

Epiphany 3C (1/24/2016)

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 kingdom into which he leads us is founded on the promise of real 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 fool ourselves into believing 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 discrimination while patting ourselves on the back for the progress we've made since. He's become a sort of 20th-century mascot, this endearing and nonthreatening figure, and we readily condemn his historical opponents 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 tend to 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 civic saint, but an enemy of the state.

A member of the congregation I served in North Dakota once told the story of King's assassination as he experienced it while serving at Grand Forks Air Force Base. As word spread throughout the base that King had been shot, his commanding officer declared – in the presence of African-American servicemen – “It's about time.” We can try to comfort ourselves with the notion that this kind of response was an aberration, that this high-ranking military official represented only a tiny fraction of the American population that cheered King's murder. Or, we can acknowledge that King and his companions in the struggle for Civil Rights faced tremendous opposition at every turn, including the regular threat of violence. What's more, we can admit that antagonism to the Civil Rights

movement manifested not only in the form of overt hate, but also idleness on the part of millions of Americans who passively resisted the change for which King ultimately 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 from his cell at Birmingham City Jail in a 1963 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 the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council 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....¹

The inaction of a quiet majority, in other words, is an even greater obstacle to justice than the viciousness of a vocal minority.

King's indictment calls our own commitment to justice into question. How often do we shrug off the ongoing movement for Civil Rights by questioning the methods of its proponents? How often do we allow the complexity of a social problem to dissuade us from actively 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 conspicuousness of this passage, it's often overlooked, perhaps because it forces us to

¹ "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," *A Testament of Hope*, 295.

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. And it's a call to large-scale change.

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 cares for 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. We'd rather not be exposed to the Lord who points us, for instance, to the persistent reality of systemic racism in our country today.

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 kingdom into which Jesus leads us is founded on the promise of real 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 new life is what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community, a human fellowship in which no one is subject to poverty, or disproportionate incarceration, or serial disadvantages on account of race or any other category of identity. It's life at its best.

Today, we hear our Lord state his purpose again, a purpose that is rooted in our prophetic past, yet which calls us to costly discipleship again in this generation. And so, we model our purpose on his, and 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.