

CALLED TO JUSTICE

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
Delivered at University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
January 19, 2003

"Follow me," says Jesus to Philip in today's gospel reading,ⁱ and Philip immediately takes up the call to discipleship. Then he contacts his friend Nathanael and declares, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."ⁱⁱ But Nathanael is dubious and resists the call to follow Jesus, saying "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Not until Jesus demonstrates superhuman knowledge does Nathanael see the light. He proclaims, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, other doubters come later, like the Apostle Thomas.

In a similar vein, the last of the Israelite judges, Samuel, mishears God calling his name three times at night.^{iv} He assumes that it's the voice of his mentor, the priest Eli. Eli keeps telling him "No, it's not I" and sending him back to bed. But Eli finally perceives that it's truly God who's calling. And then he instructs Samuel how to respond: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." The Bible is full of misheard, misunderstood and resisted calls from God, including those that came to great figures like Moses, minor prophets like Jonah, and the young rich man who approaches Jesus to ask about how to achieve eternal life.^v

So it is in our day. Tomorrow we celebrate a national holiday to honor one of the greatest of our modern prophets, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet, he had no intention of becoming a national civil rights leader and a national spiritual leader. It all began, as he wrote in his Letter from the Birmingham City Jail, when "I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery."^{vi} Just three weeks before he'd refused a nomination for the presidency of the Montgomery NAACP, claiming that he needed to devote his time to his church work and his family.^{vii} Then he was totally surprised when he was asked to lead the boycott and given "only 20 minutes to prepare the most important speech of his life... He had always taken at least fifteen hours to prepare a sermon."^{viii} He rose magnificently to the occasion, wanting to give the people of Montgomery "a passion for justice."^{ix} The rest is history.

Are each of us here ready to be called to justice? Have we been ready in the past? Will we be ready in the future? A great blueprint, I believe, is laid out for us in Dr. King's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," which I'd like to work through for the rest of this sermon. As you may remember, it was sent in the form of an open letter on April 16, 1963, in response to an open letter in January of that year from eight prominent liberal white Alabama clergy. Those clergy had entreated Dr. King to continue to work for racial justice through the court system, warning him that nonviolent resistance would have the effect of inciting violence in Birmingham.^x The letter will also be referred to in next week's sermon by Dr. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, so you can consider these two weeks as a short sermon series on the same text!

What strikes me first about the letter is that King's understanding of justice requires deep respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all other people, including the oppressor. He notes that the largest and best known black nationalist group of his time, led by Elijah Muhammad, refers to white people as incurable "devils."^{xi} Instead, King sees all people as created in God's image and asks, in Jesus' words, that you "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you."^{xii} King is genuinely polite to a fault with the eight white ministers, calling them "My Dear Fellow Clergymen" at the beginning, and begging their forgiveness at the end "If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth and is indicative of an unreasonable impatience."^{xiii}

On the other hand, the call to justice requires that he speak the truth clearly to their face. King writes: "Few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action." He sees himself as part of a social revolution, and he also expresses gratitude to those white brothers and sisters who have committed themselves to it, "all too small in quantity, but...big in quality."^{xiv} King has strong words, though, for those "all too many" white clergy who "have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained-glass windows... So [he continues] here we are, moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading people to higher levels of justice."^{xv} I hear those words now as continuing condemnation, not only as Sunday morning remains the most segregated time in America, but also as so many churches remain likewise willing to dogmatize, excuse and promote institutional homophobia, reducing sexually-active gays and lesbians to defectives or second class citizens, even as those churches claim to be working on their institutionalized racism. Taillights, from my perspective, rather than headlights leading people to higher levels of justice.

The call to justice is not just local. King was criticized as an "outside agitator" interfering in local affairs. In response, he refers to the prophets of Israel who "left their little villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns."^{xvi} He describes the Apostle Paul leaving his little village of Tarsus to carry "the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world." King explains that he is "cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states." Therefore, he "cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham." These words from his letter have been often quoted: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."^{xvii} [Close quote] So now I believe we're called to be concerned about torture wherever it is practiced, about AIDS in Africa, about the effect of globalization on Asia, about capital punishment in Texas, and about terrorism as it affects people around the world.

The call to justice requires direct action, always non-violent in King's view, but always assertive when negotiations have broken down. Direct action for him includes boycotts, demonstrations, sit-ins -- and lots of other creative activities short of destruction of property and

harm to other human beings. But it's intolerable to stay with words alone, when promises have been broken, when negotiations are not in good faith, when justice delayed becomes justice denied. In other famous words, King explains that "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."^{xviii}

That may also mean that laws need to be broken. Civil disobedience has a long and proud tradition going back to biblical martyrs in both Testaments, although there have been traditional conditions that King continues to insist upon: First, the law itself must be unjust, which for King means out of harmony with the law of God or with moral law that can be universalized. The classic example he gives is Nazi laws: "We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was 'legal,'" but King would have wanted to aid and comfort his Jewish brothers and sisters at the time even though it was illegal."^{xix} Second, breaking an unjust law must be done openly and, third, with a willingness to accept the penalty. Then, going to jail and arousing the conscience of the community over the law's injustice actually expresses the highest respect for law. So, for example, in recent memory there have been many in South African prisons challenging apartheid laws, environmentalists in American prisons challenging laws that protect or encourage logging, and dissidents in Chinese prisons challenging laws that curtail freedom of speech and assembly. King himself was in prison because refusal of a parade permit denied his First Amendment rights to peaceful protest.^{xx} Would that all those against a war on Iraq might have been on the streets of San Francisco and Washington, D.C. yesterday, protesting, even if no parade permit had been issued.

The call to justice, like the call to discipleship of Christ, is never easy. Personally, I remember weeping on the Boston common some twenty-five years ago as the pope preached on the parable of the young rich man. I knew that I, like that young man, wasn't ready and willing to do what Jesus asked: sell everything I owned and give it to the poor. And I too went away grieving. I remember reading King's Birmingham Jail letter in 1963 as a high schooler, as a suburban white boy, and finding it much too radical to affirm myself. In fact, it made me deeply uncomfortable, defensive, and resistant. What am I ready for now? What are you ready for now? Like Samuel, how many times will we need to be called before we know who's calling and how to respond? Like Nathanael, how long will we ask whether anything good can come out of Nazareth, before we see the very Son of God standing before us? We honor the life and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. today because he was called, he answered, he acted, and he gave his life at the age of 39 in the understanding that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. May we not rest until we can share in his vision of peace.

NOTES

-
- i. John 1:43-51.
 - ii. John 1:45.
 - iii. John 1:49.
 - iv. See I Samuel 3: 1-10.
 - v. Mark 10:17-23.
 - vi. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in James Melvin Washington (ed.), A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1986), p. 298.
 - vii. Stephen B. Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1982), pp. 60, 64.
 - viii. Ibid., p. 65.
 - ix. Martin Luther King, Jr., words quoted in Oates, Trumpet, p. 65.
 - x. Washington, Testament, p. 289.
 - xi. King, "Letter," pp. 296-297.
 - xii. Ibid., p. 297.
 - xiii. Ibid., pp. 289, 302.
 - xiv. Ibid., p. 298.
 - xv. Ibid., p. 299.
 - xvi. Ibid., p. 290.
 - xvii. Ibid., p. 290.
 - xviii. Ibid., p. 292.
 - xix. Ibid., pp. 294-295.
 - xx. Ibid., p. 294.