

Epiphany 2A
January 19, 2020
Isaiah 49:1-7, John 1:29-42

TOO LIGHT A THING

And now says the LORD, who formed me in the womb to be his servant:

IT IS NOT ENOUGH THAT YOU SHOULD BE MY SERVANT TO RAISE UP THE TRIBES OF JACOB AND RESTORE THE SURVIVORS OF ISRAEL. I WILL GIVE YOU AS A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS, THAT MY SAVING POWER MAY REACH TO THE END OF THE EARTH.

Some people are called to serve their own, their people, their tribe.

And some people are called to serve, teach, and reach beyond their tribe.
Jesus was one of those people. Martin Luther King was one those people.

God told Martin: It's not enough that you should minister to, with, and among the Black community. As crucial as that is, my purposes for you are bigger still: to catalyze the conscience of a whole nation. And so he did.

Working in the trenches with members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Dr. King developed strategies to address the entrenched white supremacist culture and Jim Crow laws that robbed people of their constitutional rights, their economic potential, and their dignity, because of the color of their skin.

To effect change, they took action on segregated busses, at lunch counters, in schools, and on the streets in non-violent protests that found them arrested, maligned, threatened, beaten, spit upon, attacked, tear-gassed, hosed, shot at, bombed, and murdered.

But such was their courage, such was their resolve, that they did not back down.

Stories of injustice began to show up in newspapers and magazines and to dominate television screens. And all across the country consciences began to awaken; and allies began to come forth. The courts began to judge in their favor; Congress began to pass new laws. New safeguards were enshrined; and new futures dreamed.

The work of dismantling racism and white privilege, which began in earnest midway through the 20th century is far from over. It continues in our day, in our communities, and the stakes couldn't be higher.

The fact is not lost on me that while some white church leaders found themselves awakened by Dr. King and joined the movement for equal rights, others, objecting to his tactics of public protest and civil disobedience, opposed Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

One prime example of this was a public letter entitled A CALL FOR UNITY, written by eight white clergymen from Birmingham, Alabama, after King had been arrested with others for taking part in a public protest march against the segregationist policies of that city.¹ Their letter to Dr. King says, in essence, "Your expectations are too high; your tactics too confrontational. You need to take it slow."

From his jail cell, Dr. King wrote a careful, pointed, and tightly reasoned response to those clergy; his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."²

¹ "A Call for Unity" was a letter written on April 12, 1963 by eight white clergymen local to Birmingham, Alabama and published in a local newspaper: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Call_For_Unity.

² For more, go to: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letter_from_Birmingham_Jail

The letter runs about 10 pages, and I've quoted from it before. I want to share a few paragraphs from a section in which he comments about who he believes the real opposition to change might be.

Dr. King writes:

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate.

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; ... who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season."

In your statement you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But is this a logical assertion? Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? ... Isn't this like condemning Jesus because his unique God-consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to God's will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion?

... Though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label.

- 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? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?" - MLK

Though he was inspired by the lifework of Mohandas Gandhi in achieving Indian self-rule through non-violent resistance, Dr. King's primary inspiration came from his study of the Scriptures.

In his speech upon accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. King said:

Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.³

To love genuinely is to love as Jesus loved—unconditionally, without regard for race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or immigration status. Love like that makes room for the other; love like that leaves an opening for change; love like that takes risks.

In our gospel this morning we watch the gravitational effect of love ripple through the relationships of Jesus' first followers in a linked chain of testimony.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Stockholm, Sweden, December 11, 1964.

When John's disciples see him point to Jesus and say, "There is the Lamb of God who's taking on the sin of the whole world," they immediately turn to follow him. First, Andrew tells his brother Simon. The next day the circle expands further as first Philip and then Nathanael join in.

Jesus' invitation is compelling—COME AND SEE! And at the end of his gospel, during the final meal he shares with his disciple community Jesus leaves them with one singular command:

LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.

John's message is clear: When we answer Christ's invitation to COME AND SEE; when we abide in him, graft ourselves to him, our lives—and the world as we've known it—are transformed.

But one look at our world today, at our nation, ourselves, and it's clear: the work of transformation is hardly over. In fact, there is in our nation and around the world a resurgence in unapologetic white supremacist thinking and entrenched tribalism.

One of the books our adult group has been grappled with this year is entitled **DEAR CHURCH: A LOVE LETTER FROM A BLACK PREACHER TO THE WHITEST DENOMINATION IN THE U.S.**

In the book, ELCA pastor Lenny Duncan contends that the assumption of white privilege—and therefore white supremacy—is embedded in the history and structures of our denomination.

The task before us, he writes, is to

"...dismantle, destroy, and bury white supremacy, in this nation, in our pews. In our liturgies. As a church, as a people, and as Christians. This is our call in the 21st century."⁴

The cover story in the January issue of LIVING LUTHERAN, our national magazine, is entitled: UNPACKING WHITE PRIVILEGE. (How many of you have seen it?)

It's co-authored by two women who came to be dialog with each other around issues of race and white privilege—Yolanda Denson-Byers, a Lutheran pastor of African-descent, and Shari Seifert, a Lutheran of European-descent who's a member of Calvary Lutheran Church in Minneapolis.

Their joint work, which began with the people of Calvary, is about helping people see the intrinsic privileges that come with being white and Lutheran in America.

Pastor Denson-Byers recalls how, when she taught the course RACE IN AMERICA at a State University, she "came to the startling discovery" that many of her students "believed that racism had been solved during the...civil rights movement of the 1960's and had nothing to do with them at all."⁵

She writes, "I often spent the first third of my semester-long class convincing my 18- to 22-year old European American students that racism was still a problem and that white privilege was real."

"As an African American ELCA pastor, I am asking white folks to do the work of dismantling their privilege so the ELCA can be a safer place for all of God's children." [Copies of their article in narthex...]

⁴ Lenny Duncan, *Dear Church...* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019) p. 13

⁵ *Living Lutheran*, January 2020, pp. 10-15.

The love to which God calls us is never love in general; it's always specific.

- As specific as the people Jesus encountered as he visited the towns and villages of Galilee.
- As specific as the faces of the people who put their lives on the line during the civil rights movement or who find themselves today in prison for crimes they didn't commit.
- As specific as the challenge being issued to those of us who are **white** to come to terms with the intricate web of embedded privilege that is extended to us hour by hour, day by day, without our asking, without our knowing, because of the color of our skin.

Living as we do in a country that is becoming more and more diverse, that within a few decades will become majority minority, why is it that our denomination, after having committed itself on paper to the goal of becoming more racially diverse over the past 3+ decades, finds itself less so—96% white?

Whatever evidence we may cite as reasons for this reality—whether theological, sociological, historical or practical—the question is one we must keep asking.

Like Jesus, like Martin Luther King, God has formed us for a purpose: to be light-bringers. This purpose extends beyond our own “tribe,” whatever we imagine our “tribe” to be.

Yet in many ways it begins there with an honest and fearless inventory of who we are and how the effects of racial identity manifest themselves in our lives.

As long as we avoid taking that inventory, the reality of racism will fester and what Dr. King called “the descending spiral” of violence—to bodies, minds and spirits—will continue.

In the last book he wrote before his assassination, *WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? CHAOS OR COMMUNITY*, Dr. King wrote:

“The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that.”⁶

Jesus didn't wait until his apprentices had it all figured out before he sent them out to proclaim the message that God's reign was in their midst, they were still raw recruits, greenhorns, their lives imperfect, their stories unpolished.

He didn't wait for them to be fully awakened and he doesn't wait for us. For he knows that it's while we're **ON THE WAY** that we find a Way.

YOU'RE READY NOW, he tells us. YOU'VE COME TO THE WATERS, YOU'VE BEEN FED AT THE TABLE...SO GO. BE AN EXTREMIST FOR LOVE.

Amen.

⁶ The Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community*. 1967, page 62