

Sunday, January 15, 2017

Seattle First Baptist Church

John 1:29-42

Where Do We Go From Here?

When Tim asked me to preach on this particular Sunday, it was still in those halcyon days before Ned and Michelle has announced publically their departure, before 2016 has dealt its final blows in the deaths of so much talent especially meaningful to people of my generation, and when most of the country, including the current president elect, thought the outcome on November 8 would be very different than it turned out. And to top it all off, there was the abysmal game in Atlanta yesterday, so we don't even have any more football to look forward to.

So – instead of hopeful for the ongoing optimism of the past eight years, we enter this particular week more with a sense of caution, fearful of what the days ahead may bring. As we celebrate the life and memory of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr this week, I – and I am sure many others – wonder what Dr. King might think and say about what lies before us. And – how do we honor the work of Dr. King in what we say and do in the coming days. In other words, where *do* we go from here?

Part of me would simply like to read Dr. King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. After all it was addressed to faith leaders and the churches they represented. Although written on April 16, 1963, its truth still resonate today. And I will refer to parts of it in the minutes ahead.

So here we are. Christmas and Epiphany have come and gone. It's not clear what the days ahead might bring for our community here, for our nation, and for our world. We grieve the departure of Ned and Michelle, even while we rejoice in the new opportunities that lie before

them. Many of us grieve the end of an administration, whose progressive values seem to align with ours, while fearful of the new administration that has caused so much pain, fear, and anxiety even before it is officially inaugurated. I don't know about you, but sometimes I simply want to give a heavy sigh and retreat into my own little shell for the next four years.

As people of faith, how do we authentically live into our calling to be followers of the peasant from Galilee that upended the world and changed the course of history? How do we know when we are doing the right thing? And how do we take care of ourselves and others on the journey?

When Jesus first appeared on the scene, those who would become his followers likely had the same questions. In today's gospel, we see the first glimpses of this.

Starting in verse 35. The next day, John was by the Jordan again with two of his disciples. Seeing Jesus walk by, John said, 'Look! There's the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard what John said and followed Jesus.

When Jesus turned around and noticed them following, he asked them, "What are you looking for?"

They replied, "Rabbi," which means teacher – "where are you staying?" "Come and see," Jesus answered.

So they went to see where he was staying, and they spend the rest of the day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.

One of the two who had followed Jesus after hearing John was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. The first thing Andrew did was to find Simon Peter and say, "We've found the Messiah!"

Andrew brought Simon to Jesus, who looked hard at him and said, “You are Simon ben-Jonah; I will call you “rock” – that is “Peter”.

This seems an odd interaction. Jesus asks, “What are you looking for?” and the response is “Where are you staying?” Really? What does that have to do with anything?

But perhaps, “Where are you staying” really means, I want to see how you live. I want to see who you spend time with, what you read, what you talk about, what you do. I want to see if your life is authentic. I want to know if you are the real deal.

In these early days, Andrew and the others knew nothing about Jesus. They had been attracted to the teachings of John the Baptizer and had been following him. But all along, John indicated that he was only there to point the way to the one who followed – the one who would be the real deal. So when John indicated that Jesus is the one, Andrew wants to find out for himself.

The gospel doesn’t tell us what happened during that first day that Andrew spent with Jesus, but at the end of their time together, he was convinced that he had found the Messiah and could not wait to tell his brother about it. Somehow, in what was said and done, he knew Jesus was the real deal. And it caused him to change his entire life – to leave everything he knew – his career, his family, his home, and to follow.

One of the questions I had when reading today’s gospel, was “Did first century people have existential crises?” Historians who have studied that period seem to think that most people accepted their lot in life. They mostly stayed where they were born, took on the career of their parents, didn’t make waves to draw the attention of the authorities or religious leaders, and eventually died in the same town. What would make them leave everything they knew for something different?

What makes any of us leave what we know for something different?

Unlike our first century counterparts, we seem to live in a perpetual state of existential crisis. It is almost part of the American mythos that we achieve more than the generation before – that we move onto bigger and better things. There is always the question of “Am I living the right life? Am I doing the right thing? What is my responsibility to others?”

In a time of unlimited possibility and unceasing information, we can live in a constant state of perpetual existential anxiety.

But I would venture to say, that if you have chosen to include yourself in this faith community, that you have resolved a few of those questions. I would venture to say that you do think that you have responsibility to others – that your faith and or your values tell you that we are all brothers and sisters on this earth together, no matter the differences between us – that when one of us falls we all fall – that one of us is denied rights – or even basic human dignity, that we all are denied that same human dignity.

Perhaps that is why we – as much as a Baptist can – revere Dr. King as one of our saints. After all, it was Dr. King who told us “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

In his Letter from the Birmingham Jail, as local clergy had been admonishing him for his presence in Birmingham and his methods, Dr. King directly addresses the church – he writes:

“On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South’s beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. Over and over I have found myself asking: ‘What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?’”

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.

Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

And he continues:

In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.

There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain

sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent--and often even vocal--sanction of things as they are.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

Perhaps I have once again been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ekklesia and the hope of the world.

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I love that he ends this strong admonishment of established religion with a vision of hope and beauty.

We don't know what the days ahead will bring. We see blatant racism, sexism, misogyny, islamophobia, anti-semitism, xenophobia, homophobia...and all the other phobias and isms on the rise. And we fear that our nation is taking one gigantic step backwards. I have been thinking about the language and actions that have risen through the past election cycle – how disturbing they have been. Yet, much of this language was the norm when I was growing up. And after the tape of the president elect and Billy Bush was released, women everywhere spoke up to say that they experienced this type of degradation all the time.

The day after President Obama was first elected in November of 2008, my friend Marilyn told this story. Every morning, on her walk about her neighborhood on Mercer Island, she would encounter a man doing sidewalk work. And every day she would say good morning to him as she walked by. Not once did this black man lift his head or return her greeting, until the day after the presidential election of 2008. That morning, when Marilyn greeted him, he lifted his head, gave her a big smile, and said “Good morning”. Marilyn concluded, “Today, we live in a different world.”

Yes the world has changed – and we must fight to keep from moving backward. And we do it, like Dr. King, in the light and love of Jesus. Dr. King reminds us, “We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. The one who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.” While also reminding us that, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”

Something that I found most disturbing in this past year, was how people who opposed one another spoke to and about one another. It is one thing to have a passionate dialog about our differences. It is quite another to

resort to name calling and labeling those who disagree with us. In our house, there are two words that are not allowed – “idiot” and “stupid”. We are not allowed to say that about others or about ourselves. I don’t think it helps anything when we use this language about others, no matter how wrong we might think that they are.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I think we must speak out strongly about what is happening in our nation and our world. I actually love that this particular inauguration is happening in the week that we honor Dr. King, because it calls us to speak out, to march, to protest, to resist. I know in Seattle, there is the march to honor Dr. King tomorrow and the Women’s March on Saturday – which I think also honors the life and legacy of Dr. King as well. I’m guessing that if he were still alive, he would be joining the with thousands that will be marching in Washington, DC.

Yes, we must speak out and act out against injustice. As Dr. King said, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter.” And, “Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.”

But we must also take care of ourselves and others along the way. One of the things that strikes me about Jesus when I read the gospels is how often he goes off by himself to spend time alone and pray. And if Jesus needed to do that, I definitely need to do that! We do no good if we burn ourselves out. I know when I get tired, I find myself getting anxious, angry, and bitter. None of this is helpful in furthering the cause of justice. We must prepare ourselves for what lies ahead.

And we must hold one another up. Today’s gospel tells us that the first thing that Andrew does after spending the day with Jesus is to go tell his brother about what he had experienced. He wants Simon to come along on the journey with him. When Jesus meets Simon, he gives him a new name, “Petra” – which means rock. He would become the solid one on

which others could lean, although not perfect by any means. Ram Dass reminds us that “we are all just walking one another home.” We must remember that we are not alone on this journey, to lift one another up along the way.

Again, I ask, “Where do we go from here?”

We don't know what the days ahead will bring...what they might require of us. But we are on this journey together. We pray the words of our opening hymn, “Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour.” And in the words of our closing hymn, Lead on, eternal sovereign
till sin's fierce war shall cease,
and holiness shall whisper
the sweet amen of peace.
For not with swords' loud clashing
or roll of stirring drums
with deeds of love and mercy
the heavenly kingdom comes.

And as our beloved Pastor Tim reminds us weekly, “Today if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

Amen.