Sermon copyright © 2012 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Epiphany 2B MLK
Peace, Seattle
January 15, 2012
Exodus 3:7-12, Eph. 4:1-16, Mk 3:7-19a

EXTREMIST FOR LOVE

I'VE OBSERVED THE MISERY OF MY PEOPLE, I'VE HEARD THEIR CRY, I'VE COME TO DELIVER THEM, AND I'VE CHOSEN YOU TO BE BEAR OF THE MESSAGE.

The speaker? God, of course. And the chosen messenger—Moses.

And as reluctant as he was initially to take the leader's mantel, God made him an offer he couldn't refuse—(after all you can only say NO to the Master of the Universe for so long)—and Moses began the long, arduous, step by step journey of leading God's people out of slavery and into a whole new way of being in relationship with God, with neighbor, and with world.

Leaders get a lot of flack directed at them, especially if they're trying to take us to a place we haven't been before. It's the nature of the beast. As bad as things can sometimes be, we're more comfortable with the known than the unknown….we prefer the devil we know to the one we don't.

So calling a people to change is an inherently perilous activity. It nearly got Moses killed, and it most certainly got Jesus killed.

There are many other prophets and martyrs, ancient and modern, who paid the ultimate price for standing with God in the face of injustice, and this weekend we remember one of them.
Martin Luther King, Jr.

I wasn't yet born when, in 1955, Rosa Parks sat down on a Montgomery Bus after a long day of work and refused to give up her seat to a white man. And I was only Kai's age when Dr. King stood before hundreds of thousands at the Lincoln memorial and told them his dream.

My family never lived in the segregated south and certainly never felt the pressure of racist attitudes limiting our educational or vocational potential. But King's life and his work have affected me deeply.

One of the qualities by which history judges leaders is whether his or her words stand the test of time. 50 years is a brief time in the span of history, but Dr. King's legacy of writing and action are worth plumbing.

It's ironic that while some white church leaders were awakened by Dr. King to join 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 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]

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

Sermon copyright © 2012 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

The letter runs about 10 pages, and I've quoted from it before. This time 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.

> "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 the wait for a "more convenient season." 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…
>
> "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? We must come to see that, as the federal courts have consistently affirmed, it is wrong to urge an individual to cease his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest may precipitate violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber…
>
> "…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 am 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?"

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, ethnicity, sexual orientation or immigration status. People are hungry for that love, you can't get enough of that love.

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

Sermon copyright © 2012 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

In our gospel today (did you notice?) Jesus tells his disciples: when we get to the lake make sure you have a boat ready for me so the crowd doesn't crush me.

Those who'd had a taste of wholeness, a taste of wellness had become living emblems in their communities of God's power in Jesus, and the news spread, and everyone who was desperate for healing came looking for him, came hoping to touch him and be healed.

Have you ever thought of yourself as an emblem of God's power and presence in the world? You are.

Have you ever thought of yourself as a living symbol of God's call to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God"? You are.

Have you ever imagined that you may be the only word of the Lord some people will ever hear, will ever encounter? It's true.

To love genuinely is to love as Jesus loved. And love like that takes risks.

"Speaking the truth in love," says St. Paul, "we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."[4]

The love to which God calls us is never love in general, it's specific, as specific as the stories and parables that Jesus told, as specific as the names, and faces, and detailed stories of our individual lives and the lives of those we encounter every day.

Loving like Jesus loved may move us to advocate for equal rights for communities of people who still feel the sting of discrimination, or it may move us to make certain that children in our schools have mentors and guides to help them succeed in a rapidly changing world.

Loving like Jesus loved might compel us to take to the streets in non-violent protest against laws and regulations that stack the deck against the poor and the working class, or it may compel us to befriend a refugee family, volunteer at the Food Bank, or to serve as a coach at the YMCA.

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.

He didn't wait for them and he doesn't wait for us. You're ready now, he says. You've come to the waters, you've been fed at the table…now go. Be an extremist for love, and bring me, bring my love, to the world.

Amen.

[4] Ephesians 4:14-16