

Sermons from Park Hill: January 20, 2008

Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado

Rev. Dr. David Bahr
pastor@parkhillchurch.org

January 20, 2008
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Sunday

Galatians 5: 13-15
“MLK’s Letter to American Christians”

Repeat after me:

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;
but do not use your freedom
as an opportunity for self-indulgence,
but through love
become servants to one another.
For the whole law is summed up
in a single commandment,
“You shall love your neighbor
as yourself.”
If, however,
you bite and devour one another,
take care that you are not consumed
by one another. Gal. 5: 13-15

I want to read for you today a sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 52 years ago. Very early in the movement, at the young age of 27, Dr. King wrote a brilliant sermon called Paul’s Letter to the American Christians. He used the style and content of one of the Apostle Paul’s New Testament letters to various Christian communities in places like Rome, Galatia, and Corinth. In it he set forth several important ideas that prove prophetic for the kind of ministry he would soon be doing, with glimpses of the kind of resistance he experienced by those who felt he

should stick to the proper – respectable – concerns of a preacher from the pulpit.

Just like Paul named the current relevant issues facing the churches to which he was writing, Dr. King named the current challenges of his day for American Christians: particularly segregation in and among churches and the role of Christians in seeking justice. About economic justice and the limitations of capitalism, he challenged Christians to acknowledge that they should not be seeking their own comfort but nothing less than the kingdom of God – and if there is a conflict between the two, to stand on the side of God in the pursuit of justice. He also prepares them with an assessment of the risk of persecution in doing so; at this early stage, it is prophetic of what is to come for him and others involved in the civil rights movement. We know that Dr. King was a prophet, and like all good prophets, the issues he identified over 50 years ago are still remarkably relevant to our challenges today.

For some context, this sermon was delivered on November 4, 1956. He began his ministry at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama at the end of 1954. Just one year later, in December, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus; at the age of 26, Dr. King was made the president of the group organizing a boycott of that bus company. The next month, in January, 1956, a bomb is thrown on the porch of his house; he’s arrested for going 30 in a 25 mile per hour zone; and the following month indicted for being party to a conspiracy to hinder and prevent the operation of the bus company. Things were heating up quickly.

In June, the US District Court rules that racial segregation on city bus lines is unconstitutional, but nothing changed; in October, in defiance, the mayor of Montgomery instructs the city’s legal department to do everything to shut down the boycott and its car pools, deflating the hopes of the weary citizens tired of the inconvenience of the year-long boycott. People were giving up hope. Dr. King preached this sermon to his congregation on November 4th and on December 20th, the Montgomery buses are integrated. A month later another bomb, unexploded, is discovered on his front porch. It’s only just begun.

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But you can hear in this sermon how the seeds for the methods of non-violence were being planted. One of the reasons Martin Luther King remains so inspiring is that he had tremendous expectations of people of faith, especially his fellow Christians and pastors, but he never asked anyone to risk anything he wasn't already doing.

So I invite you to listen with an ear of history and an ear toward the challenges of contemporary America, remembering the structure of this letter follows the style of the Apostle Paul. I have edited for length. Hear the words of Dr. King:

"I, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to you who are in America, Grace be unto you, and peace from God, through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

For many years I have longed to be able to come to see you. I have heard so much about you and of what you are doing. I have heard of the fascinating and astounding advances you have made in the scientific realm...dashing subways and flashing airplanes. ...You can dwarf distance and place with highways through the stratosphere. ...I have also heard of your sky-scraping buildings, with the prodigious towers steeping heavenward. I have heard of your great medical advances, which have resulted in the curing of many dread plagues and diseases, and thereby prolonged your lives and made for greater security and physical well-being. All of that is marvellous.

But, America, as I look at you from afar, I wonder whether your moral and spiritual progress has been commensurate with your scientific progress. It seems to me that your moral progress lags behind your scientific progress. You have allowed the material means **by** which you live to outdistance the spiritual ends **for** which you live. You have allowed your mentality to outrun your morality. **Through your scientific genius, you have made of the world a neighborhood, but through your moral and spiritual genius, you have failed to make of it a brotherhood.**

I am impelled to write you concerning the responsibilities laid upon you to live as Christians in the midst of an un-Christian world. That is what I had to do. That is what every Christian has to do. But I understand that there are many Christians in America who give their ultimate allegiance to manmade systems and customs. They are afraid to be different. Their great concern is to be accepted socially. They live by such principle as this: "Everybody is doing it, so it must be all right." For so many of you, morality is merely group consensus. How many are giving their ultimate allegiance to this way.

But American Christians, I must say to you as I said to the Roman Christians years ago, "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." Or, as I said to the Philippian Christians, "Ye are a colony of heaven." This means that although you live in the colony of time, your ultimate allegiance is to the empire of eternity. You have a dual citizenry. You live both in time and eternity; both in heaven and earth. Therefore, **your ultimate allegiance is not to nation; your ultimate allegiance is to God, and if any earthly institution conflicts with God's will, it is your Christian duty to take a stand against it.**

I understand that you have an economic system in America known as capitalism. Through this you have been able to do wonders. You have become the richest nation in the world. But Americans, there is the danger that you will misuse your capitalism. It can cause one to live a life of gross materialism. I am afraid that **many among you are more concerned about making a living than making a life.** You are prone to judge the success of your profession by the index of your salary rather than the quality of your service to humanity.

The misuse of capitalism can also lead to tragic exploitation. This has so often happened in your nation. They tell me that one-tenth of one percent of the population controls more than forty percent of the wealth. You can use your powerful economic

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resources to wipe poverty from the face of the earth. God never intended for one group of people to live in superfluous inordinate wealth, while others live in abject deadening poverty. God intends for all children to have the basic necessities of life, and God has left in this universe "enough and to spare" for that purpose. So I call upon you to bridge that gulf.

Dr. King then writes about the division among Protestants between so many different groups and says that "God is bigger than all our denominations. If you are to be true witnesses for Christ, you must come to see that, America." He then writes that he is disturbed because the Roman Catholic church refuses to cooperate with others under the pretense that it is the only true church. Dr. King continues by further questioning how there can be a segregated church and originates his famous line about 11 am on Sunday is the most segregated hour in America. About it all, he concludes, "How can such a division exist in the true Body of Christ? They tell me that there is more integration in the entertainment world and other secular agencies than there is in the Christian church. How appalling is that.

The underlying philosophy of Christianity is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of segregation, and all the dialectics of the logicians cannot make them lie down together. I praise your Supreme Court for rendering a great decision [on school desegregation] just two or three years ago. I am happy to know that so many persons of goodwill have accepted the decision as a great moral victory. But I understand that there are some brothers among you who have risen up in open defiance. I hear that their legislative halls ring loud with such words as "nullification" and "interposition." They have lost the true meaning of democracy and Christianity. So I would urge each of you to plead patiently with your brothers, and tell them that this isn't the way. **With understanding goodwill, you are obligated to seek to change their attitudes.** Let them know that in standing against integration, they are not only standing against the noble precepts of your democracy, but also against the eternal edicts of God. Yes America, there is still the need for Amos to cry

out to the nation: 'Let judgment roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.'

May I say just a word to those of you who are struggling against this evil. **Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons.** Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Always avoid violence. **If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.**

In your struggle for justice, let your oppressor know that you are not attempting to defeat or humiliate him, or even to pay him back for injustices that he has heaped upon you. Let him know that you are merely seeking justice for him as well as for yourself. Let him know that the festering sore of segregation debilitates the white man as well as the Negro. With this attitude you will be able to keep your struggle on high Christian standards.

Honesty compels me to admit that such a stand will require willingness to suffer and sacrifice. So don't despair if you are condemned and persecuted for righteousness' sake. **Whenever you take a stand for truth and justice, you are liable to scorn. Often you will be called an impractical idealist or a dangerous radical.** Sometimes it might mean going to jail. If such is the case you must honorably grace the jail with your presence. It might even mean physical death. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing could be more Christian. **Don't worry about persecution, America; you are going to have that if you stand up for a great principle.**

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I can say this with some authority, because my life was a continual round of persecutions. After my conversion I was rejected by the disciples at Jerusalem. Later I was tried for heresy at Jerusalem. I was jailed at Philippi, beaten at Thessalonica, mobbed at Ephesus, and depressed at Athens. And yet I am still going. I came away from each of these experiences more persuaded than ever before that "neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come...shall separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. **The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may.**

I must say goodbye now. I hope this letter will find you strong in the faith. It is probable that I will not get to see you in America, but I will meet you in God's eternity. And now unto God who is able to keep us from falling, and lift us from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy, to God be power and authority, forever and ever. Amen.

There are several lines I want to repeat for their stark poignancy for today:

- + I am afraid that many among you are more concerned about making a living than making a life.

- + Your ultimate allegiance is to God, and if any earthly institution conflicts with God's will, it is your Christian duty to take a stand against it.

- + If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos. (war in the Middle East?)

And lastly: + Whenever you take a stand for truth and justice, you are liable to scorn. Often you will be called an impractical idealist or a dangerous radical.

And I say: nothing could be more Christian. If our values of peace and justice are in contrast to the conditions of the world, what is the point of our faith if we say or do nothing?

Remember the scripture reading from Galatians. Repeat after me:

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; but do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but though love become servants to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.