, of course community - that we should also be critically reflecting on what community means and in what ways we will be called to action as a community of faith, rooted in the love God, following the examples of Christ. We are facing a time that in many ways is similar to the America that King was situated in, a time of broad inequity based on skin color and economic stability. But, in other ways we are different than Kings America, we have made many strides as evidenced here today where people of different races, different economic realities, and who speak different languages all come together to give thanks to God in one building without fear. Yet, outside of these walls there is a different story for many of God's children. How are we listening to those stories, and if we listen how might we be called to respond? Do we have the capacity to respond well? Can we respond both to the urgent need and the systemic need? How and where would we begin?

King begins his conclusion: I want to say to you as I move to my conclusion, as we talk about "Where do we go from here?" that we must honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. *(Yes)* There are forty million poor people here, and one day we must ask the question, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?" And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. *(Yes)* And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life's marketplace. *(Yes)* But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. *(All right)* It means that questions must be raised. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, "Who owns the oil?" *(Yes)* You begin to ask the question, "Who owns the iron ore?" *(Yes)* You begin to ask the question, "Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?" *(All right)* These are words that must be said. *(All right)*

And if the community of the Epiphany wants to begin to ask these types of questions for our time then we must ground ourselves well. We must be, I think, rooted in scripture, and have a clear understanding of who we are and whose we are. God loves us, God has given us power and authority to be co-creators in building up the kingdom of God. And while the language today of Ephesians 6 is a bit more militaristic than I'm entirely comfortable with, I agree that our struggle is against rulers and authorities that have rebelled against God's love- Paul uses spiritual forces of Evil, Dr. King says those who have hate in their hearts. Whatever words we use, it is this evil

or hatred that is killing people in the streets, allowing for hardened hearts to rule from the highest positions of earthly power, and attempting to diminish glimmers of hope throughout humanity. If we are to stand tall, courageously then we must be prepared – with the whole armor of God, to address the forces of evil in our time, if we choose to. Right? Chaos or community?

King continues his conclusion:

And so, I conclude by saying today that we have a task, and let us go out with a divine dissatisfaction. (*Yes*)

Let us be dissatisfied until America will no longer have a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds. (*All right*)

Let us be dissatisfied (*Yes*) until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort from the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice. (*Yes sir*)

Let us be dissatisfied (*Yes*) until those who live on the outskirts of hope are brought into the metropolis of daily security.

Let us be dissatisfied (*Yes*) until slums are cast into the junk heaps of history (*Yes*), and every family will live in a decent, sanitary home.

Let us be dissatisfied (*Yes*) until the dark yesterdays of segregated schools will be transformed into bright tomorrows of quality integrated education.

Let us be dissatisfied until integration is not seen as a problem but as an opportunity to participate in the beauty of diversity.

Let us be dissatisfied (*All right*) until men and women, however black they may be, will be judged on the basis of the content of their character, not on the basis of the color of their skin. (*Yeah*) Let us be dissatisfied. [*applause*]

Let us be dissatisfied (*Well*) until every state capitol (*Yes*) will be housed by a governor who will do justly, who will love mercy, and who will walk humbly with his God.

Let us be dissatisfied [*applause*] until from every city hall, justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. (*Yes*)

Let us be dissatisfied (*Yes*) until that day when the lion and the lamb shall lie down together (*Yes*), and every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree, and none shall be afraid.

Let us be dissatisfied (*Yes*), and men will recognize that out of one blood (*Yes*) God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth. (*Speak sir*)

Let us be dissatisfied until that day when nobody will shout, "White Power!" when nobody will shout, "Black Power!" but everybody will talk about God's power and human power. [applause]

And I must confess, my friends (*Yes sir*), that the road ahead will not always be smooth. (*Yes*) There will still be rocky places of frustration (*Yes*) and meandering points of bewilderment. There will be inevitable setbacks here and there. (*Yes*) And there will be those moments when the buoyancy of hope will be transformed into the fatigue of despair. (*Well*) Our dreams will sometimes be shattered and our ethereal hopes blasted. (*Yes*) We may again, with tear-drenched eyes, have to stand before the bier of some courageous civil rights worker whose life will be snuffed out by the dastardly acts of bloodthirsty mobs. (*Well*) But difficult and painful as it is (*Well*), we must walk on in the days ahead with an audacious faith in the future.

Let us realize that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. (End quote)

Today on the eve of the 89th anniversary of the birth of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, in the 50th year after his assassination, on the 2nd Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany we hear a challenge and an invitation. To summon up the strength to love and to choose a path from here – chaos or community. Sam Cooke sings, “it’s been a long time coming but I know a change gone come” - and who knows, maybe, like the prophet Esther, we were called for such as time as this.

Amen