

January 16, 2011

“What Are You Looking For?”

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What Are You Looking For?

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; I Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42
Epiphany 2, MLK

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett
January 16, 2011, Claremont UMC

Perhaps you had similar feelings as I did last week, watching the horrendous scene in Tucson when Jared Loughner opened fire on a gathering of people at “Congress on Your Corner,” hosted by Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords.

There is the first reaction of: “Oh no, not again.” And then come the news reporters who immediately try to determine the motive of the shooter. They don’t know anything about anyone involved, but conclusions are drawn within moments as they try to create a scenario that somehow tries to make sense of an event that has no sense.

I cringed when I heard him called evil, even before his name was known. Surely his act was evil, but is *he evil*, or is he *sick*?

I wonder why we don’t react similarly to the acts of war in which we participate daily in Iraq and Afghanistan. Innocents are slain regularly and we do not notice. Children and their families are killed and we aren’t told about it. Do we draw in our breath in horror if we DO learn of Iraqi or Afghan children who are caught in flying bullets we sanitarily call “collateral damage?” What do we think is going on over there?

Today’s scripture readings focus on call.

Through Advent and Christmas we have focused on God’s presence with us in Jesus Christ. Last week we remembered Jesus’ baptism and we renewed our own.

Today marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry when he begins to call others to join him in his ministry. The idea of being called by God was nothing new. There are many stories in the Old Testament of being called.

Second Isaiah talks about being called when he was still being formed in the womb. He understood his calling to go beyond the narrow view of Israel only. “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

The Psalmist echoes similar sentiments when he speaks of a new song in his mouth, of how God pulled him from the miry bog.

In the Corinthian passage the Apostle Paul tells the church that God has given them every gift they need in order to carry out their ministry. Each person is given a gift that strengthens the whole community. All are called – all are gifted – and all gifts make the church whole and complete in order to be faithful.

The passage from John reveals something about the transition from John’s community to Jesus. John continued to point to Jesus as “the one” they should follow. *(It’s kind of like when the bishop changes appointments of pastors at local churches. The outgoing pastor points to the one who is coming and says, “Now this is your new pastor!”)*

Jesus saw them following him and he asked them a very important question: “What are you looking for?” Their answer is pretty lame... they wanted to know where he was staying!

Well, his work was cut out for him!

But the question haunts us on this weekend commemorating Martin Luther King Jr.

What are you looking for?

What we are looking for may not always be what we need.

We remember Martin Luther King, Jr. mostly for his leadership of the Civil Rights Movement. And that's all right, but to only think of him only in those terms is to miss a real passion of what he was trying to do.

King's friend, colleague, author and leader Vincent Harding wrote about King, referring to his "I Have a Dream Speech":

"But our manner of celebrating reveals a deeply flawed and distorted understanding of Martin Luther King, Jr. Brother Martin spent a fair amount of time in jail, but his worst imprisonment may be how his own nation has frozen him in that moment in 1963. Our national memory wants that triumphant, sun-drenched hero to stay right there, static, bound to the podium before the adoring crowds. We want to be lulled into contentment by his beautiful words, his familiar cadences. We want to keep him safely, unthreateningly, on a pedestal.

"Our fixation on Martin's "Dream" is symptomatic of a dangerous collective amnesia. We insist on approaching King in a way that makes him easy to handle; we want King to fit our agendas. Increasingly, the nation wants to package him, market him—and thereby ignore him.

"The poet Carl Wendell Himes, Jr., who was only in his twenties when Martin was assassinated, articulated this domestication of King eloquently:

*Now that he is safely dead / Let us praise him /
build monuments to his glory /
sing hosannas to his name. /
Dead men make / such convenient heroes:
They cannot rise / to challenge the images /
we would fashion from their lives. /
And besides, / it is easier to build monuments /
than to make a better world. ⁱ*

King was clear and adamant about non-violence as the way to build a movement. He summoned the expertise of a young man, a Methodist Pastor, the Rev. James Lawson – to do the training for participants.

Jim Lawson is a member of our Annual Conference. He learned about non-violence when he went to India through our Board of Global Ministries mission program. There he studied and learned how non-violence transforms people and institutions and nations.

The commitment to non-violence transcended everything that Dr. King did and said. He continues to speak to us now. We have not embraced his vision of non-violence. We have continued to perpetuate system of living and being that produces violence at multiple levels. It is insipid and barely noticeable to us...like the air we breathe. And then when someone explodes in violence we look for the scapegoat... we look for the one to blame. We do not ask the fundamental questions Dr. King asked, or that Jesus asked.

What are you looking for?

How do you create what you are looking for?

I re-read the Nobel Lecture that Dr. King gave on December 11, 1964. His lecture came later, after he received the Nobel Prize for Peace. As I read it, I was struck how much of what he said 46 years ago remains true today.

In his introduction he said, "This problem of spiritual and moral lag, which constitutes modern man's chief dilemma, expresses itself in three larger problems which grow out of our ethical

infantilism. Each of these problems, while appearing to be separate and isolated, is inextricably bound to the other. I refer to racial injustice, poverty, and war.”

Speaking of racial injustice and non-violence he said:

“... The nonviolent resisters can summarize their message in the following simple terms: we will take direct action against injustice despite the failure of governmental and other official agencies to act first. We will not obey unjust laws or submit to unjust practices. We will do this peacefully, openly, cheerfully because our aim is to persuade. We adopt the means of nonviolence because our end is a community at peace with itself. We will try to persuade with our words, but if our words fail, we will try to persuade with our acts. We will always be willing to talk and seek fair compromise, but we are ready to suffer when necessary and even risk our lives to become witnesses to truth as we see it.”

He spoke passionately about poverty and how our nation has the resources to eliminate poverty. He concluded that section saying:

“In the final analysis, the rich must not ignore the poor because both rich and poor are tied in a single garment of destiny. All life is interrelated, and all people are interdependent. The agony of the poor diminishes the rich, and the salvation of the poor enlarges the rich. We are inevitably one another’s keeper because of the interrelated structure of reality.”

He talked about the futility of war. Listen to how he crafted words to drive home his message:

(and I did not alter his language for inclusiveness)

“So man's proneness to engage in war is still a fact. But wisdom born of experience should tell us that war is obsolete. There may have been a time when war served as a negative good by preventing the spread and growth of an evil force, but the destructive power of modern weapons eliminated even the possibility that war may serve as a negative good.

“If we assume that life is worth living and that man has a right to survive, then we must find an alternative to war. In a day when vehicles hurtle through outer space and guided ballistic missiles carve highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can claim victory in war.

“A so-called limited war will leave little more than a calamitous legacy of human suffering, political turmoil, and spiritual disillusionment.

“A world war - God forbid! - will leave only smoldering ashes as a mute testimony of a human race whose folly led inexorably to ultimate death. So if modern man continues to flirt unhesitatingly with war, he will transform his earthly habitat into an inferno such as even the mind of Dante could not imagine.”ⁱⁱ

Dr. King was one called by God to speak to our nation - indeed the world - of the sin of racial injustice, poverty and war. He held up the alternative of non-violent resistance to oppression. The response he got to that was jail time and assassination.

His passion for non-violence speaks to us today. Violence is insidious. We commit violence with words, with behavior, with systems that perpetuate inequality, with overt actions of violence. It is present in our market-economy system, it is learned in under-funded school systems, and overcrowded prisons.

Then why are we surprised when a troubled person commits violence against others?

I grew up in a family and culture of the Pacific Northwest where ownership of guns was normal. My father, grandfathers, and uncles had guns. But not the semi-automatic Glock with a 31 round clip. My dad had a rifle and a pistol that he used to hunt birds and deer. I have vivid memories of the smell of pheasant feathers; as well as the smell of the oil when he cleaned his guns.

What is deeply troubling is what I understand to be the easy access to semi-automatic weapons that pop off 30 rounds in ten seconds. There is only one purpose for weapons like these: they are intended to kill other humans. It is immoral that they are sold.

I know Gun Control is a hot topic but it is also a moral topic and the statistics do make a case for control. The murder rate using guns in the U.S. is 5.20 murders per 100,000 citizens. In countries with stricter control, the rate is much lower. Canada is 0.47; Britain is 0.06 and Australia is 0.07.

There was an armed citizen at the scene in Tucson. Joe Zamudio made his way toward the sound of shots with his own weapon drawn, saw a man with a gun and shouted, "Drop it! Drop it!" As it turned out, the man with the gun had just wrestled it away from Loughner; Zamudio could easily have shot him or been mistaken for a killer himself, this setting off an even more deadly firefright.

"I was very lucky," Zamudio said later. If the best response to gun violence is for citizens to shoot back, we'll all be living in the Wild West, with bullets flying in classrooms and shopping malls and public streets, and lots of collateral casualties. ⁱⁱⁱ

Again, King is quoted as saying,

"Violence may murder the murderer, but it doesn't murder murder. Violence may murder the liar, but it doesn't murder lies; it doesn't establish truth.... Violence may go to the point of murdering the hater, but it doesn't murder hate. It may increase hate.

"It is always a descending spiral leading nowhere. This is the ultimate weakness of violence: It multiplies evil and violence in the universe. It doesn't solve any problems."

Jesus' question hangs in the air.

What are you looking for?

If it is peace, then make peace.

If it is racial equality, then work for it.

If it is an end to poverty, then work for its end.

If it is an end to war, work to end it.

Martin Luther King, Jr. modeled and taught that whatever we seek, it must be done with non-violence. We cannot embody a loving God, a God who creates in love, a God who seeks the well-being of all creation... we cannot embody that God in any other manner than with love and seeking the well-being of all.

What are you looking for? asked Jesus. His first act was to start recruiting disciples; disciples who would embody a God of love, justice and peace.

God is calling YOU.

ⁱ From **The Other Side** Online, © 2003 The Other Side, January-February 2003, Vol. 39, No. 1.

ⁱⁱ "Martin Luther King - Nobel Lecture". Nobelprize.org. 15 Jan 2011

http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-lecture.html

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Week*, Jan. 21, 2011, p. 8 citing TheDailyBeast.com.