

LIBERATING LOVE

²³Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:23-29, NRSV)

To most people, my hometown, Memphis, Tennessee, is known for two things—the place where Elvis lived and the place where Martin Luther King, Jr., died. I was only 4 years old on April 4, 1968, when Dr. King was assassinated, but I remember it well. My mother had the television on and violence was breaking out in the city. As I watched the pictures of scenes from the Lorraine Motel, I heard my Mom worry out loud about whether my father would make it home from work safely. Fortunately he did.

Late into the night the news aired clips of Dr. King's speech from the night before when he had said, "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, we as people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord" (*A Testament of Hope*, p. 286).

As a child watching this speech, I took Dr. King literally. I thought he had climbed a real mountain and seen a real promised land that now, due to his death, he would sadly not visit with the rest of us. Later I understood that he spoke symbolically of a promised land where all people are treated equally. That's a promised land I'd like to see myself.

A common misconception about Dr. King is that he only sought the advancement of African Americans. This is not true. The promised land of equality he envisioned was for everyone. We all need our divisions to be healed. In his excellent 1963 book entitled, *Why We Can't Wait*, Dr. King wrote, "...The revolution for human rights is opening up unhealthy areas in American life and permitting a new and wholesome healing to take place. Eventually the civil rights movement will have contributed infinitely more to the nation than the eradication of racial injustice. It will have enlarged the concept of brotherhood to a vision of total interrelatedness." Dr. King's work for human rights was for the benefit of everyone, the oppressed and the oppressor. This was his liberating vision.

The Apostle Paul held a liberating vision of his own. It's found in today's scripture lesson, in his letter to the churches in Galatia, a region in Asia Minor. Paul had founded these churches on his first missionary journey. But time had passed and now Paul was confronted with the news that the churches in Galatia had betrayed a central tenet of the Christian faith: inclusion. Paul had preached the gospel of God's grace available to all through faith in Christ. Not

long afterward, a group known as Judaizers insisted that it wasn't enough for Gentile Christians to accept the grace of God through Christ, but that they must also keep the Jewish laws in order to please God. In the Galatians letter Paul strongly argues against being bound to the law of Moses. Instead, he asserts, the only requirement is faith.

Paul's understanding of Christ's message led him to this liberating vision in Galatians chapter 3. Here we find Paul trying to protect the faith from those who would pervert it, to stop those obsessed with eliminating religious differences and enforcing doctrinal conformity. In the face of such exclusion he wrote, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, NRSV).

For his day and time, for Dr. King's day and time, and for our day and time, this was and is radical. In Paul's day, pious Jewish men offered a daily prayer of thanks to God for having not been born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman (William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, p. 32). In Dr. King's day we had separate lunch counters, legally segregated schools, and laws against interracial marriage. In our day we face racial profiling, hate crimes, and a legal system that puts a disproportionate number of minorities on death row.

The Apostle Paul preached a vision of the oneness of all people without distinction in Christ. Dr. King proclaimed a vision of the total interrelatedness of humanity. As Christians we need to practice Jesus' vision of a peaceful world where all people are embraced as children of God. Time and time again, the scriptures show us how Jesus moved beyond the labels and the forgone conclusions. He treated the leper, the tax collector, the prostitute, the

Samaritan, and the thief on the cross like people of dignity worthy of his time and love.

How are we treating people these days? As individuals, as a church, as a society? It's easy to look at ourselves and feel rather satisfied. I doubt anybody here held a KKK rally last week or tried to convince a fellow Christian to keep every tenet of the law of Moses. But God doesn't compare us to the radical racists and religious fanatics of the world. God only holds us accountable to the teachings and example of Christ.

There's no doubt that we've made great strides in both religious and racial tolerance over the centuries. If we overlook that period of narrow-minded Puritanism, our denomination has an impressive history of acceptance of other denominations and constructive dialogue with other religions. I'm especially proud of our track record on race relations. A good many of the New England Congregationalists were abolitionists, and it was Congregational churches that helped the would-be slaves on the *Amistad* win their freedom in court and return home. When the United Church of Christ was formed in 1957 one of the first things we did was form a Commission on Racial Justice. We can also claim one of my heroes, another leader of the Civil Rights Movement, former Congressman, United Nations Representative, and Mayor of Atlanta, Rev. Andrew Young, as one of our own. These facts are important to me and are one reason I chose to be a minister in the United Church of Christ.

Despite all this good news, we've still got a long way to go. As long as 10:00 a.m. on Sunday remains the most segregated hour of the week, we've got a long way to go. As long as there is any kind of "us" and "them" mentality, we haven't reached that promised land. As long as we see a label and not a person, we fail to live as one in Christ.

We are one human family, each and every one of us created in the image of God. Barriers of race, religion, sex, economic status, political perspective, and sexual orientation come tumbling down when we let the reality of our oneness in God's eyes touch our souls and transform our hearts. Does God judge a person's worth based on where he or she graduated from college, if college was even an option? Neither should we. Does God judge a person's worth based on one's salary or a corner office? Neither should we. Do we befriend only people who dress the right way, belong to the right club, live in the right neighborhood, belong to the right political party, or have the right color skin?

Those people we accept and those we reject, overtly or subtly, speak volumes about our spiritual condition. The closer we are to oneness with God the closer we are to oneness with all humanity.

We all have our prejudices. It's impossible to live in our society without learning them. But when we acknowledge and examine them, we can move beyond them into that promised land with no eyebrows raised at an interracial family.

Who do we fear? Who do we patronize? Who do we avoid? The cab driver struggling with English? The emotionally needy neighbor who details every ache and pain every time we see her? The street person who smells like he hasn't bathed in months? The teen-age mother who collects a welfare check? The gay man with AIDS? Each and every one of these people is our sister and brother. As Dr. King put it we are totally interrelated. As the Apostle Paul put it, we are one in Christ Jesus.

What will it take for us to achieve this oneness? For starters, repentance on the part of the oppressors and

forgiveness from the oppressed. Repentance means turning around and heading in another direction. With God's help we can overcome bigotry and prejudice, negative stereotyping and preconceived notions. And perhaps we need to ask somebody to forgive us. Being forgiven is a gift, but so is the act of forgiving another. Forgiving others releases anger, pain, and resentment, making possible peace of mind, peace with others, and peace with God. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you" (4:32). Dr. King dreamed, "...that one day...the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood" (*A Testament of Hope*, p. 219). Repentance and forgiveness are an important part of this process.

In addition to repentance and forgiveness, we need acceptance and appreciation. Only then can we break out of a monochrome world. Do you remember seeing your first color movie or getting your first color television? The black and white picture was an inaccurate reflection, but bright Technicolor, now that's the way God's world was intended to be seen.

One of my favorite aspects about going into Manhattan is stepping into a microcosm of the world—every conceivable race and religion, innumerable languages and cuisines, people with a passion for punk rock or world peace, all crammed into a few square miles. It's a beautiful thing to soak in the diversity of humanity, every person a living, breathing child of God, just like me. God accepts us one and all. Let us be equally accepting.

Dr. King delivered his last Sunday morning sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., on Passion Sunday, the Sunday we commemorate Christ's death on the

cross. In his message entitled, “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” Dr. King spoke about his faith that, with God’s help, the evils in the world like racism can be overcome. He said, “With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair the stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood [and sisterhood]” (Ibid. p. 277). He prayed that God would grant them to be participants saying, “If we will but do it, we will bring about a new day of justice...and peace. And that day the morning stars will sing together and the [children] of God will shout for joy” (Ibid. pp. 277-278). I’d like to hear those stars sing and those children shout.

The choices we make create our world. We can label and exclude or we can mirror the grace of God, the love that knows no bounds. Each time we say no to prejudice and yes to love, the stars begin to hum a bit and the children begin to whisper. May the hums burst into song and the whispers swell into shouts. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only

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Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday

January 16, 2005

The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God of all nations and peoples, we are grateful for the dreams of freedom, justice, and peace forever spun by your Spirit and focused by prophets in every age.

We are grateful that in our time you call every man and woman to lift up and live by that dream, to embody it in our world by walking the walk, confessing our complicities,

braving the work, daring the confrontation, exposing the lies, singing our faith, asking the questions, raising the Cain, making the sacrifices, organizing the community, easing the hate, expanding the compassion, enduring in humility, risking the revolution of love, and ratifying the "not for sale" sign on our souls.

We especially praise you this [day] for the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., and for countless others down the ages whose names are known and unknown, and for those who yet lift up the dream and confirm it as yours, who quicken the conscience of this country and the human family around this globe, whose courage and commitments, vision and enthusiasm and joy brace our spirits and fire our wills.

So we thank you and remember and move boldly on in the faith that, however dark the night, however fearful the tyrannies of oppression, however heavy the weight of arrogance, we can yet be confident and buoyant in you and your promise that one day justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream and peace abide in our hearts, through this land, on this earth between brothers and sisters of every race, every nation, every faith, every orientation, every generation, every wounded, wonderful one and all of your human family.

Keep us faithful to that promise, your dream, and...ours.
Amen.

The prayer was adapted from *My Heart In My Mouth* by Rev. Ted Loder.

BENEDICTION

And now go in peace, striving to be one with God, striving to be one with all humanity, never resting until all God's children, all of our sisters and brothers, are truly free.
AMEN.