

Second Sunday after Epiphany

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Every year at this time, when we commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I find myself caught up in a great tension between inspiration, on the one hand, and discouragement, on the other. Yes, a great deal has changed for the better since and in no small part because of Dr. King's work. And yes, far too much hasn't changed, isn't changing, in fact in some ways is even going bad again. We are, in fact, in the midst of a resurgence of racism and white supremacy, of hate speech and violence, of deliberate policies and laws that inflict and perpetuate injustice against the marginalized and the vulnerable. That's not all that's going on, of course. But it *is* going on, and it isn't clear, to me at least, how any of this is going to change for the better.

So as we commemorate Martin Luther King and what he represents, there's a real need to listen to or read the great inspiring speeches, where Dr. King lays out his vision—so much of it put in the words of Scripture, and particularly the words of the prophets—and his absolute, steadfast confidence that that vision can and will become a reality, if we keep working for it, praying for it, living it out when and where we can, and making more and more spaces in which people can do that. We need the inspiration. We need the reminder that, as Dr. King said, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” In times like these, it's easy to lose hope, or forget that hope is of God and so, ultimately, cannot be overcome.

But I also want to remember and re-read Dr. King's “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,”¹ particularly since it's directed to religious leaders, and to white people who advise patience, tact, cooperation, compromise, and so on. (One of the religious leaders named, by the way, is the Episcopal Bishop of Alabama.) It's a long letter. And it must have been shocking at the time. It's still shocking now, because it's a reminder that the endurance of systemic racism, and of oppression and marginalization of all kinds, is not just a matter of ill will. Though ill will is certainly a part of it, there's another factor which may be even more important.

In the letter, King underscores that the people whom he is addressing are people of good will in so many ways. They recognize that there is injustice. They recognize that change is needed. And that's all to the good.

What they don't recognize, though, is the urgency of the situation for those most affected by it—people of color, the poor, the marginalized, those who are not the religious leaders, or the “white moderates” to and of whom King is also speaking. They don't feel the urgency because they're not burdened by the situation. Indeed, though King does not say this, there are ways in which they benefit from it.

So these leaders and others are critical of the peaceful protests that King and others have been leading—rallies, marches, boycotts, sit-ins, and so on. Better, they think, to create change through regular means—negotiation, persuasion, a gradual change in laws and practices, and other demonstrations of good citizenship through which people of color can show that they are worthy of what they're asking for.

Now, it's very easy, very tempting to be dismissive of these religious leaders and those who share their views. After all, we know that racism is systemic and deeply entrenched and is not going to be eliminated by more of the same. We know that direct and concerted and sustained strategic action—

¹ https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf

nonviolent, of course—is needed. We know that we need systemic means of challenging and checking discrimination, inequity, and inequality. We know that constant vigilance is necessary, not only of policies and practices but of attitudes, prejudices, and biases.

All true.

But what strikes me in re-reading this letter this time is that the religious leaders and other moderates are really demonstrating a failure of empathy, of fellow-feeling, of imagination. They seem not to understand, not to grasp the degree and intensity and scope of suffering that racism in all its forms imposes on their neighbors. Somehow, they can't extend themselves that far, they can't step out of themselves far enough to have a sense of what life is like for others, externally, certainly, but perhaps more importantly, internally.

And I am shocked not primarily because *they* were like that *then*, but that it is so easy for *me* and others to be like that *now*—to fail, for whatever reasons in empathy, to lack imagination, when it comes to realities of everyday life that dehumanize, and harm, and even kill those who are not like us.

Within the framework of the Christian life, failure of empathy and of imagination is a failure to love the neighbor, and welcome the stranger as neighbor. And failure to love the neighbor and the stranger is also a failure to love God, who created us for each other and who wills and longs for our healing and wholeness as humanity, not just as individuals. Not to put too fine a point on it, racism, oppression, and marginalization are sinful. And I am convinced that we do well to approach them as such.

Which is to say, when we think and talk about racism and oppression, we need to do so in terms that call us, as faithful people, to account. In part, this is a matter of the integration of our faith and our whole lives. But what I want to point to today is not that, but something more, well, strategic.

When we see racism, oppression, marginalization, and the like as sinful, we're not only recognizing the truth. We're also using terms that remind us that, in fact, we know something about sin and its temptations and its effects. *And* we know something about what we need to do when we encounter sin, when we sin ourselves, when we are affected by sin, willingly and not. We know that sin requires repentance—genuine, heartfelt sorrow and grief, together with recognition of the need to change, to make amends, to be reconciled. And not just recognition, but action, *making* change, *making* amends. As deliberately and consistently and *persistently* as we possibly can. And when we fall short—as we always do at some point—of getting back to it, or not giving up.

Which points to something else we know something about: we cannot do this on our own, by ourselves. To deal with our own sin, we need each other—for strength, for comfort, for support, and for that ever-so-important recognition that we're not the only ones. **AND**, even more, we need the grace of God, the work of God in our lives that strengthens and transforms us and the whole world.

When we put things in this familiar framework, the framework of our faith as we live it out, we may find that we're not quite as baffled and confused and seemingly helpless as we might otherwise feel in the face of such large, pervasive, obdurate, and complicated phenomena as racism and oppression.

In Christianity well lived, we talk about sin not to shame, or to blame, or to stimulate guilt, but to point to redemption, to God's desire and will to set us free and to heal us. No matter how far we've strayed, no matter how much we've done wrong, no matter how much we have failed to treat others and ourselves as fully human—God will not and does not turn away, or let us go. Because God is good, though we may not be.

And when we talk about sin, we point to the fact that we are in fact not ever alone. Each of us, all of us, have sinned, do sin, in various ways. And each of us, all of us have been named and claimed by God through Christ as beloved children. And God is faithful, though we may not be.

Anything, everything, that degrades, that dehumanizes, that denies dignity and blocks well-being—that is a sin. And it's a sin of *omission* as well as *commission*—not only things done, but things left undone. And we are called to turn away from that, and to turn toward not just respecting but fostering, nurturing, protecting, fighting for the dignity of every human person, for our neighbors, for those who are strange to us, as we do for ourselves. We are called to empathy, and to imagination. We are called to be shocked, and to do what it is in us, together, to do to participate in transformation and healing.

Now, knowing all this, being experienced with all this, doesn't tell us exactly what we are to do about racism and injustice or privilege, or how to do it, or who to do it with. It just tells us that we are called to do it. And that we are not alone in that.

There is no doubt—none at all—that we must continue Dr. King's and others' struggles against racism, oppression, marginalization; against systemic and direct injustice and violence; against dehumanization and degradation. There is no doubt that we do, and we will, encounter disappointment and discouragement. There is also no doubt visions of justice, equity, fairness; of healing and reconciliation are deeply, inherently, and ineradicably part of the vision of God—the vision we have of God and God's Kingdom, but also the vision that God has for creation. We are confident, we stake our lives on that vision coming to pass, and so we have an infinite and invincible hope. Even in times like these.

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