

Sunday, January 17, 2021

Sermon: Martin Luther King – Come and See Love and Justice in Action

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*Today we celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. We will also hear the story of Jesus calling his first disciples from **John 1:43-51**. Jesus is from Nazareth, but one of Jesus' first disciples asks, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Ouch! Well, let's find out together.*

I love being the pastor of this congregation for many many reasons. It has been for me a dream come true to be the pastor here at Clackamas United Church of Christ. When I was interviewing for this position a little over three years ago, I knew that this was a church that I wanted to be at. I knew that because this church does many things really well, and two things really well in particular. One of those things is that this church is committed to healing. This church has always had a commitment to healing, to love, to compassion, even for those that we may call our enemies as Jesus teaches. During this time I've heard the call for healing and I affirm that call. We need healing in our world. That's one of the things that I love about our church is that message. The other thing that we do really well at this church is that we pursue justice. I knew that this was a church that lived out the gospel message which includes healing, and also includes the pursuit of justice at the same time.

When I was interviewing with this church I learned that we were the first congregation in the United Church of Christ here in the northwest - Oregon, Washington - and maybe even in the United States, our previous pastor, Denise Andersen, led us through the process of becoming a Just Peace church. I think we were one of the very first in the United States, if not the first, to become a Just Peace congregation.

We have this commitment that is so desperately needed right now in our country of healing and of justice. And here's why this is so important. Because oftentimes when people talk about healing and unity it's often in a way that papers over or that turns a blind eye to the injustice that is in our world. Jesus does not call us to find healing for healing's sake. He does not call us to find unity for unity's sake. Jesus prays later in the Gospel of John, "May they be one as Jesus and God are one." That prayer is a prayer that if I pray honestly, I don't know about you but at least me, if I pray that prayer honestly I know that I am not one yet with my fellow human beings or with Jesus or with God. I continually have to pray this prayer. Why? Because there is so much injustice that continues in the world.

Jesus says to his disciples to follow him, to witness what he will be doing. He will be providing healing but he will also live in a way that brings more justice into the world. One of the issues that we have is that we often think that healing and justice are opposed to one another. We've already talked about mercy with our dear Muslim friend who said that God is the most merciful. God is the most merciful – and Jews, Christians and Muslims and many of the rest of us, even atheists, will agree that love without justice is virtually meaningless. But love and justice are not opposed to one another. They're not opposites. Mercy and justice within God are not opposites.

A lot of Christians at least say that there's a tension within God because while God is love, God also seeks justice as if they're opposed to one another within God. That breaks the oneness of God. There is no opposition within God. Love and justice meet together as the psalmist say. They kiss one another

they are not opposed to one another, they come together. How is that the case? Because from a Jewish, Christian and with our Muslim siblings, we can say that justice is not in these faith traditions. Justice is not primarily about punishment. Justice is about naming the injustice in the world, not primarily to punish individuals, although accountability is important, justice is about healing. Today we call this restorative justice. In the United States, we almost live as if justice only means punishment. Justice in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition is not primarily about punishing another, it's primarily about meeting the needs of the poor, the weak, the marginalized, that's what the prophets continually say.

All of the prophets from the ancient prophet Samuel in the Hebrew Scriptures to Jesus, and to our brother Muhammad, justice is about meeting the needs of the poor and the weak and the marginalized. Accountability is important, don't mishear me. Accountability is important but justice is primarily about reconciliation. And where do we see this? Throughout Christian history, we see this in our brother Martin Luther King, Jr. There's this great story near the beginning of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life where, he's the little known Martin Luther King, Jr. at this time, he becomes the voice of the Birmingham boycott when Rosa Parks took her seat and claimed her divine humanity that she was equal with a white person. And she sat in the front of the bus. She started the movement and Martin Luther King was called to be the voice of that movement in Montgomery, Alabama. And as he continued to name the injustice of racism in our world, in our nation, he got death threats to his house. Phone calls came to his house that said very nasty words that are inappropriate for church. They said you had better stop or we are going to kill you. He would receive those phone calls night after night. Throughout the hours of the night he would get these intimidating phone calls from people who wanted him to stop working for justice.

One night, King was at a meeting with other leaders of the boycott and he didn't realize this but while he was at the meeting there was a bomb that detonated at his house and his wife, Coretta, was there along with their newborn baby girl. Word made it to this meeting that King's house had been bombed and King saw all of the people there talking amongst themselves and he knew something was up. So he went to one of his best friends there at the meeting and he asked what was going on? And his friend told him his house had been bombed, so the meeting stopped and King went to his house and he saw that there had already been a crowd there. Police officers were already in his living room talking with his wife, that white journalists were already in his living room trying to figure out what happened. And he enters into this space and a crowd gathers at his yard and some people in the crowd who are supporters of King and this movement are starting to talk about turning violent.

In the face of this radical injustice, King, who has been working for a more just world, realizes that his non-violent commitment is at risk at this point. So King goes out to the crowd and gives one of his famous impromptu speeches. King says that this is where love and justice come together and kiss, as the psalmist says. King says don't get panicky, don't get your weapons, he who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that's what God in Jesus says to us. We are not advocating violence. I want you to love our enemies, be good to them, love them and let them know that you love them.

King goes on to tell them that he did not start this boycott and thank God for Rosa Parks, he says. I was asked by you to serve as your spokesman. I want it known the length and breadth of this land that if I am stopped, this movement will not stop. For what we are doing is right. What we are doing is just and God is with us. This is where King's commitment to justice and his commitment to healing, to love,

come together. They are not opposed. King lived his life in this way. And I want to give you an example of how this works in our world today.

You see, another prophet was out on Friday leading Clackamas UCC in holding up signs by our street as cars drove by. And this prophet named Amira Stanley, our Minister of Justice and Witness, called us to write one word on our signs for the new year. Those words included words of healing and words of justice. Most people who drove by honked and waved. We did get some people giving us messages that are also not suitable for church and, as they drove by, Amira wrote on her Facebook page that we sent them love and we waived them goodbye.

I just love being at this church for that very reason. We are all scared freaked out about the next week. I was listening to another one of our prophets you may not know him, he's a Lutheran pastor, a black man in Vancouver named Lenny Duncan. I was listening to a podcast he was in. Lenny has great books, so Google Lenny Duncan and listen to his stuff, read his books. Lenny said that evil will eat itself. What a great reminder that is for us. The monster will fight against itself. Are we witnessing that now? I think we are. Evil will eat itself.

Now that doesn't mean that we don't continue the struggle for a more just world. It means that we bring this desire for healing and this divine desire for justice together as Amira did by waving goodbye to the haters. Lenny trusts that evil will eat itself. As Martin Luther King continues to inspire so many of us to continue to work for justice, to continue to know the stats my friends, that racism is not something that ended in the 1960s. That racism continues to infect the United States today. That when our black brothers are sentenced to jail, they are sentenced to jail for 19 percent longer than our white brothers who commit the same crimes. Statistics like our black siblings, their households, make 57 percent as a white household on average. Why is that? They can't say it's the color of their skin because that would be racist. They can say that it's because of structures, the powers, and principalities that continue to infect the United States today.

Michelle Alexander's great book, *The New Jim Crow*, has taught us that the war on drugs that started with Ronald Reagan and continues with each presidency since, has broken up black families in a way that would never happen with white families. It has made it so that our black siblings, who who actually use drugs less than our white siblings, are unable to get jobs when they get out of jail. They struggle to get jobs if ever they can get jobs. Why? Because of racist structures that continue to infect our nation. That is the uncomfortable truth that we need to deal with as we continue to talk about finding healing in our world.

This is the message of Jesus, it is the message of Martin Luther King, it is the message that Amira proclaims and our brother, Lenny Duncan, proclaims. It is the message that we need to continue to proclaim here at Clackamas UCC. And we will continue to proclaim it as we seek a more just world and as we seek healing the divisions in our nation. We also seek healing the racism that continues to infect us. That is the journey and I am so glad that we are on this journey together. May God bless us as we continue the struggle that King laid before us in the United States, that Jesus laid before us 2000 years ago, that the prophets laid before Jesus, and that our brother, Muhammad, laid a little bit after Jesus and that we continue to struggle today. Friends, may God bless you, too. Amen