

“It’s For You”

I Samuel 3:1-20; John 1:43-51

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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“The real hero of this struggle is the American Negro. His actions and protest, his courage to risk safety, and even to risk life, have awakened the conscience of this nation...he has been called upon to make good the promise of America.”

These words could have been spoken yesterday in the wake of protests across the nation as America’s fault line on race has again made front page news in recent months.

In fact, they were spoken 50 years ago by President Lyndon Baines Johnson, a white southerner, to a joint session of Congress on March 15, 1965, a week after police clubbed, gassed and routed a peaceful protest. This assault on live television on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama became a call to end forever discrimination in granting the right to vote, a right confirmed five months later with Congress passing the Voting Rights Act. Sadly, it is a right too many of us take for granted and, depending on the election, a right less than half of us who are registered even use.

This quote was not in the recent movie “Selma,” which I urge you to see and which depicts this chapter in the Civil Rights struggle. But *this* quote was: *“There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem.”* These words by President Johnson, caused me to read his whole address and I urge you to do that, too.

Now, before I speak for too long, let me address two elephants in the room. One is over there (point to the American flag). There will be some worshippers here who are concerned that what I say this morning is “too political.” So be it. But as long as I am an American, and as long as that flag stands in the house of God, I and it stand subject to the judgment of God.

The second elephant is that someone may think “Is he just saying this because his wife is Black?” No. My commitment to fairness for all people regardless of race goes back to my church and Sunday School where we learned to sing:

*Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

My commitment to fairness for all goes back to September, 1960, when I was a six year old in Mrs. Patrone’s first-grade class on the first day of elementary school integration in my hometown. The teacher asked us to line up in pairs. I took the hand of a Black classmate because no one else would. I had long-forgotten this episode except that my mother reminded me of it when I introduced her to Carol. I recall this story only to make clear a life-time commitment to equality.

Today a new assault is being waged on racial equality in America. It begins with the siren song that tells us that the battle for racial equality is over, that affirmative action is a relic of the past, and that every American has equal opportunity. It continued with the June, 2013 Supreme Court ruling that gutted the Voting Rights Act, and continued with immediate provisions in eight states, all in the Old Confederacy, to restrict voter rights. This brings to mind yet another prophet who declared:

“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.”

*The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
“Letter from a Birmingham Jail”, April 16, 1963*

Will we in the church hear God’s call to us? Will we say with Samuel in today’s Hebrew Scriptures, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening?” Or will we play it safe, keep quiet, and say “We’ve made so much progress already, what more need we do?”

In today's Hebrew scripture, the prophet Samuel is a young boy serving the priest, Eli, in the temple, having been committed by mother Hannah to the Lord's service. If there was a vision of a beloved community you'd have thought it would be in the temple, in God's house. Yet the writer tells us, "*The word of the Lord was rare in those days, visions were not widespread.*"

Samuel rests at the foot of the Ark of the Covenant where the Torah, the Hebrew law, was kept. Samuel is in the house of God serving a man of God. When he hears his name called, he does the right thing. He runs in faithfulness and kindness to Eli, old and partially blind, saying "*Here I am, for you called me.*"

But Eli knows better. After the third time Eli realizes the voice is God's. It is a message people will not want to hear, says God, a message "*that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.*" God will punish the priest Eli and his family for his sons' blasphemy and unfaithfulness.

Today God calls us, the church, all of us, to speak an important message. It is a message some people do not want to hear. It is a message that makes both ears tingle. It is a message that says the work of racial harmony and equality is **not** done; the beloved community is **not** yet here; and that violence, physical or psychological, is **not** the way of Jesus.

There is no doubt we have made progress. The election of a Black man as President was unimaginable to many people. Laws for equal opportunity prevent or discourage workplace and public service discrimination. The faces we see in many places—sports, entertainment, and politics among them—reflect our diversity and our national motto, "*e pluribus unum,*" "one out of many."

Yet according to the Urban Institute (www.urban.org), a significant economic gap remains between whites and people of color. Whites in their 30's and 40's have approximately 3.5 times as much wealth as people of color; by age 70 that gap has widened

to 7 times. While this might, for some, bring to mind the old stereotype of the lazy ethnic person, it is far more likely to be rooted in the lack of educational and employment opportunity and transferrable (that is, hereditary) wealth. 400 years of slavery and land taken from and forced migrations of Native Americans certainly contribute to the disparity.

This economic gap may also relate to lack of opportunity related to cultural bias. A 2002 study performed by the University of Chicago and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (www.chicagobooth.edu/pdf/bertrand.pdf) sent fictitious resumes with so-called “white sounding” and “African-American” sounding names. Callbacks were 50% higher for the white sounding names. The study also checked for credentials, sending resumes of better and lower credentials. In those differences, white sounding names with better credentials received 30% more callbacks while African American names did not solicit significantly more callbacks. The study indicates these responses are uniform across occupations and industries. So anti-bias and discrimination laws are still needed.

Yet one cannot legislate the human heart. Both of my stepsons have been called the n-word. One of them received a watermelon as a birthday present at school. I received a 90-second video this week in which a Harvard Business School professor purports to ask a Marxist Chinese student what was most striking about what he learned while studying at Harvard. The answer was the role of the churches in helping people to be good: that democracy cannot be legislated without support from people who want to be good. That certainly is the right direction, and that – along with loving God and following Christ as the means to being good—is why we are here.

By now someone may wonder, “Look, pastor, I’m not a boss. I don’t hire. I don’t care what someone’s name is. I don’t use ethnic slurs. I’m working hard myself, just to get by. What do you want from me?”

First, I want us to keep the conversation going. Someone once said to me that if oppressed people just stood up for themselves, things would change. The historical record does not support that. Therefore, we need allies and we need to be allies, listening to those who look and sound different from us as a way to bring in the kingdom Christ envisioned.

Second, as part of that conversation I recognize that nearly all of us have some encounter with discrimination. With permission to repeat these two stories, Mary Lou Kampert, our white administrative assistant, tells of the time she was verbally assaulted by a white man outside Fort Campbell, KY when she chose to patronize a black-owned butcher shop. She bought there anyway. This led to her speaking of times when she has been discriminated against because she is a woman. Bob Volgmuth, also white, tells of his induction into the Navy in 1960 which ended with a long bus ride to Charleston, SC. He got off the bus, ran to the bathroom and came out to face a sheriff who said, “Do you know you were just in a Black bathroom?” Bob replied “It looked pretty clean to me.” The sheriff swore, put him in handcuffs and asked him if he was a Yankee. When Bob said he was, he got treated to a crash course on segregation, something Bob knew nothing about growing up with white and black friends here.

Nothing I am saying today is meant to diminish the pain and insult felt by women; people who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender; people with handicapping conditions, or any other person who has experienced discrimination in any form. Nor is it to deny the reality of Northern racism, more subtle but no less real. Instead, my hope is that by remembering and telling our stories we gain empathy for others similarly treated.

Third, as we take responsibility for addressing discrimination and grow in our empathy for others, we need to marry it to our vocation as Christian disciples by continually calling for what Dr. King called “the beloved community” and Jesus called “the

kingdom of God.” This means that not demonizing those with whom we disagree; not returning distain for distain; and learning anew that Christian love is not as much sentimental as it is tough and resilient. This responsibility is to seek, in our hearts and lives, the well-being of our neighbor, even the one who seeks to harm us, in the same way that the Founder of our faith loved his enemies and prayed in his mortal agony for God’s forgiveness for them.

In 1967, four years after his famous speech and a year before his assassination, Dr. King wrote:

If you lose hope, somehow you lose the vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you to go on in spite of it all. And so, today, I still have a dream.

The Trumpet of Conscience

Since time began, those who imagine alternatives to oppression, injustice and discrimination have been called dreamers. So let us be dreamers! Let us dream not only in thought but in word and deed, and be honored to be named with those who dream. (cell phone rings) “Master, speak, for your servants are listening.” It’s for you. Amen.