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Epiphany 2C MLK Sunday
Peace, Seattle
January 20, 2013
Isaiah 62:1-5, Romans 12:9-21, Luke 6:2-36

INESCAPABLE MUTUALITY

In a crucial scene in the film LINCOLN, the president comes to the telegraph office across from the White House in the dead of night, to send a telegram that will most certainly affect the course of the Civil War.[1]

The journey of Confederate emissaries headed north on a secret mission to negotiate peace, has been intentionally delayed while Lincoln presses Congress to pass the 13th Amendment permanently banning slavery.[2]

He knows that if the war ends before the amendment passes, the motivation for its passage will falter and his effort will fail. But he is under tremendous pressure—both internal and external—to put an end to the bloodshed that has claimed scores of thousands of lives from both North and the South.

As he sits there with the two young telegraph operators working the nightshift, a blanket wrapped 'round his shoulders, it seems that Lincoln's mind is made to side with peace.

But then he begins to muse about what he's learned from studying the Greek mathematician Euclid,

> "Euclid's first common notion," he tells them, "is this: things that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other…In his book, Euclid says that this is self-evident.
>
> "You see," he tells the spellbound operators, "there it is, even in that 2,000 year old book of mechanical law, it is a self evident truth that things that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other."[3]

What's at stake, of course, is not the equality of mathematical equations but the equality of every human being.

Reciting Euclid's insight stirs something in Lincoln, and changing the telegram's content he resolves that before peace can be achieved, the 13th amendment must pass.

And on January 31st, 1865, it does pass; and 10 weeks later the war is over.

But a hundred years after its passage, America was still struggling with slavery's legacy. Institutionalized racism and the bigotry it inspired still held millions captive, preventing them from fully realizing the "inalienable rights" that had been promised two centuries before.

Until one day, a seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama, tired of working on her feet all day, sat in an open seat in the middle of the bus, rather than in the section reserved for colored people—the back.

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[1] You can watch a portion of the scene @ http://www.hulu.com/watch/422130

[2] The 13th Amendment to the Constitution declared that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." Formally abolishing slavery in the United States, the 13th Amendment was passed by the Congress on January 31, 1865, and ratified by the states on December 6, 1865.

[3] Lincoln did not merely cite Euclid in speeches, but used him in his private thoughts about slavery. In an unpublished note from 1854 on slavery:

> If A. can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B. — why may not B. snatch the same argument, and prove equally, that he may enslave A?– You say A. is white, and B. is black. It is color, then; the lighter, having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with a fairer skin than your own. You do not mean color exactly?–You mean the whites are intellectually the superiors of the blacks, and, therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with an intellect superior to your own. But, say you, it is a question of interest; and, if you can make it your interest, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you. (http://www.mrlincolnandfreedom.org/inside.asp?ID=10&subjectID=2)

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And when the driver of the bus pulled over and ordered her to give up her seat to a white man, she quietly refused and was promptly arrested. **Her name is Rosa Parks**.

News of her arrest spread quickly in the community, and local black leaders organized an unprecedented **mass boycott** in protest. One year later, the Supreme Court rules that the bus laws are unconstitutional.

That single incident in Montgomery spawned one of history's greatest nonviolent revolutions, and the leader of that boycott became that revolution's spiritual chief, **Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

In April of 1963, responding to a group of Birmingham, Alabama, clergy who had sent him an open letter[4] asking him to suspend his Birmingham campaign, Rev. King wrote from jail:

> "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.[5]

These principles were as self-evident to Rev. King as Euclid's first law was to Lincoln. They weren't the first persons to believe in its truth, but in the contexts which history contrived that they serve, they seemed chosen for their tasks, and in the end, aided by divine grace as well as tenacity of spirit, they moved the bar forward for humanity.

Each new generation must rise to the challenges present to their own time, whatever those challenges may be—and we in our time have our own share:

- the degradation of Earth's air, seas, and lands;
- overpopulation;
- an ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots of the world;
- gun violence—and violence of every other kind—which threatens to destroy all we hold dear.

How do we get our minds around these challenges when we can't even agree on their definitions?

SAVE THE CHILDREN – SAVE THE SALMON – SAVE THE MIDDLE CLASS – SAVE THE EARTH

We live in a salvation-hungry world. But our understanding of salvation has become so spiritualized, so narrowly privatized, it no longer resembles the SALVATION proclaimed by the prophets and demonstrated by Jesus.

Instead, salvation has come to refer, primarily, to a personal relationship with God that guarantees us a life BEYOND this life rather than the all-encompassing gift from God's hand that's intended to begin HERE AND NOW.

Listen to Isaiah as he speaks of a people once full of hope but now beaten down by broken dreams and crumbling faith.[6]

> FOR ZION'S SAKE I WILL NOT KEEP SILENT, vows the prophet.
> AND FOR JERUSALEM'S SAKE I WILL NOT REST, UNTIL HER VINDICATION SHINES OUT LIKE THE DAWN, AND HER SALVATION LIKE A BURNING TORCH.

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[4] You can find their letter @ www.stanford.edu/group/king/frequentdocs/clergy.pdf
[5] Find the full text of King's letter here: http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html
[6] *Feasting*, W. Carter Lester, p. 242

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Is this talk about some distant, heavenly future?

> YOU SHALL NO MORE BE TERMED FORSAKEN,
> AND YOUR LAND SHALL NO MORE BE TERMED DESOLATE;
> BUT YOU SHALL BE CALLED MY DELIGHT IS IN HER,
> AND YOUR LAND MARRIED; FOR THE LORD DELIGHTS IN YOU.
>
> THE LORD HAS SWORN:
> I WILL NOT AGAIN GIVE YOUR GRAIN TO BE FOOD FOR YOUR ENEMIES,
> AND FOREIGNERS SHALL NOT DRINK THE WINE FOR WHICH YOU HAVE LABORED;
> BUT THOSE WHO GATHER IT SHALL EAT IT AND PRAISE THE LORD,
> AND THOSE WHO HARVEST IT SHALL DRINK IT IN MY HOLY COURTS.

The salvation Isaiah proclaimed and that Jesus lived is not about "pie in the sky by and by." It has to do with healing and safety now, at every level. And so Jesus, in today's gospel, can say,

> LOVE YOUR ENEMIES,

And Paul in Romans can write:

> DO NOT BE OVERCOME BY EVIL, BUT OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD.

Salvation, as the scriptures teach and as Jesus shows, is about the safety and healing which become ours when God is our ultimate resting place.

Such healing and safety is not just for me—it's for everyone. It is God's great gift to us, and it is also God's great task.

> YOU ALL ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD! LET YOUR LIGHT SO SHINE BEFORE OTHERS THAT THEY MAY SEE YOUR GOOD WORKS AND GIVE GLORY TO YOU'RE YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN.

To be the light for the world that Jesus envisioned, the church must be a public church, engaging the issues that face our world with the same tenacious spirit and moral clarity as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King engaged the issues of their days. For if it does not, the church runs the risk of becoming merely a nostalgic enclave or superfluous footnote.

The call to be a public church, however, is not a call to go about leadership in a knee-jerk or sloppy fashion. We must be disciplined in our process of discerning whether and when and how to engage, and in what form, lest we become just one more noisy gong or clanging cymbal.

That kind of discipline arises from practice. To be a church which practices what it preaches—that is the kind of body I want to be part of. And this congregation, this community, is where God has called us through the Spirit to give it our level best: Learning from each other how to live for others, to forgive and be forgiven, and to give ourselves away for the sake of the world God so loves.

The passage of the 13th Amendment wasn't a fait accompli. In the absence of Abraham Lincoln's leadership and the efforts of his allies—both principled and pragmatic—America's course might well have taken a very different trajectory. But it did pass, keeping us on the trail and in pursuit of that ever-illusive "more perfect union."

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Through the ages God has called particular servants to show the rest of us what God had in mind; to pursue justice and practice mercy as if the world itself depends on it.

Martin Luther King had a dream, he shared that dream with the world.

God is still calling us through Christ to be the city on a hill, and to show the world what peace and justice look like. To live the dream that he gave his life to share. May God grant us the strength to keep Christ's dream alive.

Amen.