

“And Justice for All”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 18, 2015

Old Testament Reading: Micah 6:6-8

⁶“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

New Testament Reading: 1st John 4:7-13, 18-21

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.



Sermon: *“And Justice for All”*

Tomorrow most of us will get a day off in honor of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. We honor Dr. King because he was a tireless proponent of justice. A son and grandson of ministers, King was a Baptist minister himself and he could not reconcile what he read in his Bible about God’s love for all humanity, with the reality of life in America that was characterized by segregation and unequal treatment of African-Americans and other minorities.

Dr. King spoke and wrote a lot of words during his lifetime but the ones most Americans probably remember come from a speech he gave at the Lincoln memorial during the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, in which he called on Americans to “make real the promises of democracy.” The words most of us learned in grade school though, are these:

“I have a dream that 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.”¹

“I have a dream.” He used those four words over and over to great effect, and to this day they stand as an iconic reminder of Dr. King’s work, vision, and sacrifice.

One could argue that part of Dr. King's dream has, at least in part, come to fruition. Official, state mandated segregation has ended. This new century has already seen the first *and* second African American Secretaries of State, the first African-American Attorney General,² and the first African American President of these United States.

But deep racial tensions still divide this country. So much of what we have seen in recent years, white supremacists marching in Charlottesville, Virginia, the spread of white nationalist ideology through the internet, the public push back against violence by armed police officers against unarmed black men; these point not to new problems, but to old ones that were never truly resolved.

We love Dr. King today. We have a holiday in his memory. We learn his speeches in school. He has become a sort-of, non-threatening, teddy bear kind of mascot for the civil rights movement. But that has not always been the case. Jeanne Theoharis is a political science professor at Brooklyn College who has studied the American Civil Rights movement. She points writes that

[Dr. King] was persistently unpopular during his lifetime. One of the things that people erase from history is how unpopular and scared of Dr. King most Americans were at the time..."

We may all fondly remember that 1963 March on Washington and his 'I Have a Dream' speech. [But] 'polls showed that most Americans didn't approve of the march, and the following year -- well before the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed -- a New York Times poll showed that most Americans thought the civil rights movement had gone too far.'

The US government thought King was so dangerous they treated him like an enemy of the state.³

Dr. King is known for his work fighting segregation, but his larger mission was to work for justice for all people. And while "I Have a Dream" soars to great rhetorical heights and has inspired generations of social activists ever since, I would argue that his [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#) more completely expresses the challenging ideals for which he stood.

In 1963, the same year in which he gave his "I Have a Dream" speech, Dr. King, along with his Southern Christian Leadership Conference, travelled to Birmingham, Alabama where they engaged with local men and women in a series of peaceful acts of civil disobedience in protest of the great injustice of segregation which was the law in Alabama at that time. Inspired by the work of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. King eschewed all forms of violent protest, writing that: "it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends," and that "...nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek."⁴

In the course of his work in Birmingham, he was arrested and thrown into jail. While there, he received a copy of the local newspaper which contained a letter signed by eight prominent Alabama clergy, among them the Moderator of the Synod of Alabama of the Presbyterian Church, US. The letter accused Dr. King of being an outside agitator who was essentially hurting the ongoing negotiations for an end to segregation. Their letter encouraged negotiation and changes through the court system rather than the program of civil disobedience being encouraged by Dr. King at that time.

While still incarcerated, Dr. King wrote, what started out as a simple letter of reply to those clergy. In it he countered the notion that he was an outside agitator by pointing out the interconnectedness of all God's people. "I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states," he wrote. "I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham."⁵ In this letter, composed on the margins of that same newspaper, scraps of paper snuck to him by a jail-house Trusty, and eventually on note pads his lawyers were finally allowed to bring him,⁶ Dr. King wrote this:

*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*⁷

These are words to be carefully considered as we revisit the questions of justice and whether or not "justice for all" really exists.

Generally, when we hear the word "justice," we think of folks getting what they have earned; receiving that which they deserve. If a person goes to school, works hard, and becomes successful then we say that they have received their "just rewards." And if a person commits a crime, and then goes to jail, we say that justice is served because that person got what they deserved. But when Dr. King wrote that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" he wasn't talking about people getting what they deserved, he was talking about people getting that to which they have a God-given right.

You may work hard and *earn* a raise at work. But you have *a right* to expect equal pay for equal work. You may have *earned* good grades, but you have *a right* to expect the same educational opportunities as everyone else. You may *earn* more money than most people, you may *earn* college degrees, you may *earn* awards and accolades, but you have *a right* to cast your vote and to have that vote count the same, no matter who you are, and you have *a right* to be treated equally under the law.

That all human beings have basic rights and freedoms is foundational to our very existence as a nation. The Declaration of Independence which formally stated the intent of the colonies to separate from British rule, the document on which our very identity as a nation is founded, includes this statement: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." When Thomas Jefferson wrote those words, he wasn't trying to say that we had *earned* those rights, but that they are self-evident, in-born, gifts from God.

But where men and women are denied the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, there is no justice. And Dr. King's words remind us that we cannot be content with justice here, in our own lives, if there is no justice for God's children over there; because *injustice* anywhere, is a threat to *justice* everywhere.

There are lots of ways to work for justice and certainly when Dr. King wrote these words a number of groups espoused different approaches. While the Alabama clergy argued for patient, gradual change brought about by negotiation and through the court system, other groups such as the Black Panthers urged violent means to bring about change.⁸ But, King saw a third approach that centered on respect for all of God's children, the oppressed as well as their oppressors; an approach that dictated what he described as a "more excellent way of love."⁹

In our New Testament lesson, the author of First John writes that “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

The writer here seems to be inspired by gospel accounts of Jesus being challenged as to the greatest law to which he replies that all the laws hang from these two commandments: to love God and your neighbor as yourself.

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul writes that: “The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’, and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”¹⁰

Ultimately, to love God is to love neighbor. And for Dr. King, we cannot say that we love our neighbors if we treat them, or allow them to be treated, unjustly.

Injustice takes on many different forms. When Dr. King was active in the civil rights movement, Jim Crow was still the norm in the American south. There were different rules for different people which is inherently unfair. If you don’t think so, ask any fourth grader you know.

In the America of Dr. King’s lifetime, it was still common for African Americans to be denied equal educational opportunities, fair pay, and the right to vote. It was common for African Americans to be lynched, murdered, for almost anything that was considered a slight to a white person. Emmett Till was a 14-year-old child who was kidnapped and murdered in 1955 because he supposedly whistled at a white woman and flirted with her over a grocery store counter.¹¹

But, even though today we can point to changes in legal codes across the country that have, for the most part, put an end to institutionalized segregation, there are still different standards for different people.

Women are generally paid less than men for the same work. According to the Pew Research Center, on average, women in the United States earn \$.84 for every dollar earned by a man working in the same job.¹² And as we have seen recently, women experience disproportionate levels of sexual harassment. A 2016 report from the US Equal Opportunity Employment Commission revealed that at least 25% of women have been harassed in the workplace - one of every four; And that is an extremely conservative estimate.¹³

In spite of victories in court, gay, lesbian, and transgendered people are still discriminated against, often under the guise of religious freedom. Violence and discrimination against gay, lesbian, and transgendered people is still very common.

The same is true for African Americans. There has been a lot in the news over the last couple of years about controversial deaths involving police officers and unarmed black men. But whatever your feelings on racial issues involving minorities and police authorities, it is hard to ignore this statistic, from the Pew Research Center: In the United States, African American men are six times more likely to be arrested and incarcerated than Caucasian men.¹⁴

Immigrants come to this country in search of the freedom and opportunity enjoyed by so many more before them, but they often face legal and societal hurdles and are stigmatized as law-breakers and openly persecuted, at all levels of society.¹⁵

Though slavery has been abolished as a legal practice in this country for a century and a half, it is still a problem in this country. The buying and selling of human beings for the purposes of prostitution and labor is still prevalent, only now we call it human trafficking. And according to an article published in October, “[The State of] Ohio ranks number five in the nation for the most human trafficking cases.”¹⁶

The world is a better place than it was in 1963 when Dr. King was conducting non-violent protests to end discrimination against people of color, but the work Dr. King started back then continues today. In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Dr. King reserves some of his most withering and at the same time, most heart-breaking criticism for the church. He writes:

There was a time when the church was very powerful -- in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." By their effort and example, they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch-defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent -- and often even vocal -- sanction of things as they are.

*But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.*¹⁷

One could argue that Kings words were prophetic and what he predicted, we have already seen come to pass.

Tomorrow many of us will get a day off. Some will use that time to participate in service projects to honor Dr. King’s legacy; some will use the time for a much-needed break; some will use the day shepherding children who’ve been given the day off from school.

For many people here and around the world, it will be another day of injustice; another day of inequality and oppression. So, whatever you choose to do tomorrow, maybe some of that time should be used to consider what we as a church should be doing to work for justice; what we as a community of Christians can do to show our love for God by loving our brothers and sisters. Justice begins with love, you see.

And Love empowers us to share lunch with a hungry stranger; love gives us strength to swing a hammer for habitat for humanity; love gives us patience to teach someone to read; love gives us the desire to make time to volunteer at our local hospital or serve meals at a soup kitchen or to be an advocate for someone who has none. Love gives us courage to write letters to our representatives in government; to march in

protest of unfair treatment for minorities and those on the margins, and to speak out for those who have no voice.

It is the spirit of love that enables us to take the gifts that God has given each one of us, however small, however insignificant, and use them in the service of justice for all.

Because justice *anywhere*, can be the seeds of justice *everywhere*.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

¹ King, jr., Dr. Martin Luther. 'I Have A Dream'. 1963. Speech. <http://www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>

² Wikipedia,. 'List Of African-American United States Cabinet Secretaries'. N.p., 2014. Web. 20 Jan. 2015. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_African-American_United_States_Cabinet_Secretaries

³ Blake, John. "Three Ways MLK Speaks to Our Time." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 15 Jan. 2018, www.cnn.com/2018/01/12/us/mlk-relevance-today/index.html.

⁴ King Jr., Dr. Martin Luther. *Letter From A Birmingham Jail*. 1963. Letter

⁵ King, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*

⁶ King, Jr., Dr. Martin Luther. *Author's Note to Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. 1963. Manuscript. Available at: <http://abacus.bates.edu/admin/offices/dos/mlk/letter.html>

⁷ King, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*

⁸ "The Black Panthers". HistoryLearningSite.co.uk. 2014. Web. And 'Black Panthers'. *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia 2012*: <http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/history/black-panthers.html>. Print.

⁹ King, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*

¹⁰ Romans 13:9, NRSV

¹¹ Tyson, Timothy B. *The Blood of Emmett Till*. Simon Et Schuster, 2017.

¹² Patten, Eileen. 'On Equal Pay Day, Key Facts About The Gender Pay Gap'. *Pew Research Center*. N.p., 2014. Web. 20 Jan. 2015. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/04/08/on-equal-pay-day-everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-gender-pay-gap/>

¹³ Golshan, Tara. "Study Finds 75 Percent of Workplace Harassment Victims Experienced Retaliation When They Spoke Up." *Vox*, Vox, 15 Oct. 2017, www.vox.com/identities/2017/10/15/16438750/weinstein-sexual-harassment-facts.

¹⁴ Drake, Bruce. 'Incarceration Gap Widens Between Whites And Blacks'. *Pew Research Center*. N.p., 2013. Web. 20 Jan. 2015. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/06/incarceration-gap-between-whites-and-blacks-widens/>

¹⁵ Velasquez, Jean-Claude. 'The Invisible & Voiceless: The Plight of The Undocumented Immigrant In America'. The Elie Wiesel Foundation Prize in Ethics Essay Contest. Elie Wiesel Foundation, 2014. Web. http://www.eliewiesel.org/CM_Images/UploadedImages/2014%20Winners/2014_HM_Velasquez_The%20Invisible%20Voiceless.pdf

¹⁶ Mullen, Christina. "Why Ohio Is Ranked 5 in Nation for Human Trafficking." *WKBN.com*, 16 Oct. 2017, [wkbn.com/2017/01/12/why-is-ohio-ranked-5-in-nation-for-human-trafficking/](http://www.wkbn.com/2017/01/12/why-is-ohio-ranked-5-in-nation-for-human-trafficking/).

¹⁷ King, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*