

A FREEDOM CHURCH OF THE POOR

Acts 4.29-35

April 8, 2018

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[Music: "Come Sunday" by Duke Ellington]

According to a story on KUOW, on April 4th, 1968, after the announcement that Dr. King had been assassinated, radio stations started playing Duke Ellington's "Come Sunday" throughout the day and frequently throughout the next week.

Since I heard the news yesterday of the passing of the Rev. Dr. Samuel B. McKinney, pastor emeritus of Mt. Zion Baptist Church and a civil rights advocate here and around the country, I have been wondering what kind of remembrance there will be of him. I guess the question for all of us on this Sunday is whether or not the movement for justice and the dismantling of white supremacy will die with him. Of if we will be part of that ongoing uprising that will not rest until all people can say: "Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, we're free at last."

The day before he was killed, Dr. King had been preaching at the Mason Temple in Memphis, the mother church of the predominately African-American Church of God in Christ.

Dr. King had come to Memphis to march with sanitation workers who were on strike, protesting their poverty wages and dangerous working conditions that left Robert Walker and Echol Cole dead after being crushed to death by faulty equipment.

He was there as part of a national "Poor People's Campaign;" a campaign that intended to bring several thousand people and leaders from 53 different organizations representing Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Rican, and whites to Washington D.C. to call for, I quote, "radical redistribution of economic power." Dr. King called it a

“freedom church of the poor.” If that doesn’t get you in trouble, I don’t know what would.

By the time he got to Memphis, Dr. King was already under pressure. He was under surveillance by the FBI that wanted, according to Drew Dellinger in the *Atlantic*, to (in their words) “prevent the RISE OF A ‘MESSIAH’ who could unify, and electrify, the militant black nationalist movement.”

He was being pressured by other religious leaders who thought Dr. King should leave poverty and economic justice alone.

The day before his sermon at Mason Temple, a riot broke out and Dr. King was tired and depressed. He confided in friends that he thought he had been a failure.

On April 3rd, Dr. King got up to speak. He imagined all the times and places in history that he might have been allowed to see. And then he said:

Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, “If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy.” Now that’s a strange statement to make, he says, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion is all around ... But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding – something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City, Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee – the cry is always the same – “We want to be free.”

I’m hoping that sounds vaguely familiar. Last Sunday was Easter. And the Crossans told us that there is a big difference between the way we celebrate Easter in the West and how it is celebrated by Christians in the

East. In the West, Christ rises magnificently and triumphantly ... and utterly alone. In the East, Christ breaks into the kingdom of death and destroys all the locks, and throws away all the keys, and sets everybody free – everybody.

Christians in the East understand resurrection as *anastasis*, literally up/rising. It is this shining moment in human evolution that empowers all humanity to be free!

So here we have the events of a twentieth century Holy Week – Dr. King standing with those who are poor and oppressed, preaching a gospel of love and nonviolent resistance; under surveillance by a government worried about the rise of a “Messiah” who could energize and electrify the people; feeling pressure from religious and political leaders to tone it down. And Dr. King goes to the pulpit of Mason Temple Church of God in Christ and says: I am happy to be here; I am happy to be witnessing an uprising of freedom and economic justice here and around the world.

And the next day, he was dead.

The Poor People’s Campaign went on. In May, about 50,000 people marched on D.C. And they set up an encampment on the National Mall. Do you know what they called it?

Resurrection City.

And so here we are this morning. Remembering the death of Dr. King and grieving the loss of Dr. McKinney. And we have to decide again this morning if we will be part of that resurrection story – that uprising – or not.

And you know, if the spirit of Dr. King is still alive. So is the spirit of his detractors.

Any time I stray into something that sounds political, I hear from folks who say; “Dr. Phillips” (they don’t actually say that; I’m just trying it out) you should stay out of it. Your degree isn’t in economics. This isn’t your business.”

But I am increasingly taking a page out of Charles Dickens when his character, Marley, says: “Business? Humanity was my business. The common welfare was my business. Charity, mercy, forbearance, benevolence, were all my business.”

And that brings me to the lesson for today from Acts 4. You will find the text printed in your bulletin.

Acts 4.29-35, the *Inclusive Bible*

After the resurrection, the early followers of Jesus prayed together: “And now, O God, take note of the people’s threats and help your faithful ones to proclaim your message with all boldness: stretch out your hand to heal and to work miracles and marvels through the name of your holy child Jesus.”

As they prayed, the house where they were assembled was shaken; they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to proclaim the word of God boldly. The community of believers was of one mind and one heart. None of them claimed anything as their own; rather, everything was held in common. The apostles continued to testify with great power to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and they were all given great respect; nor was anyone needy among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them and give the money to the apostles who distributed the money to any members who might be in need.

It sounds like those early followers of the risen Jesus were a “freedom church of the poor.” They were an uprising of courage. They created a community. They put themselves on the line for those in need. It sounds like that twentieth century movement of Dr. King.

And I think there might be some lessons here for whatever twenty-first century uprising we might imagine.

First, it takes courage - taking note of people's threats and proclaiming your message boldly anyway.

Let's be clear. Any time you start messing with the status quo, there are going to be threats. Working for change makes comfortable people *uncomfortable*.

It takes courage to work for change.

And it seems to me that there is precious little courage in our government right now. Who will stand up to the forces that would destroy our democracy? Who is willing to do anything about income inequality and poverty? Who will stand up – really stand up – to racism?

If there is a lack of courage, that isn't a political issue. It's a spiritual one. Those early followers of Jesus – that first “freedom church of the poor” – knew they had to pray for boldness in the face of threats that would most assuredly come.

I love that old hymn by Harry Emerson Fosdick:
Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore ...
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, serving you whom we adore.

Fosdick is right, I think, that an uprising that is willing to take on the obstructions that keep us from meeting human need will take some wisdom and some courage.

But I don't think it is just the courage to stand up against something. The uprising of those early followers of Jesus was about the courage to speak on behalf of healing and the unexpected. “Stretch out your hand,” they pray, “to heal and to work miracles.”

We need some healing and some miracles today. We need the boldness not only to stand up against those evils we deplore but the courage to imagine new possibilities.

What is that old line from Star Trek? “To boldly go where no one has gone before.” That takes courage. There are risks involved. There is the possibility of disappointment. And the potential for failure.

It is Dr. King confiding to his friends that night that he thought he was a failure and then stepping out on to that chancel anyway and speaking eloquently again about that vision he had for the world.

What was the civil rights movement if it wasn't courageous imagination about how the world could be rather than the perceived safety of settling for the world as it was?

A “freedom church of the poor” would take spiritual power and a courageous imagination that could change the world.

And it's true. I am not an economist. But I know someone who is. I've met him and he is someone from right here in the Northwest. David Korten. And he says that we have a choice to make about how we imagine the world. We can choose Empire – that ongoing system of domination – or we can choose the kind of partnership he calls “Earth Community.” Or what Dr. King called the “Beloved Community.”

Making that decision isn't just about deciding to build better organizations and more efficient systems. It's about committing ourselves to build communities where belonging is a spiritual practice - where belonging isn't just about welcome and acceptance. It's about the responsibility we have for one another. It's about the way we belong to one another and the world.

In that early uprising, people felt so strongly about community and the responsibility of belonging to one another that they sold everything they

had and created a common fund to meet everyone's need. It was – let's not put too fine a point on it – a redistribution of wealth.

That twentieth century uprising, Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign or the freedom church of the poor, demanded federal funding for full employment, a guaranteed annual income, anti-poverty programs, and housing for the poor.”

Whether any of that makes good economic policy or not is only part of the story. The underlying spiritual reality is that we belong to one another.

And it's as simple as this: We can define that belonging in terms of ownership or relationship.

In that early uprising of the community of Jesus, belonging as relationship won.

In that twentieth century “freedom church of the poor,” relationship won. Dr. King said that the gathering of all those people to stand together around a new way of belonging to one another was “the high point of the entire campaign.” They were, like that first century uprising, a community of “one mind and one heart.”

The truth is – and you already know this but we all forget – we own very few things; ultimately, we own nothing. But we have a relationship with everything. And how we belong to one another has everything to do with the kind of relationships we are cultivating with everything and everyone around us.

Rabbi Lerner says:

Energy always flows either toward hope, community, love, generosity, mutual recognition, and spiritual aliveness or it flows toward despair, cynicism, fear that there is not enough, paranoia about the intentions of others, and desire to control.

In other words, we have a choice to make this morning. Will we define our belonging as ownership or relationship? Will we focus our energy on despair, cynicism, fear, and the desire to control? Will we focus our energy on ownership? Or will we focus that precious spiritual energy we all have on hope and community and love and generosity? On relationship.

I don't know what it took for Dr. King that night in Memphis to call up the spiritual energy necessary to walk out to that pulpit. The threats were coming fast and furious. His movement had, in some ways, been betrayed. By his own admission, he was tired and depressed.

Maybe he prayed for courage and strength. Maybe he was buoyed by the energy of the crowd. Maybe he realized that even his own life did not ultimately belong to him because his last public words were: *Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

And today, if you hear that voice – if you hear the echo of that voice down in the depths of your own soul – please, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Drew Dellinger, "The Last March of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *The Atlantic*, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/04/mlk-last-march/555953. Dr. King's last sermon is printed in the collection, *I Have A Dream*, ed. James M. Washington (HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), pp. 193-203. David C. Korten, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community* (Kumarian Press, Inc. and Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. 2006). The quote from Rabbi Lerner is on p. 27.