

Walter and Martin
The Rev. David C. Bloom
Seattle First Baptist Church—January 14, 2018

Matthew 5:43-48

I John 4:7-8; 11-12

One scarcely knows where to begin this morning. When the President uses a degrading expletive to describe some of the countries of origin in Africa and Latin America of many of our refugees and proposes that recipients of Medicaid be required to work for their benefits, when their health is already at risk—and doing both of these in the same week, I am once again staggered into disbelief that this could be the public face of our nation. But it is. All we need to do is look at the headlines in the media across the globe. A cruel irony is that Trump's immigrant expletive apparently occurred when he had taken a break from preparing a statement for the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. But ironies abound in this man's world, and his grasp of reality is alarming, at the very least. I am reminded of Joseph Welch's admonition to Senator Joe McCarthy during McCarthy's anti-communist tirade in his 1950's senate hearings: "Until this moment, Senator, I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness. You've done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?"

A sense of decency does seem to be in short supply in our national politics these days, when wars and rumors of wars, political rifts that are fracturing our nation, resurgent racism, anti-immigrant hysteria, persistent poverty and homelessness all threaten the very foundations of our democracy.

If Martin Luther King, Jr. had lived, he would be turning 89 tomorrow, January 15, the very day on which our nation honors him this year. 89! As he said on the eve of his assassination in Memphis in April of 1968, where he had come to support the garbage workers strike amidst growing threats upon his life,

I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really 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!

Are we really any closer today? I don't know! Sometimes I fear not. Certainly the difficult days that Dr. King predicted remain with us. But I do know that as God called young Martin King to work for justice for his and for all people, God continues to call each of us. There may be many things that seem to be out of our control, but there are things that we can control, and that is what we do.

The current issue of the New Yorker magazine, timed to come out just before the King holiday week-end, shows two National Football League players, Michael Bennett of the Seattle Seahawks and Colin Kaepernick, formerly of the San Francisco 49'ers, taking a knee as many of the players across the country did this season during the national anthem. Kneeling between them in a prayerful posture, is Martin Luther King, Jr. It is a powerful and compelling image.

The cover's title, "In Creative Battle," draws from Dr. King's 1964 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, in which he spoke of a "creative battle to end the long night of racial injustice." Mark Ulriksen, the artist who created the image said, "I asked myself: What would King be doing if he were around today? How would you feel if you had to show up at work every day and salute a country that treats black people like second-class citizens? I'm glad that Colin Kaepernick and Michael Bennett are making it political. I'm sure that if King were around today, he'd be disappointed at the slow pace of progress: two steps forward, twenty steps back. Or ten yards back, as the metaphor may be."

"What would King be doing if he were around today?" Mark Ulriksen wonders, and we should as well. But Jerry Large in his recent column in the Seattle Times rephrases the question and places it directly in our laps. "What should we be doing? We've had a mixed-race president," Large writes, "and social media was all about Oprah for president for a while this week. (But) we also have segregated neighborhoods and schools and great economic disparities. We are a far different country today because of the (Civil Rights movement), and yet the changes that brought progress also fed movements to take America back to where it had been before. We have not yet reached the mountain top." While we may have women in political leadership in our local and state politics, Large says, "Women in the workplace are still subject to abuse and harassment. That, too, is about who still wields real power. Striving for greater civil and human rights is always about fighting against entrenched power. And that fight is a battle of ideas. Today, as in King's time, marching toward greater human rights still requires fighting lies and promoting truth."

Dr. King's quote that I chose for this morning's bulletin says, "I am convinced that love is the most durable power in the world. It is not an expression of impractical idealism, but of practical realism (and) is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization." Love as "practical realism." I love that. Dr. King understood, probably more than most of us, the power of love to change hearts and minds and behaviors and to bind us together as one humanity.

And here is where we can see a direct link from Dr. King in the 1960's back to his Baptist forebear and ours Walter Rauschenbusch, who had written his seminal work on the social gospel Christianity and the Social Crisis in 1907. (When my dad retired from ministry in 1970 he said I could look in his library and take any books that I wanted. One that I found, and still have, was a 1911 printing of Christianity and the Social Crisis. For about four to five years it was the largest selling religious book in the world and this was about the 10th printing of the original edition. It is a theological treasure in my library.) Walter Rauschenbusch had been a pastor in Hell's Kitchen in the late 19th Century. There, amidst the destitution and poverty and tragic rates of infant mortality among the largely immigrant population in the teeming tenements of lower Manhattan, he discovered that his traditional evangelical theology was woefully inadequate. He said he was driven back to read the Hebrew prophets and that he had a second conversion, a conversation not about his eternal soul, but about Jesus' proclamation, in the spirit of the Hebrew prophets, of the coming of the Kingdom of God, a realm of peace and wholeness and justice for all people, here on earth. "Christianity, he said, "was launched with all the purpose and hope, all the impetus and power, of a great revolutionary movement, pledged to change the world-as-it-is into the world-as-it-ought-to-be."

"I came early to Walter Rauschenbusch's Christianity and the Social Crisis," Dr. King once wrote, "which left an indelible imprint on my thinking by giving me a theological basis for the social concern which had already grown up in me. Rauschenbusch had done a great service for the Christian Church by insisting that the gospel deals with the whole (person), not only (the

person's) soul but the body; not only (people's) spiritual well-being but (their) material well-being. It has been my conviction ever since reading Rauschenbusch that any religion that professes concern for the souls of men and women and is not equally concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion, waiting to be buried."

Growing out of this conviction, Dr. King moved increasingly throughout his ministry toward advocacy for economic justice for low-wage workers and their families, which was what brought him to Memphis to support the black garbage workers. In the spirit of Rauschenbusch, he understood that for religion to have any relevance for the masses of working people, it had to speak to their social and economic conditions. This led him to proclaim what he said was God's call for the church to build "the beloved community," a living reality of justice and peace and reconciliation. It was a reality that was directly influenced by Rauschenbusch's image of the Kingdom of God, a reality that can be both experienced, but never quite fully realized in our lifetimes, and so we are continually compelled to work toward its realization.

It is the church, more than any other institution in our society, I believe both Rauschenbusch and King would say, that has the moral imperative to set forth the vision of the Kingdom of God and the Beloved Community in our midst.

I believe that spirit is exemplified in Jesus words from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, and if taken seriously, would revolutionize our human relationships and our world:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; ... For if you love those who love you, what recompense do you have? ... And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing that is extraordinary? ... So be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This last sentence—"Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."—is too often taken out of context to mean some kind of moral purity, when in fact Jesus is talking about perfect love, that is, our willingness to love God and one another without limit or reservation. Now that would be "practical realism"...realized in both our personal and our corporate lives.

And so I have an idea about how to do this. It's not original with me, but I learned long ago that it is important for institutions, including churches, to remind themselves of what they say they stand for.

Last spring Seattle First Baptist Church adopted an Affirmation of Values. I spoke about this in my sermon here last April on the day that it was presented to the congregation. This Affirmation provides a framework for our congregation, in the faithful tradition of Walter and Martin, to work for freedom, human rights, social justice, dignity, and compassion.

The Affirmation of Values sets forth six specific steps in how we can go about doing this. I don't know where we are in doing this work at this time, but it is an affirmation that calls for our attention, our study, and our prayerful action. If we are concerned about our personal witness and the witness of this historic, progressive, and ecumenical American Baptist congregation, then the values and work set for in the Affirmation of Values is an important way for us to be faithful to the vision of both Walter and Martin.

When I was in seminary in the late 60's during the tumult of that decade, some of us "wiser than thou" seminarians loved to quote the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan's famous observation: "The church always arrives on the scene a little breathless and a little late." Ooo, we

were smug. But how about if we got out in front of the curve for a change...on the bow wave of history, instead of in the prop wash. "Oh, gosh, Rev. Bloom, there you go again, wanting us to be God's trouble-makers." Why not? I don't know how else we do it. When Jesus asked us to take up our cross and follow him, he was not calling us to an easy life, he was not promising what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." I believe he was calling us to submit to the self-giving love that Jesus preached and Dr. King lived. As I said earlier: "There may be many things that seem to be out of our control, but there are things that we can control, and that is what we do. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in Letter and Papers from Prison, "The church is the church only when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping and serving"

We know that Dr. King's favorite hymn was "Precious Lord, Take my hand." But he had another favorite, thanks to a reminder from Pastor Tim, one that Dr. King cited at particularly challenging moments in his life, and it is the one we sang earlier, written in 1845 by James Russell Lowell, a New England abolitionist:

*Once to everyone and nation,
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side;
Some great cause, some great decision,
Offering each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever,
'Twixt that darkness and that light.*

But it is the final verse that I find so haunting during this struggle for truth in our national politics:

*Though the cause of evil prosper,
Yet 'tis truth alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold,
And upon the throne be wrong;
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above His own.*

And so:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love....Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.