

14th Sunday After Pentecost

THE SERMON ON THE MALL

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Isaiah 53:13 - 14

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Hebrews 12:28 - 29

And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

Luke 13:11 - 13

Fifty years ago I could scarcely imagine how God might arrange the ways of men and women so that the sweeping arc of history would bend our propensities for violence and mayhem toward just accords. I was but a boy then, more interested in the touch football game that my brother and I played with our neighbor Wilbur on the cobblestone alleyway behind our house.

It was late August and the heat rose from the streets with liquid illusion as though the very air might spark to flame in any moment. As the sweat

rolled from our heads and dripped from our arms we were unmindful of the momentous events, which would mean so much to us in the years to come. But our parents had a sense of it even then that our destinies were unfolding before us as the radio broadcast the speeches from Washington that fateful day of the grand march on Washington. History is a curious thing for it straightens the curved spine of time so that the present may never live for itself but lives instead for the promise of what might be even as it attempts to escape the shadow of what has been.

We are told that the media of the day were little concerned about the upshot for democracy of grievance on the march but overly exercised instead by the prospect that a gathering of so large a number of “militant negroes” in the nation’s capital betokened riots and a violent unraveling of “law and order.”

And so it was that our parents called us into the house away from our street games so soon as they began to understand the pressing significance of “the fullness of time.” And as Dr. King spoke the concluding word on that day of civil protest, as he raised his preacher’s voice before the whole of that peaceful assembly on the mall in the year of the “negroes’ intolerable discontent” my father leaned forward in his chair toward the radio. In a

hushed whisper he implored us to “turn it up, turn it up.” It was as though he had gathered all of us around a fire for protection against the dark, which had surrounded us for so many years.

Dr. King’s voice rose with unimpeded grace and like flame licking the air his words reminded us of our just cause. He recalled to all who could hear, the gem of freedom buried in the hard rock soil of human equality. And before any of us had noticed King made the abstraction of liberty and human dignity concrete, real and, above all, personal by sharing his hopes for his own children and all children everywhere.

In a memorable turn of phrase he spoke of the content of one’s character superabounding the color of one’s skin. And as the words lifted us our hearts began to burn as he shared his dream. In that moment the prophet in him spoke truth to the power of the capitol and the white house alike for his dream sketched anew the hope expressed in the documents that had founded the nation. These covenants of principle and law had established the nation as a nation of free peoples and bespoke the reign of divine favor for a people gathered in brotherhood and sisterhood.

I remember even now how the repeated line “I have a dream” awakened in me a well of imagination for possibility. But then in a festival of

image and metaphor King inverted the common meaning of national mountain ranges from meeting sights of the Klan to treasures of nature that echo the divine calling of the nation to a symphony of brotherhood. I remember how his words rang out like a bell tolling the hour of God's own coming "From every mountainside, let freedom ring." And when the song sounded in our ear we understood that the music of freedom is the heritage of a people licked by the flames of God's word and not that idol of a cross that burns in a fever of hate on Lookout Mountain.

I see him now, my father rocking in his chair and rubbing his hands together as King's words quickened his spirit. When King reached the crescendo of his oration by rounding it with the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last" Daddy fairly leapt from his seat in joyous exaltation." Tears now streaming along his cheeks he cried out "Ohhh wee, that Negro can preach."

The power of that moment has never left me and over the half century since it occurred King's keening oratory raised for me a standard of public speech unsurpassed to this very day. Did he preach? Yes he preached!! Did he reason with us? He called upon texts both God and genius inspired as he sought an uncommon wisdom rooted in the conviction that human

personality is worthy of highest regard. So said Jesus when he made straight what had been crooked for 18 years in that woman's spine.

And so it was that Rev. King would mine the infinite resource of God's word to show "the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain."

So much for all the alarm in the media about the break down of "law and order." It reminds me of the leaders of the temple upbraiding Jesus because he dared to heal that woman on the Sabbath contrary to the "law of God." What kind of law permits one to treat one's animals better than one's own sister? This interrogative is the retort Jesus makes to his critics. In this Jesus makes evident what King had clearly learned in his searching of the scriptures, that the whole point of any just law is to affirm human personality and not to bind people with fetters God never intended. Is this not the very word that Jesus spoke over the woman that holy day? "You are set free." Jesus affirms freedom on the holiest day of the week as though freedom was the law even on the Sabbath. He said it as though keeping the Sabbath is reverencing God by loving our sisters. The holiness of the Sabbath is honored in honoring God's will for us.

Fifty years ago people caught up in the furnace of a late summer day caught fire in the pressing of their flesh but in that hot laying on of hands they secured the cure for their affliction of alienation and estrangement. They were unbound to be bound “heart to heart and breast to breast.” The older one’s among us who are the great cloud of witnesses to that august day say that at day’s end they walked taller and straighter and with a new resolve never to be bent down again. They are able to rejoice because the miracle of that day abides still, even in the wake of new voter suppression laws, and the legislative assault on women and undocumented aliens. The witnesses to history cannot forget Jesus’ new law to “love your neighbor.” From this law there can never be any rest. They remember King’s magisterial command of word and deed as though the one was but half of the whole, as though one needs both spine and spirit to praise God in a shout of Thanksgiving. The scripture says that when Jesus had healed that poor bedeviled woman that day, “immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.” There is no wonder at all that King climaxed his speech as he did that day. As he rose on the balls of his feet with his hand stretched high in a blessing of the teeming hundreds of thousands we all rose with him as though shot from a cannon or our living room chairs.

For the song he sang was at once a song of thanksgiving and praise in honor of the unconquerable law of heaven. It was a song only the free could sing, a song only the healed could sing, a song only the upright rightup could sing, a song only the straight of back could sing with verve, gusto and raptured joy.

Daddy started marching around the living room floor, high stepping and singing without words but in a language I understood nonetheless. “Ohhh weee, oohhh weee, ohh weee.” I had seen him sulking under the weight of racism, heard him lament the burden of it because it had robbed him of what his life might have been. I had seen him spit the bile of his discontent at a world twisted with racial discord and straightjacketed by discrimination made legal. But on August 28th in 1963 my Daddy was more drum major than sullen pedestrian. He had heard King’s call as that woman had heard the call of Jesus and like her, Daddy rejoiced and gave God thanks. He kept saying over and over again, “good God almighty, good God almighty.” And for good measure he would throw in his vernacular praise with a hearty “hot dog o row.” For Daddy that was the highest praise indeed.

I’m told the press and news broadcast interviewers were unkind to King leading up to the march. He had been asked impertinent questions about his

congregation, questions that insinuated that **he** was perhaps racist because **he** had no white members in his congregation, questions that intimated that **he** was fomenting conditions ripe for violence because **he** was stoking the anger of black folks.

I have seen some of these old newsreels and I could see behind King's eye what he would have wanted to say but dared not say. But Jesus did say it and he said it without reservation or caution when he called **his** critics hypocrites! Luke gives us the full view of the crowd 2000 years ago and the crowd of fifty years ago in its response to King. "When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing."

When God shows favor women will unbend themselves from under the weight of a rigid religion, races will stand erect after centuries of oppression, and our nation will rise to live out the true meaning of its creed that all men and women are created equal. When God shows favor the day is nigh that "every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low; the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

Now is the time of our rejoicing, the time of song and dance, because we know that God is on our side in the whip of history and the lash of our afflictions.

Praise God with me and give him the glory, for our God is a just God. Our God is a God of infinite mercies. Our God is the rock of ages and the God our silent tears. He is the God of our going out and our coming in and thanks be unto God, the day arrives that we sing, "I sing because I'm happy and I sing because I'm free, for his eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me."