

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.'S VISION FOR AMERICA

(01/23/2022)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 6:27-36; 23:32-34

“But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” (Luke 6:27)

I am happy to report that I have received a good deal of positive feedback regarding last week’s reflection. No one who responded had heard of the Parable of the Chinese Bamboo Tree, and many found that it spoke to them. I confess that I, despite my love of myths, fairy tales, and parables, had never heard of it until a couple of weeks ago.

I encountered it, of all places, in the sports section of the Boston Globe. One of the sports writers for the Globe had written a piece on Adrian Phillips, a defensive back of the New England Patriots. Mr. Phillips, who is now 29 years old, was drafted in 2014 by the Chargers, who bounced him back and forth between the second team and the practice squad. The road to his life-long dream of being on the first team was a long and frustrating one.

Mr. Phillips’ mentor (whose name escapes me) encouraged him to take the Parable of the Chinese Bamboo Tree to heart. And that he did. Every day over the past six years he worked on himself—running wind sprints, in the weight room, on the practice squad, and by studying his position. This year, partially because the Patriots’ defensive backfield was depleted because of injuries and COVID, he got his chance. His performance in the Patriots’ 27-24 win over the Chargers, which led to his being named AFC Defensive Player of the Week, earned him a three-year extension on his contract.

He did it because he persevered.

The Parable of the Chinese Bamboo Tree teaches us that there are times in life when we need to persevere in the pursuit of our individual life goals or our goals for our country and the world. We persevere because we know that, though the determining factors in our life, in the life of our nation and the world seem to be totally beyond our control, we are doing the right thing. It is what we have to do if we are to be true to our authentic self—and, also, to something higher.

A healthy dose of optimism doesn’t hurt when we encounter speed bumps on the road of life. I confess that I am an incurable optimist! Despite all its problems, I believe that this is a wonderful world and that the life we have been given is a precious gift. Probably because of my religious beliefs and the humanistic strains in my psychological training, I believe there is a core of good in everyone.

To be sure, not everyone is conscious of this creative and creating presence within them, the spiritual presence or center that seeks to shape the unfolding of their life. Not everyone lives his/her life out of this center. In fact, it may be difficult at certain times or with certain people to discern any empirical evidence of this deeply spiritual core. But I believe it's there. I believe it's there in each of us, whether we call this center the Holy Spirit, our soul, Atman, our Buddha-nature, or the Jungian concept of the Self. This is the grounding for my optimism!

Thirteen years ago, our celebration of Martin Luther King Day coincided with the inauguration of the first African American president in our country's history. Partially because of my involvement in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, I felt this was a big deal. It was the fulfillment of a dream that was eloquently articulated by Martin Luther King, Jr., the belief that someday a person could be elected President of the United States of America because of his/her qualifications and character, not because of his/her race, religion, or gender. I remember thinking at the time that we had finally moved past our shameful history of prejudice and discrimination, and that a new day was dawning for our country.

Today I am much more realistic about the amount of time it will take to make this dream a reality. I had hoped that the voices of hatred and bigotry, though not silenced, would be more easily identified for what they are, and that they would no longer be tolerated. I had hoped that the prejudices that tear the fabric of our society and violate our moral values would finally be overcome.

This has not happened. Not only the insurrection, an outright attack on our democracy, but the dogged determination by one of our political parties to deprive citizens of their constitutional right to vote, shows that many people in our country do not really want to live in a democracy; they want things the way they want them, and if depriving people of their constitutional rights would ensure this, so be it. The Black Lives Matter movement has made us painfully aware of the reality of systemic racism and the abuse of power that still exists in this great country. Recent misogynous and racial, anti-Asian, attacks and even threats directed toward Dr. Michelle Wu, the new mayor of Boston, a woman who is intelligent, well educated, accomplished, capable, and deeply committed to help Boston become the city it can become, shows us how far we still need to go. The recent past has made us painfully aware of how much work remains to be done to achieve the kind of society that Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned.

Being the optimist that I am, I cannot let go of King's dream. Across this great country millions of people are standing up for the values that have been contravened; they are standing up for the civic institutions that have been disdained, for the civility that has been scorned, for the inclusiveness that has been mocked, and for the rule of law that has been ignored. They are calling us to recover our sense of compassion, to listen to our better, not our lesser angels.

Partially because there are so many of these people, I remain steadfastly optimistic. In this quest, it is comforting to remember that we do not stand alone.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned our nation as a nation where diversity is embraced, a nation where peace and justice reign. He not only awakened or reawakened this vision in us; he showed us how to get there. He taught us the importance of understanding, acceptance, forgiveness, and love in shaping our response to the complex social issues of our time.

In Martin Luther King's day, there were two primary goals to the civil rights movement. The first was to enable or empower disadvantaged people to obtain their constitutional rights. As the leaders of the movement noted, even though a hundred years had passed since Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had freed the slaves, many Black people had yet to experience either freedom or equality in a country that was supposedly founded on the proposition that "all people are created equal."

I grew up in a town that, as far as I know, was all white. I don't remember any kids of color in my high school, and certainly no teachers. Most of us who grew up in the North knew that individual and institutionalized prejudice existed in the North as well as the South. We knew that Black people throughout the country were denied access to higher education, to upper management positions in business and industry, to managerial positions in major league baseball and football, and to certain towns or neighborhoods through discriminatory real estate practices. It was just a little more blatant down south.

In 1965 when I became involved in the Civil Rights Movement, out of the approximately 20,000 people who lived in Lowndes County, Alabama, only two were registered to vote. It was not for lack of interest in the political system. Some Black people who tried to register were beaten. Some were told to go home, that registrations were not being processed that day. After five or ten return trips, the person would conclude that no day was the right day for him/her to register.

It was not uncommon for the literacy test to be used in a discriminatory manner. A Black man in Selma told me that he was asked to recite from memory the Constitution of the United States. Another told me he was refused registration because he didn't know the number of panes of glass in the courthouse in Montgomery. Federal marshals had to be called in--to enable people to register to vote, to ensure the safe admission of Black children to previously white schools, and to make the judicial system fair or at least fairer, for white juries were not always guided by principles of justice when white people were accused of crimes against Blacks.

This is why it is so shameful that some of the people in power in our government, particularly in the United States Senate, have found new and creative ways to deprive minorities of their constitutional right to vote. It means we are going backward.

All the major civil rights organizations of the 1960s: SCLC—the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (led by King and Ralph Abernathy and Andrew Young); the NAACP—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (led by Roy Wilkins); SNCC—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (led by Stokely Carmichael); and the Black Panthers (led by Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver), were agreed on this first goal. Black people needed to be free. They needed to have the same rights as white people. They deserved the right to share in the prosperity of this country and receive the benefits of their labors. This was non-negotiable. Blacks had waited long enough!

The second goal, a goal embraced by only a few of the civil rights leaders, was to eliminate prejudice and racism from our society by changing people's hearts.

Racism is a sin. It alienates us from our brothers and sisters and from that God who is the Lord of us all. It does violence to God's children, to incarnations of God's Holy Spirit. Racism hurts the person who is being discriminated against, but it is a stain on the soul of the person who is racist. I would rather stand before God and say that I had a difficult life because of the reaction people had to the color of my sin than to say that I killed four little girls in a Birmingham church, that as a member of the Ku Klux Klan I had hanged Black people and had used the cross, the symbol of our Lord, as a symbol of hatred and bigotry.

The 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, in which I participated, threw a spotlight on the racial atrocities of the South--the beatings, hangings, shootings, and bombings. It was the first time that I had seen "White Only" signs on drinking fountains. It was the first time that I had encountered Christian churches where Black people were not allowed to worship.

Every night in Selma for the week preceding the March from Selma to Montgomery, we attended a prayer meeting in either Brown Chapel AME Church or the Green Street Baptist Church. We heard some great preachers--Jim Bevel, Andrew Young, and Jesse Jackson. An even more powerful experience for me, however, was seeing poor, uneducated Black people come forward to pray for the policemen who had beaten them earlier that day.

I heard them pray that white America might be freed from its sickness, for only a sick person could break a little girl's arm with a night stick. Only a sick person could have killed the Reverend James Reeb, who was beaten to death in Selma the week before we arrived; Viola Liuzzo, who participated in the March and was later killed by the Ku Klux Klan, Jimmie Lee Jackson, who was shot by an Alabama state trooper prior to Bloody Sunday, or Medgar Evers, a

military veteran who was serving as a field secretary for the NAACP and who was killed by Byron De La Beckwith in 1963 (Beckwith was twice acquitted by all-white juries and was not convicted until a federal trial was held in 1994); and throw a bomb into the Sunday school room of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham in 1963 that killed four little children. Only a sick person could terrorize people who were only asking for their constitutional rights.

As I sat in that church one evening and watched poor disenfranchised Black people pray for their enemies, pray for those white people who were in the grips of a sickness for which the only cure was love, I realized that it was their religious faith that made them stand head and shoulders above their oppressors. It was in that moment, realizing the tremendous power of the Christian faith to produce a quality of life, even in the face of oppression, that I experienced a call to the Christian ministry.

Martin Luther King, Jr. never gave up on this second aspect of the movement. He never stopped working to help white people. He affirmed the need for equal rights, but as a Christian minister he also felt the need to work for universal love. He never gave up on white America, and he never doubted the power of love to overcome the divisive sin of racism.

How do we transform prejudice into brotherhood, hatred into love? The process starts with understanding. Blacks understood the great fear that whites, especially southern whites, had of equality. Whites were afraid that their culture, their economy (which was built on the evil of slavery) would be turned upside down. More often than not, lurking behind prejudice is ignorance.

The second step in the process of transforming hatred into love is acceptance. If we are going to change a situation, we begin by accepting it as it is. We accept people as they are. Martin Luther King, Jr. maintained that the people who oppress us are still our brothers and sisters. We may wish they were in a different place, but we need to accept them as they are.

The third step in the process of transforming hatred into love is forgiveness. Jesus told us that we should forgive our enemies, and he did it. But Jesus doesn't tell us how to do it. Perhaps his love for people was so great that he could just forgive. Most of us need to follow a process that goes from understanding to acceptance to forgiveness and then to love.

Think about some situation in your own life. Think of someone who has hurt you. First, try to understand what was behind this person's actions. Almost immediately you will become conscious of the person's fear, the person's insecurity, his/her distorted perceptions or unrealistic expectations. Lurking behind many hurtful acts is either ignorance or fear.

Second, accept the person as he/she is. I find it helpful to remind myself that the person may have caused me harm, but that was the best that he/she could do. I then remind myself that I wouldn't want to change places with that person. I do not envy a person who is filled with anger or hatred. Hatred poisons the soul. I would rather experience injustice directed against me than have my soul poisoned by hatred. We should feel sorry for the person who has wronged us.

When we can do this, the spirit of forgiveness will arise within us, not as a response to a divine command but as the fruit of understanding and acceptance combined with our willingness to let go of our hurt and desire for revenge. If we let go of our need to be treated the way we feel we should have been treated, then we and maybe even the other person will experience forgiveness.

The final step is love. If we go through the process of understanding, acceptance, and forgiveness, a feeling of love will arise within us. The person who has wronged us will no longer be our enemy. We may need to take a stand against the person; we may need to defend ourselves against the person, for the person may still be trying to hurt us, but we do not have to be filled with anger toward the person. The anger, just like the desire for revenge, melts away.

I think the Black people in Selma who were able to pray for the state troopers who had beaten them with nightsticks intuitively knew this process. I think Martin Luther King's grasp of this spiritual process was what made him stand out from the other civil rights leaders of his day. These people grasped the deeper meaning of Jesus' teaching about forgiveness.

Jesus understood that the religious and secular authorities perceived him as a threat. Because he understood the fear that lay behind their hatred, he felt compassion for them. We should feel compassion for someone who lives in fear. It's a terrible way to live. There is a Shaolin saying: "It is a terrible thing to live in darkness, and fear is the greatest darkness." The darkness of fear gives rise to a desire to destroy the Other, that which we perceive as threatening.

Jesus understood the people who tortured and crucified him. He felt sorry for them; he felt compassion for them. He knew what a terrible life they were living. He didn't hate them because he didn't fear them. No matter what they did to him, there was a part of him they couldn't touch. They couldn't drag him down to their level. No matter what they did, he returned their hatred, their enmity, with love.

Jesus tells us that it is easy to love those who love us. Loving those who hate us is a challenge! It helps to understand the root of their feelings toward us, to understand the fear that lies behind the hatred. Then we can feel sorry for them, as we would for anyone who lives in fear. We wouldn't want to live this way! If we can have compassion for those who hate us, if we can love and pray for our enemies, Jesus tells us that "our reward will be great in heaven." I

think when he says this, he is talking about the experience of being in the kingdom of heaven right here and now, not just as a reward after we die.

I think this teaching applies not only to those who harbor prejudices against us, but also to all those whose vision of the kind of America we want and need to create differ from ours. We need to feel sorry for those whose dreams of success are built on the suppression of minorities. We need to feel sorry for Dylan Roof, the Confederate, neo-Nazi, white supremacist who killed nine Black people in a Charleston church because he believed they posed a threat to the primacy, perhaps even the survival of his master race. He, and many like him are in the grips of a terrible soul sickness.

White people and people of color, men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals, people of all religious faiths or none, all of us in America with our prejudices, with our sin, cannot afford to lose sight of Martin Luther King's message, a message that arose out of a deeply held Christian faith. We are deeply indebted to his visionary and prophetic ministry.

As Martin Luther King has said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." I don't think we are being starry-eyed optimists to affirm our belief that this is true.

It is not only my hope; it is my steadfast belief that no matter how troubling the present may be and no matter how bleak the future may seem, if we remember the Parable of the Chinese Bamboo Tree, if we persevere in the pursuit of our goals and if we not only work for peace and justice, but we if do it in the right way, in a loving way, in Jesus' way, we will be doing our part to create, to usher in a new age where that vision can become a reality for all of God's children.

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