

At the Intersection of Ecumenical Hope and Justice

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Every year this weekend falls at the intersection of the commemoration of the birthday and life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The juxtaposition of these two holy moments in our annual calendar is not by chance but a moment of special blessing for all of us who are followers of the way of Jesus. I am reminded that the mission of the Church Council of Greater Seattle is “rooted in the way of Jesus, the Church Council engages congregations for the prophetic witness of justice.” In our times, there has been no greater prophetic witness for justice, for civil rights for all, than Rev. Dr. King and the movement for dignity, equality and freedom that continues today almost two decades into the 21st Century.

The two pathways that draw Christian communions together in faith and the “Jericho Road” that Dr. King trod converge in the focus for this year in the week of prayer: “Justice, only Justice you Shall Serve” we hear in Deuteronomy 16:20 and which the churches of the worldwide fellowship are praying this week. Let us remember, with the Rev. James Lawson, who trained so many young activists in non-violence principles and practices during the Civil Rights Era:

“One of the finest moments of Christianity came in the 1950s with the emergence of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr....For those of us involved in the Civil Rights movement, our model was Jesus and the scriptural insistence that righteousness and justice trump charity. We insisted that Jim Crow laws must be displaced by justice. We demanded that freedom dismantle racism and segregation. With our bodies we called for a salvation that not only healed the spiritual wickedness of prejudice and racism but sowed the seeds for the emergence of the beloved community.” (Introduction to *The Poverty & Justice Bible*).

Rev. Lawson is fond of saying today, not just civil rights, but human rights. I had the honor of shaking the hand of this icon, this generous and fearless United Methodist minister, at the Parliament of the World’s Religions last November in Toronto. Indeed, human rights and covenant justice we seek to practice as faithful disciples, not just in word, not just a theory, but in reflected-upon action.

It is very easy to take for granted our privilege in the context of the vocation to which we are called. When I was 9 in New York City, my favorite thing about going to church was the so-called “black and white” cookie I would get after the service at the pastry shop. Sure, there was something of mystery in the old neo-Gothic style church. But what preoccupied me was the treat after the “sacrifice” of the mass. Never once did I think about as a child nor did I hear about in a sermon or in school about the real meaning of the Woolworth’s next door to the pastry shop. How what it meant to sit on a stool in the south (and sometimes the north) if you

were African American in the 1950s and 1960s. David Halberstam recounts Rev. Lawson and young activists reflecting, “What could be more American than wanting to eat at a store where you had just shopped? What could be more un-American than taking people’s money for clothes but refusing them the right to eat in the store’s dining room?” (Halberstam, *The Children*). I did not know then how justice-seeking meant non-violent direct action through seeking to have a meal served as a human being hungry for equity and just treatment and a dignified place at the table for all, without exclusions. My preoccupation as a child did not allow me to see the vocation of faith to which I am called. But, in the “children of the movement” who sat at lunch counters without fear, taking on the suffering for the restoration of the soul of our nation, we had as witnesses true “children of God” who knew who they were and spoke to our co-creative responsibilities we share in Christ.

I imagine that Diane Nash and John Lewis, then about 20 years old and now a revered U.S. Congressman, and the “children of the movement” at times felt alone, or had doubts, or were afraid as they willingly took on risks to break the bonds of segregation. It is said that being a prophet can be a lonely enterprise. At the same time, scripture tells us that the holy vocation of prophecy, to “suffer with Jesus in order to be glorified with him,” is a nobility to which each one of us is called. The mantle of the sovereign in Psalm 72, to center those who are impoverished or marginalized, to prioritize justice, and equitable treatment of each person as a child of God, is the very royal priesthood to which you and I belong. The Episcopal bishop and theologian, N.T. Wright, says, that our human vocation is framed “within the true justice and mercy of God himself.”

For all of this sacred work of living into our vocation and being priests and prophets, holy mothers and fathers and siblings, and companions on the journey, we need community. In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we honor the communities of faith called church. The church exists, called into being by Christ, in order to extend a worldwide fellowship and to transform unjust systems and structures into ones worthy of God’s creation, to remake the world in God’s image. We celebrate our unity to the extent that we seek to live it in practice. In that regard, we have much to do. Even in Seattle. We think we know it all, that we have it made, that we are enlightened. Though we don’t want to talk about it, we have racism here that must be addressed, just like in other parts of our country. Ijeoma Oluo has noted: “We cannot understand American racism unless we recognize it as a system that was built to run – and that still runs – on principles of oppression and domination.” (Mark Leviton, “White Lies: Ijeoma Oluo on Privilege, Power, and Race.” *The Sun*, December 2018).

Our vocation to be children of God is grounded in our baptism. Baptism makes us countercultural. God gives us the power to heal, to liberate, to love in the face of poverty, racism, militarism and devastation of creation. In baptism, we are graced with a universal love that is also unifying. As the theologian William Stringfellow says, we are baptized not into equality but into a unity that we are charged to uphold. And this insight can guide us to deal with America’s original sin of racism: “(Racism) is the power with which Jesus Christ was

confronted and which, at great and sufficient cost, he overcame. In other words, the issue here is not equality among human beings, but unity among human beings...The issue is baptism. The issue is the unity of all humanity wrought by God in the life and work of Christ. Baptism is the sacrament of that unity."

We each are made in God's image with an unassailable dignity and right to partake in the beauty of God's creation. God is the potter and we are the clay, the work of God's hands, made for wholeness and holiness. And where some are left out, coming proximate - face to face - with people experiencing marginalization, is a living out of the reconciling hope that we ask for and the restorative justice that we seek for God's creation renewed. We are God's vehicles for his glory. The earth and all God's creatures are God's and not to be violated. Through the Spirit, we may discern and act consistent with what is life-affirming, imbued, even "pregnant" with hope.

So too the Spirit guides the church. In the context of what Christians call powers and principalities that seemingly at times can "possess" us, the church at its best is a kind of "community of resistance." More than just being against what is destructive in society, it is about a place of humanity, of integrity. The Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, said: "I think that communities of resistance should be places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness." (Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, *The Raft is Not the Shore*). Healing and wholeness, as Daniel Berrigan puts it, the inscription of the law of love within.

Creation groans whenever its human creatures experience oppression. Such violence in our own nation today can be overwhelming. Yet, we can straighten our backs and begin to walk gently on the earth springing forth new buds of creation. The Women's Marches this past week and the March for Our Lives a year ago being two great examples. The narrative of hate, discrimination and dehumanization is an unacceptable and intolerable strain on the spirit of democracy and a scandal to the movement of the Reign of God on earth as in heaven. It must be challenged by a restored narrative of hospitality and hope. And with fierce winds blowing, through a God whose beloved Son Jesus has the power to save through his cross, the earthenware pots that we are can pull the curtain on the xenophobic, racist, impoverishing and diminishing story and replace it with community-affirming love. This love that does justice resides safe in the knowledge that our nation's liberation is bound up with our faithfulness to what God has done, is doing and will do before us and among us. We are called to be agents of a new season in God's image.

The truth of the unity of God is the unity in which we are to live out in our daily lives. The Spirit is drawing us into this truth, infusing us within and hovering around us. The Spirit is inviting us to freedom, freedom to be our true selves in God's creation. And this means realizing in the depths of our being that we belong to God, that God has a claim on us as beloved creatures, beloved just like Jesus as he entered into the waters of baptism in the River Jordan. God calls you by your name, congregations of Martin Luther King Jr. and South Snohomish Counties!

Such a gift of freedom as God's children in hope of a renewed creation recognizes our capacity and audacity as full and whole human beings breathing with the Spirit: where the dominant culture would tear down, we are to build up; where the dominant culture says we are first and foremost consumers, we assert that we are children of God beloved in God's eyes for who we are, not what we have; where the dominant culture feeds violence, we live lives of peacemaking and reconciliation; where the dominant culture honors accumulation, power, and prestige, we are drawn to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.

In our faults and sin, in our preoccupations and blindness, whether in fear or doubt, or loneliness or illness, nothing will separate us from the love of Christ for us, for you and me. Let us not limit the possibilities of what God is doing in and among us. Let us not forget that whether we can see it or not, God is making a way out of no way. Let us recognize that we are first and foremost children of God, good in God's image, and made for good, rooted in the way of Jesus. You are what the world is waiting for.

When churches celebrate their God-given unity not only in words shared but also in deeds expressed for justice, in sowing the seeds of the beloved community as Dr. King described it and Jesus inaugurated, then we will have reached a new moment where "hope and history rhyme" once again. May God bless this holy initiative.

Passing over from winter to spring requires going through the cross to new and renewed freedom in our lives. Our Japanese maple, planted at our house when we first moved there 20 years ago, still stands, its root at an ever slight angle. Slightly off center, like me and all of us. We may not be perfect in the faith that does justice, but in the communion of God we are firmly planted. And in this time, in God's time, at the intersection of ecumenical hope and justice, our leaves turn beautiful colors, beyond measure.