

Sermon – Second Sunday after Epiphany

Dr Martin Luther King Jr

The sun rises and sets each day. The seven days of the week roll by. The seasons come and go without any help from humankind. These natural cycles of life reassure us that life goes on despite the turmoil human existence creates in the world.

In church life, the liturgical calendar follows a similar arc, a cycle of three years that come and go with familiar readings and days of celebration. Each year the feasts of the church are celebrated with consistent timing. All this familiarity for Christians provides us a sense of reassurance and hope as time moves on through good and not-so-good times.

Tomorrow, Monday is the annual day of remembrance of the life of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, a well-known prophet for peace, martyred for his peaceful advocacy for equality for people of color and lifting the poor out of poverty. The day we honor his memory lies between two notable feast days of the church – the Confession of St Peter, also celebrated tomorrow and the conversion of St Paul, to be celebrated next Monday.

The time between these two important feast days is also the traditional time we celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It is fitting that the significant commemorations of Dr King's life and Christian Unity sit between the commemorations of these two great pillars of the Christian Church. All of them preached peace and unity amongst their followers.

For Christians, this time should be a time of deep reflection and prayer for justice, peace, and unity amongst all people, especially Christians. Jesus prayed for his disciples that “they may be one so that the world may believe” (John 17.21). Hearts are touched when Christians come together to pray for their unity work for unity in community. Our hearts are broken though and old wounds opened when Christians initiate or perpetrate disunity and violence against others.

The end days of the current Trump administration have been fraught for everyone. The massive denial of truth around the election has been astounding. The assault on the Capitol Building on January 6, described by many as an insurrection, was downright scary. Law makers, Capitol Police, congressional staff and the Vice President were all directly threatened by a crowd eager for violent confrontation. It was a troubling step on the growing arc of disunity in the country. I found myself wondering how in earth would all of this end.

My anxiety rose further after I read an article in the NY Times titled, “How White Evangelicals Fused with Trump Extremism,” by Elizabeth Dias and Ruth Graham. Here are the opening few paragraphs that they wrote:

Before self-proclaimed members of the far-right group the Proud Boys marched toward the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday, they stopped to kneel in the street and prayed in the name of Jesus.

The group, whose participants have espoused misogynistic and anti-immigrant views, prayed for God to bring “reformation and revival.” They gave thanks for “the wonderful nation we’ve all been blessed to be in.” They asked God for the restoration of their “value systems,” and for the “courage and strength to both represent you and represent our culture well.” And they invoked the divine protection for what was to come.

Then they rose. Their leader declared into a bullhorn that the media must “get the hell out of my way.” And then they moved toward the Capitol.

The term ‘evangelical Christians’ has always been misleading I’ve thought. A better term for this subset of Christians is ‘white Christian nationalists,’ a term that has now come into our lexicon because of their coopting of God for their violent ways.

Most of the those that stormed the Capitol where white and many carried their so-called Christian values up those steps to confront the police officers. Many thought that this insurrection attempt was the beginning of a Holy War, a time inspired by God to reclaim white Christian values that many thought would be wiped away with the incoming administration.

What troubled me most was the co-opting of God and Jesus and other religious symbols for their political purposes. I wondered how it would end. How would unity be restored when a certain group or groups in society does this. Disunity in our nation grew exponentially that day, not just between political tribes but also between fellow Christians, faithful believers in Jesus Christ, who supposedly all read the same scriptural texts.

What we witnessed on Wednesday is not new. We can find many instances of similar postures by groups through history. The white supremacy movement of the early to mid 20th c is a prime example where God was coopted for a holy fight against African Americans. What we are witnessing is basic human behavior that has been a part of our DNA since we first started to walk upright.

The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, has written on the topic of religious violence. In his book, *Not in God’s Name – Confronting Religious Violence*, Rabbi Sacks traces the arc of human evolution and the struggle between good and evil, light and dark that is contained within each of us. He also delves into the way we are attracted to groups and develop a sense of security from membership of groups that act in ways to protect the group’s beliefs even if this means violence against the perceived enemy.

It’s hard to see Christians attacking other Christians, scapegoating each other for perceived failings in the country. It’s also hard to see people of faith disregard peace and unity to attack each other for perceived denigration of their understanding of God. Rabbi Sacks wrote, “[we have seen] how altruism leads us to make sacrifices for the sake of the group, while at the same time, leading acts of violence against perceived threats to the group, good and bad, altruism and aggression, peace and violence, love and hate, are born together as the twin consequences of our need to define ourselves

as an Us in opposition to a Them.”¹ Jesus reached out to the other, he saw the need of the other, yet what we see in these protestors is a belittling of the other, and a fear of the others potential power.

It would be great if the leadership of this country took this week of prayer for Christian unity to heart and sought to reduce division and injustice in our country and the world. Many of our leaders are abrogating their responsibility to lead by example and to hold those that incite and perpetuate violence accountable for their unjust actions in stirring up division, supporting corruption and denigrating those that would oppose them.

So what is to come next that might prevent us from fracturing as a society even further. Healing and reconciliation will only come when all leaders tell the truth, fact based truth, and can demonstrate true respect for the truth. Political leaders are elected to improve the lives of all the people they represent not just of their political tribe. When leaders sow division and refuse to follow facts, then society will fracture deeper than it has. Leaders need to work together to improve the lives of all those left behind by inequality and division so that all citizens might flourish as they have a right to do.

As we remember the life of Dr King tomorrow, the contrast between the non-violent protests he advocated and the violent protests we have witnessed lately, couldn't be starker. The civil rights era in this country was a culmination of decades, indeed centuries, of injustice towards people of color, immigrants and the poor. The movement led by Dr King and others sought to shine the bright light of justice on all the unjust discriminations using peaceful resistance to white supremacy, which we might now call 'White Christian nationalism'.

The struggle for unity of peoples and justice for all, spans the full arc of human history from ancient time, through multiple civic upheavals, through wars and terrorism like the horrific lynching of innocent black people, on through the great civil rights struggles of the 1950s, 60s and 70s to this very day, when we continue to see tribal responses to issues espousing disunity. The work of justice and peace for all is ongoing through each generation and is a core component of our own understanding of the teachings of Jesus.

Today we still ache for the way injustice is perpetuated in this country. We ache for the lives of black men and women so often discriminated against and the subject of community and police violence. We ache for refugees who flee violence and oppression in central and south America only to be met with more hostility at our borders. We ache for the children separated from their families for no reason other than to punish their parents.

We ache for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people, especially youth, who are still bullied and ostracized by their peers and by institutions of society like conservative, evangelical religious organizations. We ache for women and girls who are discriminated against and abused by men

¹ Sacks, Jonathan *Not in God's Name – Confronting Religious Violence*, p42

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January 17, 2021

throughout the world, subjected to unequal wages and more likely to live in poverty. I could go on and on.

Our work for peace and justice is never done because humankind wrestles with good and evil, light and dark that is contained within each of us. We always have a choice and we have to choose good over bad, light over darkness. This is how we become reconciled to a life in Jesus. We must continue to chip away at disunity and unjust practices and be prepared to speak up. If we don't speak up, then who will?

Martin Luther King Jr. was a prophet for the time but we can learn so much from him, his ministry and his mantra of fighting violence and discrimination with non-violent protests. Dr King's prophetic message must resonate with us today. Like many of the prophetic voices of times past he was silenced in the hope that the movement and actions he championed would be halted or reversed. Of course, that didn't happen and his voice continues to be heard, as does the voice of Jesus, John, Jeremiah, Amos and Elijah.

White Christian Nationalists are trying to silence those of us that firmly believe in unity and equality. We believe deeply that the teachings of Jesus Christ support unity because this is what he taught his disciples - that "they may be one so that the world may believe." (John 17.21) We know from scripture that Jesus taught love, respect and welcome for the other, the 'Them.' If we promote disunity and violence will only drive people from believing in Jesus and his message of hope for a better world.

Injustice, as many of us know happens all around us every day. Our prophetic witness is the antidote the world needs. Our witness can shine the light of Jesus into those dark places and we can do what we can to unify and arrest the complacency of the world that too often accepts violence as a way of resolving issues.

The question remains. If not us, then who?

Amen