

Being the Church in Jesus Christ: The Wisdom of Pastor Paul

Brentwood Sermons for 2015

Practicing Faith, Hope, and Love in the Midst of Depression

Feb 8, 2015

**Ps 41 & 1 Thess 5:1-11 – Text = 1 Thess 5:8
(680, 462, 373, 704)**

Three things have reminded me of the resilient leadership of Martin Luther King Jr this past week – a quote I found on his love of jazz as I was doing the Jazzthink e-zine, going to the Academy-Award nominated movie *Selma* with Jill, and going to a tribute concert for Pete Seeger last night in Surrey.

All of these events focused my attention on the possibilities of practicing faith, hope, and love in the midst of depressing situations.

Let's begin with the quote from King on jazz.
Here it is:

*Jazz speaks for life. The Blues tell the story of life's difficulties, and if you think for a moment, you will realize that they take the hardest realities of life and put them into music, only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph. ...
... in the particular struggle of the Negro in America there is something akin to the universal struggle of modern man. Everybody has the Blues. Everybody longs for meaning. Everybody needs to love and be loved. Everybody needs to clap hands and be happy. Everybody longs for faith.
In music, especially this broad category called Jazz, there is a stepping stone towards all of these.*

In the midst of the hardest realities of life –
depressing as they are for us at times,
and King faced some of the hardest of those realities
in his struggle for equal rights for blacks in the United States –
we can find new signs of hope, new sources of meaning,
new levels of love, and new depths of faith.
For King, this resilience in the face of depression
found a powerful inspiration in music,
especially in the music of the black church and jazz.
It inspired and moved him to take one step after another
into a better future for his people and the nation.

The movie *Selma* captures powerfully
the struggles involved in taking such steps.
There are the intellectual doubts about the strategy,
the emotional fears of violence and death,
the instinctive desire to pay back evil with evil,
or just run and hide.
It's hard to stay the course,
especially when that course involves non-violent resistance
to violent authorities and civic leaders.
In the face of powers in our lives that abuse and oppress,
it takes a particularly strong kind of resilience to resist
in dignity and truth,
modelling the kind of world that you want to co-create with God.

The Pete Seeger tribute concert brought back wonderful memories
of the music that most shaped my faith, hope, and love
in the 1960s, with its focus on beneficial social change.
Both folk and jazz traced their roots back to the blues,
A music that encouraged people
to be realistic about the hardest realities of their lives,
but not be defined by that negativity.
They sang about it to remind themselves and their fellow sufferers
that faith, hope, and love still existed
and, in fact, were far more powerful than whatever was bringing them down,
because faith, hope, and love
came from the creative source of flourishing life,
the energy that we Christians recognize in Jesus Christ.

It's easy to get depressed about our lives.
It was easy for Paul and his readers,
for Martin Luther King Jr and his colleagues,
and for many of us in this congregation.

I have not experience serious or clinical depression in my life.
My sympathy and sensibility for those who have
has found words in the experience of Parker Palmer,
a Quaker writer who has focused much of his attention
on how to flourish as an educator.
He describes depression as 'a living death'
in which we are frozen in darkness of winter.

While blind to any other realities while in that coffin,
he does find another reality that brings him back into the light.
Here's how he describes it:

*In that deadly darkness, the faculties I had always depended on collapsed.
My intellect was useless; my emotions were dead;
my will was impotent; my ego was shattered.
But from time to time, deep in the thickets of my inner wilderness,
I could sense the presence of something that knew how to stay alive
even when the rest of me wanted to die.
That something was my tough and tenacious soul.*

Then, in another place, he writes more
about practicing faith, hope, and love in the midst of depression:

*I do not believe that the God who gave me life wants me to live a living death.
I believe that the God who gave me life wants me to live life fully and well.
Now, is that going to take me to places where I suffer,
because I am standing for something or I am committed to something
or I am passionate about something that gets resisted and rejected by the society?
Absolutely.
But anyone who's ever suffered that way
knows that it's a life-giving way to suffer,
that if it's your truth, you can't not do it.
And that knowledge carries you through.
But there's another kind of suffering that is simply and purely death.
It's death in life, and that is a darkness to be worked through
to find the life on the other side.*

I think another inspiring example of this kind of conviction is Paul.
He was devoted to a suffering Saviour.
He suffered internally and externally himself.
He worked with and served people
who suffered for their faith.
Many of them, I'm sure, went through bouts of depression,
when intellect, emotions, and instincts were blacked out
by the pressures and problems that beset them.

That's why Paul's language of armour,
as a defense against the darkness of depression,
resonates so powerfully for us.
God has given us the breastplate of faith and love,
the helmet of hope,
all for our salvation as a people who are called to bless the world.

This armour will not prevent us from getting wounded,
from getting lost for a season in the darkness of doubt,
from sinking into the pit of despair from time to time.

It will feel like a living death.

But it is not,
because God is with us.

Nothing, as Paul assures the Roman church,
can separate us from the love of God
that is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the midst of the winters of our discontents,
when our faculties for flourishing seem useless,
we are surprised by faith, hope, and love
in ways we don't necessarily understand,
but in which we can rejoice.

That was Paul's experience of the Gospel.
That was Martin Luther King's experience of the Gospel.
That is our experience of the Gospel –
a God who will not let us go,
who suffers with us in order to bring us through that suffering
into the light and joy of his eternal commonwealth
where we are continually nourished to flourish
in the abundance of divine grace.

I trust, in some small but significant way,
that grace has touched and revived you this morning
in this time of worship.

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far
more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph 3:20-21)*