

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church

The 2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Year C     January 16, 2022

Text: A portion of the Letter from a Birmingham Jail     The Rev. Lucy D. LaRocca

This weekend, our nation remembers the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr on his birthday. In the church, King is celebrated on his feast day, which is the day of his death, April 4th.

Our first reading this morning came from MLK's famous 'Letter from the Birmingham Jail.' First, some background on this letter. In 1963, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference helped organize a number of sit-ins and non-violent marches with local civil rights leaders in Alabama to try to draw attention to the need for racial justice. King was arrested as part of these peaceful protests. Not everyone was supportive of his efforts.

A group of moderate white clergy wrote a letter called 'A Call to Unity.' In their letter, they criticized the means by which the SCLC and King sought to bring about racial justice. They thought that ending segregation and achieving equality should happen through the courts, rather than marching in the streets. These clergy, and many others, called King an extremist.

In response, King wrote his letter from the jail where he was being held. He expressed his sadness and frustration with those who seemed to agree with the idea of racial equality, but who didn't have the courage to speak out against racism, or to join the demonstrators. King saw the clergy's call for patience and unity as more about preserving the status quo, rather than about helping systemic change take place.

And he said, he would gladly accept the label of extremist, because it put him in the company of so many others who were called the same. The definition of an extremist is one with radical political or religious views, especially one who resorts to or advocates for extreme action. Mostly, we think of extremists as those who would resort to violence in order to see their passions and their ideas dominate in society. This usually means violence as with domestic extremists who propagate racism and hatred, or terrorists who want attention by any means.

But King said there are other extremists. Those whose convictions and faith compel them to take extraordinary action for the common good. Jesus, he said, was an extremist for love. Amos, an extremist for justice. Paul, an extremist for the gospel. And Martin Luther and Abraham Lincoln and John Bunyon. All extremists for what is true and right. All extremists in love, truth and goodness.

It is this type of extremist that King was proud to be; this type of extremist that he urged his fellow Christians to be.

This letter of Martin Luther King continues to speak to us in our time. Ugly manifestations of white supremacy continue. Displays of extreme hate, racism, and violence continue to shock this country that some naively thought was 'post-racist.' And the more subtle forms of racism continue: prejudices and slights in the workplace, schools, and neighborhoods.

King's letter calls us to counter that kind of hate and violence. He urges us to be peacemakers- in witness to God's love. In this way we stand in deepest solidarity with those who are the targets of hate. We show displays of strength not through bullying or intimidation, but through vulnerable love.

This is indeed a radical manifestation of our faith. Radical in the sense that it is foundational to our faith. That is the original definition of the word radical: the root of something. Jesus continually pushed back against systems that kept some in power and others permanently on the margins. Again and again, Jesus spoke truth to those in power and advocated for the vulnerable and abused. It was for this that he was killed.

We still have a long way to go to heal the wounds of slavery and racism that have festered in our country. Without acknowledging the harm that has been done, and the harm that continues to this day, we will not be able to move forward. Whether we are talking about a physical illness, an addiction, spiritual or emotional trauma, or a societal ill, the first step in the healing process is always to recognize and name the problem.

Beloved Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who died a few weeks ago, was a leading voice against apartheid in South Africa and helped to bring about an end to that system of segregation. He became the head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which sought to heal the deep wounds of his country through dialogue and reckoning with the past. At the end of his life, Tutu expressed dismay that South Africa continues to struggle with racial tension and economic inequality. He said that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was just a start, and that efforts to heal society need to be on-going. Truth telling and reconciliation have never been a 'one and done' proposition. They are foundational to our faith and practice as Christians.

We need to learn about the systems upon which our nation was founded and name the injustices and atrocities that occurred. And we need to be radical extremists, remembering the foundations of our faith and taking strong action to bring about God's dream of the beloved community where all are reconciled to one another and to God and liberty and justice are truly for all people.

This is the legacy of Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu, two passionate disciples of Jesus who used the gifts they had been given: their intellects, their courage, and their prophetic vision to work to heal the countries they loved.

I'll close this morning with the collect for the Feast of Martin Luther King.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, by the hand of Moses your servant you led your people out of slavery, and made them free at last: Grant that your church, following the example of your prophet Martin Luther King, may resist oppression in the name of your love, and may strive to secure for all your children the blessed liberty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.