

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

Year B

January 15, 2012

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You hear about the terrible accident at the Amazon Bookstore warehouse? Two huge stacks of books were set on fire, and it turns out the stacks were made up of thousands of copies of Roget's Thesaurus.

Witnesses were stunned, startled, aghast, taken aback, stupefied, flabbergasted, dumbfounded, and surprised.

This Sunday we have the juxtaposition of the scriptures telling us about God's call to have people serve his purposes, and we have the celebration of the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr., also called by God to serve his purposes. Then of course we have Paul's admonitions about fornication, and I think I'll let you add that to the salad on your own.

The Biblical stories are somewhat mysterious. The boy Samuel hears the voice of God in the middle of the night. The young man Nathanael is invited by a friend, not that unusual, but Jesus recognizes him in some profound way that evokes awe and faith from him. The call of Martin was a little more pedantic. He was the son and grandson of Baptist preachers, and he probably felt called from within the womb to that life. But his call into the midst of the Civil Rights movement came about by the insistence of his fellow black clergy in Montgomery.

King was essentially the new kid on the block. He was 26 years old, new to Montgomery, Alabama, highly regarded as a preacher but easily the most expendable pastor in town. He wasn't looking for a high profile duty, and his fellow pastors asked him to step in front of the cameras to make the case for the bus boycott they had organized because they figured his church wouldn't miss him if things went badly.

King began to frame an argument for the civil rights movement which made the most coherent link between scripture, our national heritage, and the harmful effects of discrimination since Abraham Lincoln. He recognized that discrimination was a double edged sword, as harmful to the whites who controlled it as it was to the victims who suffered it. The victims of racial discrimination paid a terrible price in their suffering and pain. The perpetrators, without recognizing it, were also paying a terrible price in their loss of humanity and in their rejection of God's purpose for their lives.

We would do well to mark the characteristics which King brought to his work, and I want to name four of them today. We are in a renewed age of protests, as TIME magazine identified in its "Person of the Year" cover. Whether in the Middle East, the Midwest, Wall Street or Burma, there is a

renewed energy for protesting the injustices of oppressor regimes or oppressive financial systems. Martin Luther King certainly took part in and led protests for the 13 years he led the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but he was not merely a protester. For him protests were nothing but a tool by which to disclose the higher calling to which the strong and the weak were called, a tool by which to reveal the truth, as if in a mirror, to those whose very human soul was in danger.

Perhaps the most important thing to know about King is that he was a man of prayer. This is the first of the characteristics to remember. King did not simply act, but he listened. As the little boy Samuel was taught to do, King practiced the same posture – not just the request for a voice, but a promise to listen. “Speak, for your servant is listening.” It was prayer that reinvigorated King when he was at his weakest and most frightened, and it was prayer on which King relied for the success of his efforts. It was one thing to boycott buses, and it was one thing more to pray for the obstinate to have a change of heart.

The second characteristic to remember is that King drew upon the wisdom of others. He did not come to his world view in isolation, nor did he craft the strategy of nonviolence on his own. He studied Ghandi, even making a pilgrimage to Ghandi’s birthplace in 1959. In seminary he studied under Reinhold Niebuhr who shaped his theology profoundly with his belief that societies typically become more perverse and unjust than its individual members would choose to be. King spent 11 of his first 26 years in higher education, leaving high school for Morehouse College at the age of 15.

A third characteristic of King was humility, not in self effacement or personal reticence, but in recalling that the power of sin was as great in him as it was in the most offensive bigot he would ever meet. At the core of Martin’s preaching and speeches was the recollection that without the grace of God, no one could claim the banner of righteousness. The victim of racial hatred, who also kept hatred in his heart, was as disconnected from God’s spirit as was the perpetrator. It was only through the redemptive power of love, even if love seemed to permit suffering, that the burdens of injustice could be turned into the assets of righteousness.

Finally I will mention the characteristic of hope. As King continued in his work, first with the civil rights of African Americans, then with his work for the just treatment of all laborers, and then with his work for international peace and reconciliation, King began to have a vision for a better world, a better society. What King adopted from a theologian and founder of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Josiah Royce, was an imagination for what he would call the Beloved Community.

At the heart of the Beloved Community is a commitment to nonviolence. “The way of acquiescence leads to moral and spiritual suicide.

The way of violence leads to bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. But, the way of non-violence leads to redemption and the creation of the beloved community. The aftermath of nonviolence is redemption. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation.” King believed that Jesus Christ expects of us such fervent attentiveness to making peace and demanding justice that the outcome will be a transformed society and world. King had the fervent hope that a different kind of society was possible, but its essential commitment would be to love and its essential practice would be nonviolence.

I wish we could know how a long life for Dr. King might have shaped the future into which we have lived. I wish we could recognize that his death was not some random act of violence, but a purposeful assault of evil powers opposing the vision he offered.

King’s great contribution to our nation was that he linked the religious aspirations of Saturday and Sunday synagogue and church gatherings with the national aspirations of our history. Never one to encourage a kind of theocratic establishment in the USA, he was unafraid to declare that God expects better of us than we are giving. The temptations to give up are so great, and the hopeful visions seem so small in comparison with the tsunami of disrespect that we have come to tolerate as normal for political discourse. Better than we put up with today, would be King’s imagination for who we could be: “Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood [and sisterhood]. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.”