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## **“Expanding Our Response to God’s Call”**

**A sermon by Homer Ashby**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time: Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday**

**January 16, 2011**

**Isa. 49:1–7; Jn. 1: 29–42**

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The scripture lessons today are stories about God’s call. In the Hebrew Scripture Lesson from Isaiah God calls Israel to be God’s Servant and call God’s people back to righteousness, and beyond that for the servant Israel to be a light to the nations. In the John text we read of both the call to John to bear witness to the one who is to come after and the call that God has for Jesus to be the sacrificial Lamb.

As Christians, each of us is called by God. God has given us an assignment of what we are to do and how we are to be. This call should not be construed in too limited a way, or too light a thing as Isaiah tells us. Rather, God’s call upon our lives has to do with the whole of our lives, and is to be lived out in a way so as to contribute to the establishment of God’s realm here on earth. This morning I want us to look together at the expansive way in which God is calling us at this particular time in the kingdom building era.

In the Bible God’s call is often associated with some particularly challenging time or event. For example, Moses’ call to lead the ancient Israelites out of bondage in Egypt; or the call to Jonah to go back to Nineveh and be a courageous prophet, or the call to Paul to preach the Gospel. The call to Esther to save the people of God from annihilation. While there are some places in the world where clearly catastrophic events are calling for heroic intervention, most often, we do not see ourselves called there. However, this does not mean that we are not called. In fact, I would argue that we are called at this particular time in particular ways, to address the particular manifestations in which God’s kingdom building project is in jeopardy of collapse.

The language that Dr. King used for the manifestation of the realm of God was “The Beloved Community.” In describing the purpose of the Montgomery bus boycott

he said its purpose was “reconciliation, . . . redemption, the creation of the beloved community.”<sup>i</sup> Later, in describing the purpose and aim of SCLC he wrote, “The ultimate aim of SCLC is to foster and create the ‘beloved community’ in America where brotherhood is a reality. . . . SCLC works for integration. Our ultimate goal is genuine intergroup and interpersonal living... integration.”<sup>ii</sup> King’s was a vision of a completely integrated society, a community of love and justice where brotherhood would be an actuality in all of social life. In Dr. King’s mind, such a community would be the ideal corporate expression of the Christian faith. How close are we to King’s vision of a beloved community? A recent Census report on racial residential segregation shows that racial segregation is at its lowest point in the past century.<sup>iii</sup> However, the average white person lives in a neighborhood that is 79 percent white (down from 80 percent ten years ago) and the average black person lives in a neighborhood that is 46 percent black (down from 49 percent ten years ago). There are two related trends that are disturbing: 1) Latinos are becoming increasingly marginalized and segregated, and 2) the increased integration of blacks has contributed, according to Washington Post columnist, Eugene Robinson, in his latest book, *Disintegration*, to a decrease in the health and well-being of a more unified black community.<sup>iv</sup> So the picture is mixed. Residential segregation patterns are improving albeit slightly. But other measures such as health disparities, income disparities, incarceration comparisons, the inclusion of other racial ethnic minorities show no improvement and in some cases decline. Not the dire conditions of a Darfur, but clearly a poor representation of Dr. King’s vision of a beloved community of interrelatedness. Unless we expand and step up our efforts there is a real possibility the dream could just languish, unfulfilled. And what can happen to a dream deferred? Langston Hughes paints a graphic picture:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore--  
And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over--  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

When my daughter was a toddler we used to play a record for her of Ella Jenkins' songs. One of those songs had the following refrain (with apologies for my signing): *Lord, Lord, Lord, you sure been good to me, Lord; Lord, Lord, Lord, you sure been good to me Lord; Lord, Lord, Lord, you sure been good to me Lord; you did what the world forgot to do.*

The word forgot in that song has deeper and wider meaning. Forgot in the context of this song to means resist, refuse, ignore, etc. When the world forgets, that is, fails to be the beloved community of interrelatedness it is called to be, often our response is to try to make up for what the world has forgotten to do. Efforts like ours at First Presbyterian can and do make a big difference in the face of unmet needs. We have participated with Habitat for Humanity in building two houses; we have tutored and prepared housing for residents at Genesis Home; fed the homeless at Durham Urban Ministry along with dozens of other projects. Yet, the reality is that our efforts alone are not enough. Are we not called to raise the alarm about the world's forgetfulness. Are we not challenged to not let the world get away with forgetting while we try to make up for its indifference. Are we not called to shake dulled memories awake with shouts and demands for justice and righteousness?

Another evil that currently threatens the coming of God's kingdom is that of complacency. This sense of complacency appears in many forms: "I don't want to risk speaking out; It's not my problem; I'd do something, but I don't know enough about the situation. I think the challenges are so great that it is impossible to do anything about it." We are being lulled into a false sense that there is nothing we can or should do by mental constructs of our own and those who benefit from our malaise. I'm reminded of the statement attributed to Edmund Burke: "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing." As Christians we know that God is at work bringing in His promised realm and that He can do it all by Himself. But God's call to God's people throughout the ages bears witness to the fact that God would rather work with us rather than for us. Just as in the case of the world's forgetfulness where God wants us to do more than make up for, so too, in the face of the temptation to resign ourselves to complacency God wants us to resist the temptation to make do with things as they are.

The call to combat forgetfulness and complacency is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. At least once a month we gather around a table to remember. We hear again Christ's words to remember him. And in remembering him we remember his challenges to those he encountered to expand their understanding of their call. He called his disciples to not be merely fishers, but fishers of people. He challenged the young man who had too limited an understanding of what it meant to obtain eternal life. All the parables revealed what more his listeners could be and do. "It has been said...but I tell you." "The kingdom of God is like this..." It is this savior we serve and

whose memory we invoke to overcome forgetfulness. The Lord has always employed prophets to wake-up the sensibilities of those who have become too complacent with the way things are in their faith and life and world. In our families, in our schools, in our neighborhoods, in our city, in our state, in our country and in the world there is injustice that needs challenging. And we, called to be God's prophets, must speak up in the face of injustice. The imperative to speak out is so vital that Jesus warns us that if we remain quiet, the very stones will cry out. Unfortunately, by then, too much needless hurt and injury will have occurred.

This brings me to the events in Tucson, Arizona a week ago Saturday. Our country is now reflecting on what is the nature of the culture of discourse in our society. Is there too much vitriol, and hatred and vindictiveness in our speech and communication with one another? The answer is yes. It must stop. But, Homer, does not your encouragement to speak up and to speak out carry with it the danger of fueling the fire of conflict and violence. Yes, it potentially does, *however*, we must always think of our pronouncements in ways that Dr. King and Jesus would condone. Does our rhetoric promote the furthering of God's beloved community? Do our words contribute to reconciliation and increased interrelatedness? Do our efforts to challenge injustice and establish peace reflect the love of God in Jesus Christ, a love that reflects how we would want to be treated by others? If we employ these ways of interacting, then we can avoid the more destructive ways of engaging one another. But what would it look like? You know that obnoxious brother-in-law who thinks that Glen Beck speaks gospel, or that aunt who irritably quotes Ed Schultz every chance she gets, or the co-worker who talks about "those" people. God is calling us to not write them off, but to engage them in a serious discourse about issues, ideas and events. Moreover, God is calling us to engage in ways that reflect kingdom dialogue. When it comes to confronting one another I think our Buddhist friends can be helpful. We should always ask ourselves when we have something difficult or challenging to say: Is it necessary, is it kind and is it honest. I have been saying this morning that in the face of the darkness that threatens the light, boldly speaking out is necessary. But is it done with kindness and honesty. A lot has been said recently about civility. And in a way I am calling for civil discourse, but I am also claiming that we can confront forgetfulness and complacency about justice issues and be civil at the same time.

God was not satisfied with too limited a call for the Servant. The redemption of Jacob was commendable, but becoming a light to the nations, that was more in keeping with the wishes of God. God sent John for repentance. But repentance is not enough. Beyond repentance there needs to be a commitment to new life, new life in Christ. God's kingdom is partially here and now, but its fulfillment requires us to challenge the world's forgetfulness of what it is called to be and do and to not complacently accept what is as if it were enough. Be both John who cries out in the wilderness, "Prepare Ye

the Way of the Lord” and a disciple of Christ who removes obstacles that get in the way of that Way. Be on the lookout for ways in which you can expand your efforts to establish fairness and promote interrelatedness. As Dr. King said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” The good news is that if we pay attention to all the places we can promote God’s kingdom, then the promises of God’s justice and peace will reign in our hearts and communities. With God’s help, let it be so.

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<sup>i</sup> Smith, Kenneth L. and Zepp, Jr., Ira G. “Martin Luther King’s Vision of the Beloved Community.” *Christian Century*, April 3, 1974, pp. 361-363.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Iceland, John, Daniel H. Weinberg and Erika Steinmetz, U.S. Census Bureau, Series CENSR-3, Racial and Ethnic Residential Segregation in the United States: 1980-2000, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 2002.

<sup>iv</sup> Washington, Eugene. *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*. New York: Random House, 2010.