

27 January 2008

Well, now I'm feeling a little ashamed of my sermon from last week. Not that I have changed my mind about the importance of Martin Luther King's legacy, but on Monday I opened the newspaper to find an article and the paper editorial both saying the same thing I did in my sermon. I turned on the radio to hear the speakers at the official memorial in Atlanta echo the same theme, and on the evening news when they interviewed the marchers? Once again, people stressed King's radical message, how he shouldn't be reduced to a dream, and how we all have a lot of work to do. It seems everyone wants to preserve his legacy, so I guess I should get over my self-righteousness!

So this week let me take a more positive approach, taking it a step further and exploring one aspect of King's legacy, inspired by our scripture readings for today. We've got this story about the calling of the disciples, and then Paul's letter to the Corinthians about divisions within their church, and these got me to thinking about the church as a community, a community of people who are called out of the larger society, called to form a new society, a new family, a new community – what Martin Luther King called “the beloved community.”

So what is this community that we call the church? What is its purpose? Why does it exist? Perhaps we are meant to be what one person described as a “Holiness Club”. And she's got a point. We're supposed to be good and virtuous, right? The church ought to be a community that nurtures and challenges and admonishes us to live better lives, holier lives, to live more fully as God would want: more kind and loving and patient and generous, all those fruits of the spirit that I mentioned a couple of weeks ago. That is a good image up to a point. But the problem with it is illustrated by our selection from Corinthians. Church people don't always act very holy. Church people can be horribly mean-spirited toward one another. I'm sure that's no surprise to you. The problem isn't just that we act unholy toward one another, but that if we see our purpose as being a Holiness Club, then we get into arguments about who is the most holy. Some people aren't holy enough, so maybe they don't deserve to be a member of our Holiness Club, and we should kick them out before their unholiness pollutes the rest of us. We see this in the Corinthian church. People were taking opposing sides, depending on which church leader they followed: Paul or Apollo or Cephas (that is, Peter). It's like a church with multiple staff, and some people support the senior pastor, some the associate, some are in the camp of the music minister. Or as Paul will get into later in this letter, they divide according to what service they do for the church: the altar guild people are best, no the Sunday school teachers, no the website manager.

It's not that it's bad or wrong to think of the church as the place where we practice being holy. In fact, I preached a sermon on just that topic this past year! But I'm not sure that's our reason for being. Rather we have the well-known story of Jesus calling the first disciples with that famous line, “I will make you fish for people.” The church as a community is called to evangelism. That's probably scarier than a Holiness Club! “Rats! Is this where she says we have to start knocking door to door?” There was a fellow at the MLK march who seemed to think so. He kept wandering among the marchers saying, “I know where I'm going to spend eternity! Do you?”

But is that the only thing fishing for people can mean? Why are we supposed to fish for people, to ask them where they're spending eternity? That's not the most important question to me. I'm more interested in the here and now. And indeed we hear elsewhere in the gospel that we fish for people in order to proclaim the good news, which is less about the hereafter than the here and now: liberty to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind – freedom, healing, restoration, and above all and through it all, *reconciliation*. Reconciliation between God and humanity, between people and one another. Breaking

down the dividing walls of hostility, bringing people together. Re-forming individuals into a new society, a community called by God, Martin Luther King's beloved community.

But what does that really mean? Really, what does it mean to be a community of reconciliation? I think it means we no longer divide ourselves from one another, as folks were doing in Corinth. It means we are *for* one another, not against each other. We are each other's advocates

For an idea of what that might be like, think of what a family, of what friends, are supposed to be about. Family and friends are supposed to be our advocates. This doesn't mean they look away when we do naughty things, so we can still be practicing on that holiness. But family and friends shouldn't wear us down with nagging and criticism. Say a child in a family is hyperactive and acting out all the time, and the doctor wants to put her on medication, and the school wants to put her in a special class, and they are motivated less by the desire to help her than by the desire to get her out of their hair. It is the family's job to be *for* that child, to *advocate* for her – to be realistic about her problems, but not to just give up on her. Or say a person is having a really hard time, going through depression, even sinking into alcoholism, a true friend will not just run away when he gets in bad shape. A true friend will stand by him and support him, will confront him about his problems, but will also help him find the solution. Maybe you have had family and friends who were *for* you in such a way, or maybe your family and friends were against you. But can you imagine what it would be like if the church were that way? The church should be *for* everyone, and not just everyone within the church, but for everyone outside it as well.

I was listening to a program on the radio this week about suicide bombers, what such people are like, why they are willing to blow themselves and innocent bystanders up. The program said that even pregnant women have volunteered to be suicide bombers. It's hard to imagine what could drive a person to such an extreme. It's not just a matter of hardship or suffering, it's not just a matter of zealousness or fervor. And it occurred to me that this is the opposite of what it means to be for others, to be part of a community of reconciliation. To be a suicide bomber is to be radically against others: against your targeted enemy, against innocent bystanders, even against yourself. A suicide bomber is not for anyone or anything, but only against. Suicide bombers are the anti-church.

Martin Luther King described the church as the beloved community, a community called to love one another, and to employ love as a powerful force for positive change in the greater world around us. It is a community that is *for* others. In describing the alternative, he said, "Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity. Hate destroys a man's sense of values and his objectivity. It causes him to describe the beautiful as ugly and the ugly as beautiful, and to confuse the true with the false and the false with the true." Rather, King used the power of love to find what we hold in common with those who would deem themselves our enemies. Love, he said, "seeks not to humiliate and not to defeat the oppressor, but it seeks to win his friendship and his understanding. And thereby and therefore the aftermath of this method is reconciliation." "Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the 'fight fire with fire' method...is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community. Physical force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything permanent; only love can do that. Yes love, which means understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one's enemies."