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Epiphany 2C – MLK Sunday
Peace, Seattle
January 17, 2010 epk
Amos 5:21-24, Romans 12:9-21, Luke 6:20-36

A LEGACY OF NON-VIOLENT CHANGE

At the same time that our eyes, and those of the world, witness the tragedy unfolding in Haiti, we gather to affirm the unwavering presence of the Light of the world in our lives, and, in addition today, to lift up the legacy of his servant, Martin Luther King Jr.

And because we are a church of the Word, our lens for examining Christ's Light and King's legacy are the challenging texts of scripture that are placed before us…**and "challenging" is too easy a word.**

For Amos, Paul, and Jesus each confront us with statements as clear, as focused, as critical, and as uncompromising as a laser beam.

AMOS: I HATE, I DESPISE YOUR FESTIVALS AND TAKE NO DELIGHT IN YOUR SOLEMN ASSEMBLIES…AWAY WITH THE NOISE OF YOUR SONGS AND THE MELODY OF YOUR INSTRUMENTS. BUT LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN LIKE WATERS, AND RIGHTEOUSNESS LIKE AN EVERFLOWING STREAM.

PAUL: DO NOT REPAY ANYONE EVIL FOR EVIL…BLESS THOSE WHO PERSECUTE YOU; BLESS AND DO NOT CURSE THEM. OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD.

JESUS: IF YOU LOVE THOSE WHO LOVE YOU, WHAT CREDIT IS THAT TO YOU? EVEN SINNERS DO THE SAME. I SAY TO YOU THAT LISTEN: LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, DO GOOD TO THOSE WHO HATE YOU, BLESS THOSE WHO CURSE YOU, PRAY FOR THOSE WHO ABUSE YOU.

See what I mean? Laser beam.

Jesus embodied what he taught; practicing what he preached took him all the way to the cross. And the community he gathered around himself, to which he entrusted his message and his method, was charged with carrying on that legacy. We are part of that community.

When I read the letters and hear the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., it strikes me that Dr. King took that same laser beam of spirit-filled prophetic speech from the scriptures and trained it on the struggle for racial and social justice and equality in America.

In 1963, four months before the March on Washington where he told the world his dream, Dr. King found himself in a Birmingham, Alabama jail cell. He'd been arrested with others for taking part in a public protest march against the segregationist policies of that city.

In response to the presence of King and other leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, eight white clergymen from Birmingham published an open letter entitled CALL TO UNITY in which they urged an end to the demonstrations (quote) "directed and led in part by outsiders" (unquote), and called for black leaders to engage in local negotiations and to use the courts if rights were being denied. [1]

[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.

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

The letter runs about 10 pages, and none of it is throwaway material. I want to share a couple paragraphs from toward the beginning that capture the sense of his response.

> "I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham," writes Dr. King, "since you have been influenced by the view which argues against 'outsiders coming in.' I have the honor of serving as President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference…Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here...**But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here.**
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> "Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their *"thus saith the Lord"* far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town…
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> "Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states… **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.** Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds."[3]

The words still bristle with power! Yet as powerful as Dr. King's theological arguments and rhetorical skills were, it was the non-violent marches and the reactionary backlash from authorities that finally caught the attention of the nation and got the wheels of justice moving.

Maybe you recall, as I do, seeing film footage of high pressure water jets and police dogs being set loose on marchers and bystanders by the order of police chief Bull Conner. That was Birmingham.

Dr. King showed us that loving our enemy doesn't mean becoming a doormat; that turning the cheek means not accepting abuse, but instead holding up the mirror of conscience so that the immorality and injustice of the deeds themselves are exposed. There is a cost to that level of commitment.

By the end of the Birmingham campaign, the conscience of our nation was aroused. King's reputation surged, Bull Connor lost his job, the "whites only" signs in Birmingham store windows were taken down, and the push for Civil Rights legislation gained a national platform.[4]

Later that summer as he stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. King spoke pointedly about the importance that demonstrations remain non-violent:

> "There is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force."

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[2] For more, go to: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letter_from_Birmingham_Jail
[3] Martin Luther King, Jr. Letter from a Birmingham Jail. http://www.mlkonline.net/jail.html
[4] More at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birmingham_campaign

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One year later, as he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. King said it again, this time with the whole world listening:

> "Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time: the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence. Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.[5]

Whenever we have a baptism at Peace, we are reminded that when we pass through the waters, God's NO to evil becomes our NO, and God's YES to loving enemies becomes our YES.

To love genuinely is to love as Jesus loved. Love like that 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.

Steve Daschel of the Southwest Youth and Family Services told us in his PASS THE HAT moment earlier this morning that one of their programs does two very simple and specific things that make all the difference in the world. They make two visits to the homes of low-income families with young children. On the first visit, they bring a toy and teach the parents how to play with their children. On the second trip, they take a book and teach parents how to read to their children. The track record shows that when children and families benefit from this simple experience, the high school graduation rates of these children rise to the level of their middle class peers.

Loving like Jesus loved may move us to advocate for equal rights for communities who still feel the sting of discrimination, or it may move us to make certain that children in our neighborhood know they are valued and safe.

Loving like Jesus loved might compel us to take to the streets in non-violent protest against unjust and discriminatory laws, or it may compel us to serve as a volunteer at an orphanage in Haiti, as a number of young people—college and post-college—have done. And now we have been learning in the days since the earthquake, that because they answered the call to love and to serve, some have given not only themselves but their lives.[6]

The lives of love and justice to which Christ calls us manifests itself in specific ways. That's why in Romans 12 Paul lists specific behaviors for loving others.

- Cultivate mutual affection,
- Extend hospitality,
- Contribute to the needs of other Christians,
- Weep with those who weep,
- If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they're thirsty, give them something to drink.
- Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In the unfolding tragedy in Haiti we have the opportunity to love well by giving generously and praying incessantly.

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

[6] Read about Washington State volunteer Molly Hightower, at: http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/localnews/2010803605_apwahaitimissing2ndldwritethru.html Read about Ben Larson, Lutheran seminarian, who spent his last breath singing: http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Communication-Services/News/Releases.aspx#&&a=4403

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But we also have that opportunity much closer at hand every day: in our homes, at our workplaces, among our classmates, in this congregation; in the variety of encounters that are part of our lives day after day after day.

Caring for neighbor, whether friend or stranger; becoming an advocate for justice within the daily context of our lives, however rudimentary that justice may be; it's all part of doing God's work with our hands, and so making God's dream for our world come true, when "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Amen.