

Words Forming Witnesses

Psalm 150 & Psalm 106:1-3
(Hymns – 722, 726, 530, 563)
April 7, 2013

Praise God's Justice

Fifty years ago this month – April 16, 1963, to be precise –
Martin Luther King Jr wrote a letter from the Birmingham jail
in response to a letter written by a group of white clergymen of Birmingham.

Writing that letter was not an easy task.
King was in jail in the segregationist south in the 1960s,
arrested because he was marching in protest
over the denial of justice for blacks in the United States.
He was denied access to newspapers,
so would not have seen the letter from the white clergy
had one of the guards not smuggled a copy of the newspaper
into the prison.
King wrote his ideas in the margins of the newspapers,
on other scraps he could find,
and even on toilet paper.
These, in turn, were smuggled out,
given to his friends,
and compiled into *The Letter from the Birmingham Jail*.

The letter is 11 pages long.
I won't read it all,
but I do encourage you to find it on the internet and read all of it.
It is a powerful testimony
to the way this black preacher from Atlanta, Georgia,
understood the source and sustenance of his courage
to praise and practice justice
in the face of what appeared to be overwhelming resistance
from people who claimed to share his Christian faith.

Here are three key quotes.

The first outlines King's understanding of nonviolent direct action,
a strategy he learned from Ghandi.

*Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension
that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront*

the issue. It seeks to so dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

The second testifies to his hope for the church,
disappointed as he is at its all-to-frequent support for an unjust status quo.

Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ekklesia and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom, They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone down the highways of the South on tortuous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have been dismissed from their churches, have lost the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment.

The third is King's concluding hope,
a hope that was to radiate through his famous "I Have a Dream ..." speech
to be delivered on the Washington Mall in August of 1963

Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

I have quoted extensively from Martin Luther King Jr this morning because I continue to be inspired by his example of faith in action.

His resolve and resilience in praising and practicing justice arose from his reverence for God's steadfast love and goodness.

Without that foundation, the clarity and courage he modeled would not have developed and had the impact they did.

I don't know whether Dr. King ever preached on our Memorize and Ponder verses this morning.

*Praise the Lord!
A give thanks to the Lord for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.
Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord,
or declare all his praise?
Happy are those who observe justice,
who do righteousness at all times.*

I imagine it would have been an attractive text for him. It begins, as did all of his work for greater justice, with God, with his goodness, his enduring steadfast love, and his mighty doings.

It is so easy to forget that reality. It is so easy to not notice this goodness and love is the air we breathe. It is so easy to get wrapped up in and defined by our "troubled times." It is so easy to hunker down in hiding in our "fear-drenched communities."

If we get trapped in that kind of 'ease,' then we cannot truly praise, yet along practice, the justice and righteousness that our text celebrates.

It's a false 'ease' that really is an illusion. The quote from Dr. King on our screen this morning reminds us of this.



Everything is connected in and through God's love for his creation. When one suffers, we all suffer. When one is treated unjustly, we are all treated unjustly.

That profound sense of the interconnectedness of everything
is crucial in striving for justice and righteousness.
When we initiate our thinking about these things with God's desires,
then our energies will be more likely to flow in alignment with God's goodness.
And that, after all, is one way to think about
our core calling as human beings.
How do we align our energy with its true source in God
to celebrate and serve justice and righteousness?

There is something else in this text that I think is worth noting this morning.

It connects praise with practice.
Worship and work flow from and into one another.
Praise and worship are activities in which
we come together at God's invitation
to spend time and attention with God in each other's company
so that our whole beings – our souls – can be nourished to flourish
in the grace of Jesus Christ.

All of this happens through the activity of the Holy Spirit.
God's communal being draws us lovingly into its circle of love
and then invites us further to accompany God
as together we go out to do justice and live righteously
as witnesses to the presence and power of God's goodness.

The eight white clergy in Birmingham 50 years ago
accused Dr. King of being an outside agitator.
I'm more inclined to see him as an inside agitator,
working in concert with the Holy Spirit
to stir up the instinct, the emotions, and the intellect
of people who are not being true to their divine calling,
of people who are not treating others as beloved children of God,
of people who are not praising and practicing God's goodness.

We still need those kinds of inside agitators.

We still need to be those kinds of inside agitators.

That's what providentially flows
from praising and practicing God's justice
like our text this morning encourages us to do.