

Epiphany 3C (1/27/2019)
 Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
 Psalm 19
 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

We tend to neglect the central purpose of Jesus' ministry, preferring a benign Messiah who does not expect us to change. But the reality into which he leads us is founded on the promise of real, physical liberation for those in captivity to injustice. Good news for the poor can feel like a threat to those who are not poor, but God realigns our relationships for the sake of our new life together, that we might all live fuller, more joyful lives consistent with God's dream for human community.

If we ignore history, we might assume that Martin Luther King, Jr. always enjoyed the high esteem we afford him today. Each year in mid-January, we revisit his most famous words about racial harmony and unity, celebrating his dream of a nation devoid of prejudice while patting ourselves on the back for the progress we've made since. King has become a sort of 20th-century mascot, endearing and nonthreatening, whose historical opponents we readily denounce as bad apples, a small minority hardened by hate. But the truth of King's ministry and martyrdom is more complicated and more troubling than the rosy picture we often paint. **His march for justice – racial, economic, and geopolitical – was uphill the entire way, and in the eyes of many Americans, he died not as a hero, but an enemy of the state.**

It's an exercise in honesty to remind ourselves that King was subjected to regular threats and hate mail. "Mr. King, Hang your head in shame," one anonymous piece read, "You are responsible for all of these riots and havoc in this country today." And another: "How can you be a minister and have such hatred in your heart for the 'white'-race and the Nation in general? Do return that 'Nobel-peace-prize'

that we bestowed upon you, (as a great honor) so we can give it to someone who really deserves it.”¹

We can try to convince ourselves that this kind of response was an aberration, that only a tiny fraction of the American population misunderstood and maligned King’s work. Or, we can acknowledge that King and his companions in the struggle for civil and human rights faced tremendous opposition at every turn, including the threat of violence. What’s more, we can admit that the Civil Rights movement was met not only with overt antagonism, but also idleness on the part of millions of Americans who passively resisted the change for which King finally gave his life.

Even fellow clergy who claimed to support the cause of racial equality called into question the wisdom and timeliness of King’s actions. He responded to them from his cell at Birmingham City Jail in a now-famous letter:

I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; ...who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom....²

The inaction of an apprehensive majority, in other words, is an even greater obstacle to justice than the activity of a hateful minority.

King’s critique calls our own commitment to justice into question. How often do we shrug off the ongoing movement for human rights by questioning the

¹ <https://splinternews.com/martin-luther-kings-hate-mail-eerily-resembles-criticis-1793850027>.

² “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” *A Testament of Hope*, 295.

methods of its proponents? How often do we allow the complexity of a social problem to dissuade us from engaging it? How often do we react defensively to prophetic calls for change for fear that someone else's dignity and empowerment might somehow threaten our own?

As followers of Jesus, we don't have the freedom to disregard the biblical mandate to do justice. We can't be the quiet, hesitant majority. At the onset of his public ministry, our Lord stands in the midst of his community and draws his inspiration from the Prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

It's a mission statement, a summary of Jesus' messianic intent. And, despite the centrality of this passage, it's often overlooked, perhaps because it forces us to acknowledge the world-turning purpose of all of Jesus' work: good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed – in short, new hope for all those we relegate to the margins. It's the key to understanding every healing, every teaching, every challenge to the status quo.

But we prefer a benign Messiah, one like the Martin Luther King of our popular imagination, one who does not expect us to change. We prefer a Lord who attends to our individual spiritual well-being but does not confront the ways we have arranged our common life to benefit some at the expense of others. **We want a gentle shepherd, a caring friend, a personal savior. But we'd rather not be exposed to Jesus the prophet, the one who upholds God's concern for the poor,**

the captive, the blind, and the oppressed – those whose interests God expects us to prioritize.

Dear church, good news for the poor can feel like a threat to those who are not poor. But, **we don't need to be afraid. Yes, the reality into which Jesus leads us is founded on the promise of real, physical liberation for those living in captivity to injustice. But God realigns our relationships for the sake of our new life together, that we all might live fuller, more joyful lives, consistent with God's dream for humankind.** This kind of life is what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community. It's a human fellowship grounded in the love of God, a community where no one suffers disproportionately on account of race or gender identity or sexual orientation or any other category of identity. It's life at its best.

Today we hear our Lord define his purpose again, a purpose that is rooted in our prophetic past, yet which calls us to costly discipleship again and again in our time. So, let's model our purpose on his, and continue to walk by faith into the uncertainty of change, all for the sake of the world God envisions for us, the world as it yet can be.