

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on January 17, 2021.

## **MARTIN LUTHER KING JR: A POSITIVE VISION**

***But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos 5:24***

As you may recall, during this program year we are focusing on a series presenting people we call Luminaries. Except for the Advent/Christmas season and Lent, we are exploring the lives of Christians who illuminate aspects of the Christian faith. They serve as examples of truth and lived practices that can inspire us to be more faithful in our striving to follow Jesus.

Today we focus on the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr. It is hard to believe that it has been more than fifty years since Dr. King was killed in Memphis. This means more than two thirds of Americans have no contemporary memory of his life and work. It is important for us to remember his leadership in helping to end legal segregation and affirming the rights of all to participate in the political process.

There are many lessons we can learn from the life of Martin Luther King. He is another example of an imperfect saint. We learned from Augustine that followers of Jesus are not perfect. King had blemishes in his personal conduct, but these do not cancel all his accomplishments. I had originally planned to focus primarily on King's practice of non-violence in the face of violence. King incarnated Jesus' command to "turn the other cheek."

But the events of the last year have changed my focus. We have lived through a very dramatic and demoralizing year. I am not talking about the pandemic. During the last 12 months we have seen all kinds of scenes of destruction across our nation. Protests morphed into riots where Court Houses were attacked. We witnessed Police stations and whole city blocks burned to the ground. We saw statues representing the founding of our nation toppled. Then ten days ago we saw the pictures of people breaking windows in our capital and occupying the offices of duly elected officials.

This happened in the background of an election year full of vitriol and over the top rhetoric. It seemed that everyone was expected to take one side in the political struggle. This included not just political actors, but media, business, and every other institution in our country. You were not only expected to disagree with your opponents but hate them as well. Even if in normal times you might agree with the other side on some issue, now you must disagree. It seems like political polarization has come to affect every aspect of our lives – even sports.

For me personally, this has gotten so bad that I have stopped regularly watching news some eight months ago. There is not even one person I want to hear speak. The overblown language and reckless charges made by all sides completely turn me off. Reading the news does not affect my blood pressure as much as listening to the politicians and talking heads.

During the last year, it seems to me there have been only two topics of conversation. The health crisis has been number one, but not far behind has been the toxicity of our public square. I have heard so many people asking the questions, “Has it ever been this bad?”, or “What can we do about all this?”

The answer to the first question is yes. On Saturday January 9, there was a review in the Wall Street Journal of a book called “The Patriots.” This book tells the story of the relationship between John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. The first paragraph reads:

**Fake news, partisan bickering and juvenile name-calling is nothing new in American politics. The election of 1800 was so savagely fought that it resulted in a deadly duel, a constitutional amendment and a life long estrangement among the Founding Fathers. Whatever we might think of modern political discourse, present-day mud-slingers are relative amateurs when stacked against their 18<sup>th</sup>-century forebears.**

I believe it can give us some comfort to know that there have been times of great polarization in the past and the nation has survived. Those who lived through the 1960’s can remember wondering if we could ever put things back together after Vietnam, and we did.

For an answer to the second question of “What can we do.” I believe that we can look to the example of Martin Luther King Jr. He can teach the followers of Jesus how to speak in the public square. There are two important lessons that Martin Luther King Jr. models for us. He both presented the social change he wanted with a positive vision and he was motivated by love.

First the positive vision. King was not merely a scold, who told people what was wrong, he cast a positive vision and larger purpose. He was like Amos who not only criticized the status quo but also shared the positive image of justice flowing like water. King was like the Book of Revelation speaking of a new Heaven and a new Earth. This calling people to a higher vision is what is missing today.

Take for example the continued battle to end racism in our common life. Two years ago the *New York Times* began what was called the 1619 project. The 1619 project claims the true founding of America was not Jamestown, or the landing of the Mayflower, or the proclamation of the Declaration of Independence or the ratification of the Constitution. No, the 1619 project claims the founding occurred in August of 1619 when 20 Africans were brought ashore and sold in Virginia. In the ideology of this project our nation is not only flawed, but basically corrupt and almost unredeemable.

Contrast that image to Dr. King’s speech in Washington in 1963:

**Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.**

**But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so, we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.**

**In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."**

**But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.**

This is a positive vision. Instead of claiming the nation is fundamentally evil, as the 1619 project, King claims that nation has failed to live up to its founding. He gives a clarion call to the nation to become who we had said we were. He is appealing to the better angels of human nature. The speech takes its name from these words which re-enforce that message.

**And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.**

**I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."**

When the followers of Jesus participate in the public square we should be positive. We need as much as possible to present a vision that is life giving. All too often Christians shout about what they are against. Christians can become nattering nabobs of negativism. When we speak as an individual or as a group proclaim what you are for, be an agent of positive change. Seek to build rather than tear down.

In this present climate of division and hate, Martin Luther King Jr. teaches us that the tools we use to bring change matters.

**But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of**

**bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.**

King reminds us to use the same tools that Jesus used; persuasion, compassion and education. We are never to use violence to get our way. The pictures of burning police stations and shattered Capital glass are antithetical to any true follower of Jesus. Speech that calls for the cancelation of fellow human beings is not worthy of a Christian.

The tactics of Martin Luther King are built upon the foundation of love. Love for God and love for every other human being. We are living in a time when the word hate is used all to often. Each side in our polarized time has stoked hate for its opponent. We read quote after quote of people, from all sides, calling people traitors who should be lined up and shot.

It is fine for a follower of Jesus to say they hate racism or war or high taxes or any other policy, but it is never appropriate to say I hate another human person. Every person is a child of God and no matter how twisted they may be in our eyes, we must treat them with the respect of a person created in the image of God.

There are some people who seem to believe that all the negativity in our corporate life will go away this week. It will not. We have deep differences in our nation. These disputes are born of culture, history, experience and belief. They will not magically disappear.

But we can change how we talk about and treat each other. We can seek out those we disagree with and listen respectfully to their ideas. Martin Luther King Jr. was on the receiving end of horrendous hate speech in every platform. In letters and speeches people sought to bring him down. The hate towards him was palpable. Yet he did not give in to hate. He did not return evil for evil. He followed Jesus in giving his life in love for others.

In a book published shortly before his death called "Strength to Love," he wrote:

**Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."**

May we follow Martin Luther King's example of bringing the love of Jesus to the public square. May we be agents of reconciliation, may we seek to build not tear down, may we work to bring people together and may we seek the common good over our narrow interests. May we find a common dream big enough to include all of God's children.