

Sermon: Being God-Determined People**Scripture: Romans 12:1-2; 9-14****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: January 17, 2016**

Although he grew up deep within the church, Martin Luther King said that his growing realization of the truth of God, a personal God who “both evokes and answers prayer”, the God of miracles like we’ve been talking about this morning, came as a result of his stepping into situations where he was no longer safe and comfortable but rather vulnerable and paying the cost for doing what was good and right. In his essay “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence” King speaks of his trials like this:

Due to my involvement in the struggle for the freedom of my people, I have known very few quiet days in the last few years. I have been imprisoned in Alabama and Georgia jails 12 times. My home has been bombed twice. A day seldom passes that my family and I are not the recipients of threats of death...So in a real sense I have been battered by the storms of persecution. I must admit that at times I have.... been tempted to retreat to a more quiet and serene life. But every time such a temptation appears, something came to strengthen and sustain my determination. I have learned now that the Master’s burden is light precisely when we take his yoke upon us. P. 153

The yoke of Jesus is a yoke that has us pulling and working for justice and righteousness and peace. It is a yoke that reminds us that our lives are not given to us for our own purposes, to do with as we see fit, but rather as Christians our lives are given to us for God’s purposes. Unlike what our culture encourages us to pride ourselves on, we are not self-made, self-determined people. We are God-made and we seek to be God-determined people.

What that means, exactly, to be a God-determined person we learn from the example of Jesus himself. We learn that it means forgiving when we feel least capable of it. It means opening ourselves to the other when we most want to shut them out or reject them. It means we pursue justice for others even if it does not benefit ourselves to do so. It means, as Karen Swyers mural project represents, crossing boundaries of class, race, religion, politics, to create a brotherhood/sisterhood of God. And, like Martin Luther King, so powerfully exemplified, being God-determined means responding to hate with love, violence with nonviolence, hardness of heart with gentleness of spirit. Such things are not practices that necessarily follow because we call ourselves Christians or are

believers or attend church regularly. They arise out of a reaching for the higher principles in life, out of a call from the Higher Principle, the living God. The people who learn to live in such a way, whether they are Christians or not, are the leaven in the bread of society that can raise up all of us to a greater height than we could accomplish ourselves as self-made people.

But what Martin Luther King also discovered was that the true practitioner of the higher Gospel principles finds himself or herself depending more upon the mercy of God for their lives and so experience the hand of God in striking ways. Without the willingness to be vulnerable and open, to live our lives in the way of Jesus, the experience of God can remain illusive. “The agonizing moments through which I have passed during the last few years,” King explains plainly, “have drawn me closer to God.”

More than ever before I am convinced of the reality of a personal God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life. God has been profoundly real to me in recent years. In the midst of outer dangers I have felt an inner calm. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner voice saying “Lo, I will be with you.” When the chains of fear and the manacles of frustration have all but stymied my [own] efforts, I have felt the power of God, transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope. I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose, and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship. P. 154

It is in the struggle for righteousness; not in the struggle for personal safety, nor in the struggle for making the money we need to buy what we want, nor in the struggle to balance our budgets and beautify our buildings, nor in the struggle for separating ourselves from the foreign other, nor in the struggle for political ascendancy, but in the struggle for righteousness and justice that the human being has cosmic companionship.

Do we want to know God as a cosmic companion? Then our scriptures and our tradition, our Jesus, tells us we need enter into the struggle for justice and righteousness and not keep ourselves safe and protected in our enclaves of comfort. This is what Jesus and other prophetic voices call us to. The prophet in our Judeo-Christian tradition and across the ages into the present day is the voice speaking aloud God’s vision of how the world is *supposed* to be AND the voice of the prophet speaks in opposition to the self-made human, nationalistic, tribal vision of the way things should be. The prophet always

holds out for a vision that requires us to change. This is why we tend to kill prophets be they Jesus, the Apostles Peter or Paul, Martin Luther King, Gandhi or the next voice that becomes too loud and too challenging of the way things are. And yet because the prophetic voice is not their own but the voice of our Cosmic Companion, if they are being true to their vocation, the voice inevitably continues to sound beyond their deaths. Here let me end with the words of King again and then Carrie is going to sing a song written by Patty Griffin that speaks of the end of King's life:

The past decade has been a most exciting one. In spite of the tensions and uncertainties of this period something profoundly meaningful is taking place. Old systems of exploitation and oppression are passing; new systems of justice and equality are being born. In a real sense this is a great time to be alive. Therefore I am not yet discouraged about the future. Granted that the easygoing optimism of yesterday is impossible. Granted that we face a world crisis which leaves us standing so often amid the surging murmur of life's restless sea. But every crisis has both its dangers and its opportunities. It can spell either salvation or doom. In a dark, confused world, the Kingdom of God may yet reign in the hearts of men [and women].
- p. 155

And so may it reign and may we be a part of it.

*All quotes taken from "Strength to Love" by Martin Luther King, Jr. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963.