

“UNFINISHED CALLING”
A Sermon by Richard D. Clewell
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Scripture Texts: Psalm 40: 1-10, 1 John 4: 7-21

This January weekend and tomorrow nationally we celebrate and remember the life, ministry and death of a modern day prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr. Historically, prophets have never done too well. They often are killed before their calling is complete. This is directly related to their work which shakes up the status quo. On a regular basis they are venerated in death but their living message and spiritual impact are blunted or soon forgotten by those God would seek to follow them and to carry on the vision.

A friend of mine related the story of visiting one of his deacons in his home where there was a picture of Salmons' head of Jesus right next to his gun rack with its National Rifle Association placard. Somehow there's a disconnect there. I think we can also do this in our exhibits of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s picture on walls and in places of prominence and forget his clear demonstration of what God desires for all people. Matthew pictures Jesus' declaration on such matters in his Gospel. (Mtt. 23: 27-31)

Our epistle text this morning speaks to the basic purpose God has for his people everywhere which, if followed, will lead to the ultimate completion of the kingdom way. (Read 1 John:4: 7-12) As we look at this text and some of its implications, I propose to intersperse in this discourse some of the statements made by Dr. King regarding such matters. The context of this first letter of John deals with the genuine spirit of the Church of Jesus Christ versus the culture of the world. The author shows little patience and even less support for an understanding of the church as a social club, a special interest group, or a religious accommodation to the ruling secular order and culture. In our current national environment it is simply not enough for the church to resemble the Democratic Party at work or the Republican Party at prayer or to idolize unfettered capitalism as the epitome of all things good. The writer says, "Test the spirits whether they come from God" with the major considerations based in walking in the Light of Christ as Lord, keeping God's commandments, and demonstrating love for God in the way we love our neighbors.

What first is striking in this text is that the transforming love of God is a continuing process in the lives of men and women in the on-going creation. We are called to respond to that love and new outlook by expressing such love in bringing reconciliation to our neighbors, our society, and even to perceived enemies. This love is no sentimental drivel or weak passiveness; rather it is the response of our whole self – our being, our mind, our heart, our soul, and strength – to God's great act of love in Jesus Christ. The love God defines is unqualified love in action, love that chooses to give itself away for someone else.

Martin Luther King, Jr. in commenting on this text (1 John 4: 7,8,12b) states: “This call for world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all humankind. This oft misunderstood and misinterpreted concept – so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak and cowardly force – has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man. When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality.”

The very nature of Christ’s love revealed in the cross and the calling of followers of that transforming reconciliation like Martin Luther King Jr., demand that others carry on the work by which God has chosen to make the kingdom way overcome the opposing world system. In this sense Christ’s work and the efforts of his followers, well-known and less-known, are unfinished and dependent on the next generation touched by God’s love. That includes you and me today.

Secondly, the writer states earlier in the epistle, “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 John 3:18). In this radical change that God is at work to accomplish in our lives, it is not just a matter of words and talk; it is about truth and action. This kind of active love is not so much something we feel as it is something we do. The love with which God loves us and the love we are called to share with others is not just idle talk about love. It is love lived out in action that is shaped by the cross. This love received from God through Christ is intended to totally reorient our sin-distorted lives and to ultimately transform and reconstruct this sin-damaged world. In this redesigned outlook and living is the motivating center of Christian discipleship which drives and influences our actions. Pastor James A. Harnish in response to John’s words (1John 4: 19,10) declares, “Here’s how radical the love of God is: You are loved so much by God that Jesus died for you. Your family members, even the most irritating of them, are loved so much by God that Jesus died for them. Your neighbors, even the ones who drive you crazy, are loved so much by God that Jesus died for them. Democrats are loved so much by God that Jesus died for them. Republicans are loved so much by God that Jesus died for them. Israelis and Palestinians are loved so much by God that Jesus died for them. Osama bin Laden is loved so much by God that Jesus died for him. Saddam Hussein was loved so much by God that Jesus died for him. God loved every human being in this broken world so much that God gave his only Son for them.”

When we demonstrate such love in tangible action we participate in the coming of the kingdom of God. Every individual and community act of love undermines the power of evil, violence, hatred, and sin in this world. It becomes part of God’s saving love for the whole creation.

Martin Luther King, Jr. taught and demonstrated the power of Christ-like love. In his sermon, “An Experiment in Love” he wrote, “To meet hate with retaliatory hate would do nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe. Hate begets hate; violence begets violence; toughness begets greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love.”

The issue for all of us as followers of Jesus Christ is how do we demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ in our actions? John states that “We love God because he first loves us.” (v.19) That love received should make a difference in our outlook, our ability to forgive ourselves and others, and leads to sharing that love on behalf of our neighbor who is our brother or sister in God’s view. The epistle author continues with the reality test of demonstrated Christian love: “Those who say “I love God” and hate their brothers and sisters are liars for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (v. 20,21) The question of who is my neighbor is pictured in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk.10:25-37)

Interpreting this story Dr. King relates in a sermon, “Who is my Neighbor?, “I do not know his name, says Jesus in essence. He is anyone who lies in need at life’s roadside. He is neither Jew or Gentile; he is neither Russian nor American; he is neither Negro or white. He is “a certain man” – any needy man – on one of the Jericho roads of life. So Jesus defines a neighbor, not in a theological definition, but in a life situation”

The world system, often including the religious, walk by on the other side looking out only for their safety, security, and maintaining their status. The one transformed by love does not fear but reaches out in actions of compassion.

Again, Dr. King elucidates:

“The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” But - - - the good Samaritan reversed the question: “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”

On another occasion, brother Martin explains:

“An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.”

Finally, Christian love rises above our human fears of looking different, or being rejected by our culture. It risks not only reaching out to act on behalf of others in need, but it also advocates for change in structures which are evil and perpetuate the separation of peoples in pursuit of maintaining the culture’s status quo and entrenched power. Too often Christians who acknowledge the way of Christ remain silent when love calls for

transformation – “to do justice, to love kindness in walking humbly before your God.” (Micah 6:8)

Dr. King, often felt abandoned by clergy and other Christians as he sought justice for those in poverty, those without power, and those victimized by prevailing economic and social structures, part of the evil of the world system.

He exhorted with the following words:

“He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps perpetuate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.”

Again, he warned:

“We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and hateful actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

And

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Love expressed is often risky and takes courage. God expects that all people may experience reconciliation and the abundant life. That is why the risk is vital – it is faithfulness in our love for God demonstrated in concern for all neighbors and for our world.

Martin expressed this truth in a clear way:

“Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”

The challenge is ours as followers in the line of Jesus Christ, the prophets of old, and modern day prophets like Martin Luther King, Jr. The predominant culture of our day demonstrates the continuing need for reconciliation and transformation. Hatred abounds, violence runs rampant and continues to breed more violence. Fear stalks our country and culture; greed and corruption are proliferated by power, class and the economic elite. More and more people are excluded from a quality life. Where are today’s prophets? Where is the church? How does the community of faith speak and act? The work of Christ and all the prophets of the past depend on those who continue to speak out and act on the basis of the love of God. They are the continuing light in the dark system of the world.

Final words from Martin Luther King, Jr. speak to our calling:

“Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.”

And he expresses the concern:

“If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.”

So, what will it be as we attempt to follow our faith as the way of the kingdom continues to engage the world system? As we carry out our calling as God's representatives today, what are we willing to sacrifice in response to God's love for us? What difference will our love in word and action make in our community and the world? Will our Savior be able to say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant?"

Amen

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