

The Prophet's Call
John 1:35-42; Isaiah 49:1-7
January 15, 2017 – Human Relations Day

It was fall of 1955, when a young African-American woman from Alabama traveled to Detroit, Michigan to attend a conference on racial equality. Upon returning home, her friends gathered, anxious to hear what she had learned. She stated in a dejected voice, “The problem is too big. There’s nothing we can do.” Then came that fateful day, December 1, 1955, the day that young woman, by the name of Rosa Parks, after a hard day’s work as a seamstress in a local department store boarded a city bus. She collapsed into a seat only to be told that she had to give that seat up, because a white man wanted it; and she said, “No.” She said, “That’s not right.” The bus driver called the police. Rosa Parks was arrested and fined. And the black churches of Montgomery, Alabama came together in protest.

The pastor of one of those churches was a 27 year old preacher, a recent graduate of Boston Theological Seminary with a PhD in Theology, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The pastors came together, and the decision was made: “We can’t let the Rosa Parks issue go unanswered. We will organize the African-American community of Montgomery and we will boycott the Montgomery City Bus System.” Then the pastors turned to the young Dr. King, and said, “You, Martin are the man. You’re the one to organize this boycott.”

No, my friends, Martin Luther King did not volunteer to be a Civil Rights Leader. Martin Luther King, Jr’s plan was to settle in, to be a good pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, but Dr. King was called – called by the other pastors of Montgomery, called by the Spirit, called by God. The Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted over a year. African Americas formed car pools. Some walked long distances to work. But they did not ride city buses; and ultimately, in 1956, the boycott was successful in ending segregation in the bus system. The boycott also drew national attention, and focus on the Jim Crow laws of the segregated south.

I could speak as some length about the peaceful protests led by Martin Luther King, but let’s fast forward to August 28, 1963. The event was the 100th Anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, and King organized a march on Washington that drew 200,000 people demanding equal rights for minorities. I was ten years old at the time, but I still remember watching that old Black & White TV – Martin Luther King standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial with the mall filled with people as far as the eye could see.

Dr. King had prepared a wonderful speech. And he concluded his speech:

“Go back to Mississippi; go back to Alabama; go back to South Carolina; go back to Georgia; go back to Louisiana; go back to the slums and ghettos of the northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.”

and there was silence. Dr. King stood there; and there was silence. Then the late Mahalia Jackson leaned forward and whispered: “Martin, tell them about your dream. Tell them about your dream, Martin.” And so the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. continued:

“I say to you my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American Dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed – we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

My friends, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was not a saint. In fact there were certain flaws in his character both personally and academically that would testify to his humanness; and it’s not appropriate for me to go into those at this time. But I tell you, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a prophet; and he had a prophet’s call. He had a dream, and he felt called to work tirelessly to move that dream ever closer to reality at great personal risk to both himself and his family.

But, on this Human Relations Sunday, we must ask: “Where is the dream today?” Great strides were made in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960’s owing to Dr. King and his supporters both in the movement and in the branches of Federal Government. Still, in 1978, I was privileged to be traveling the country with an 35 piece orchestra. We had one African American in the group – a trumpet player. In Pine Bluff, Arkansas the orchestra was invited to spend an afternoon off at the local pool. When we arrived, our trumpet player was denied admittance. He was told, if he would like, he could pick up the trash on the grounds while he waited for his friends. A month later we walked into a bar in Morgan City,

Louisiana and ordered a beer. I was told that I was welcome to stay, but my friend would need to take his to go. Now fortunately, we have made a lot of progress since 1978; and we continue to make progress. But sadly, we are still a long way from the dream that all people will be judged not by the color of their skin, or by their age, or their ethnicity, or their gender, or their sexual orientation, or their socio-economic status but by the content of their character.

I've stated before from the pulpit that I am deeply concerned by what seems to be an increase or at least an emboldening of white supremacist groups in the country. And I continue to be disheartened by what has come to be called islamophobia – a fear or belief that the Muslim religion is in and of itself evil. Yes, I do believe the dream is closer to reality than it was in 1963 or even in 1978; but, in many ways, it's still a dream. We still have a long way to go.

So what about us? What's our role in all of this? What prophetic call is God putting on your heart or on my heart? What prophetic roll should this church play? My answer is simple – Agape. Love. Jesus gave us two great commandments: “Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.” The theory doesn't get any simpler than that; but, oh, the practice can be so difficult. When the young lawyer asked, “So who is my neighbor?” Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus essentially said, those folks over there, those folks that are different than you, those folks whom you despise, they are your neighbor.

Yes, it's easy to love our friends, the people we sit next to in church, or the members of our social clubs. It's a lot harder to love the homeless man, the criminal, the addict, the person that is so different that we really can't understand them. But that's the call of Christ. And I don't believe that call is a call to love from afar. I do believe that, as Christians we are called to reach out, to serve, to help. Our church does a lot of that, and we are looking for ways to do more. Ask me what you should be doing as an individual, and I respond: “That's between you and God; but I'll be glad to help you sort that out if you feel so called.”

But there is another aspect to the love; and that's to speak out against the hate. I hope, when you hear hateful speech, you have the courage to join Rosa Parks in saying, “No – that's not right.” I hope our church has that same courage. I pray that our denomination will have that same courage – and I tell you: Sometimes it does and sometimes it does not; and some of us are working to change that.

Every Sunday we pray the Lord's Prayer. Some of you are in the very good habit of praying it every day. Friends, “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven,” means more than just words. There's a call in that. When I receive our Sunday offering, I sometimes pray, “Use each gift and use each giver for the furtherance of your kingdom.” There's a call in that. Yes I believe that we, as

Christians, as called to further what Martin Luther King called “the beloved community.”

A prophet is someone who has the call, the courage, and the conviction to apply the word of God to life’s real circumstances, to speak the word of God, to work to make the kingdom on earth a reality. What is your prophetic call? What’s my prophetic call? What is our collective prophetic call?

By the way, I’ve said a lot about Martin Luther King; and I’ve said a bit about us. You might like to know what happened to Rosa Parks. Early in the movement she moved to Michigan where, from 1966 to 1988 she served as an aide to Michigan Congressman John Conyers. In 1987, she founded the Rosa and Raymond Parks institute for Self Development; and in 1996, President Bill Clinton awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She died on October 24, 2005 at the age of 92. Yes, Rosa Parks was also a prophet.

May each of us pray for the discernment to know where God is calling us, individually and collectively; and, may each of us have the strength, the courage, and the faith to follow that call wherever that call may lead. May we give thanks for the prophets past and present; and may we give God all the glory.

Let us pray. . .

Lord, let us hear your call;
and give us the courage and the conviction to respond
as we walk the path you would have us walk,
the path of justice, the path of righteousness, the path of peace.
Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
North Olmsted United Methodist Church