

January 19, 2020

*“Love God, Love Others”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Exodus 3:1-8

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The other day I was reading an article in the Cape Cod Times regarding a dispute over whether or not the Brewster Baptist Church should continue to be used as voting location. And the result was that the Brewster Board of Selectmen decided to continue using the church, despite one of the board members taking issue with voting in a building associated with religion. She stated, “I just believe that there should be a separation of church and state and I think we should try and move away from the church.” At one time, Brewster had used their town hall as a voting location until parking became an issue, and voting was relocated to the church almost twenty years ago.

Now I find this woman's thinking somewhat thin, and I'll get to my reasoning in a moment. But she's not alone. If you remember, when we requested approval to hold our beach services at Surf Drive Beach, there was one selectwoman who voted against us for the exact same reason: her notion of the separation of church and state. Now we often hear that phrase, but do we really understand its intent. That's why I like this definition: the separation of church and state is a rationale meant to prevent or eliminate religious organizations having any political influence over the nation state. It doesn't mean the two can't ever share a public venue, such as a municipal beach or a community church open to the public, providing it makes common sense. But there's not much of that around these days, is there? And it seems to be getting worse. But the reason I'm giving you this little civics lesson today is because of the person we are celebrating tomorrow: the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Because, arguably, the greatest agent of social change in this nation state called the United States of America, was a Christian preacher who did not adhere to that separation of church and state. Let me say that again: the greatest agent of social change in this nation state called the United States of America, was a Christian preacher who did not adhere to that separation of church and state. We can only understand the profound impact of that by looking back at it from a historical perspective. You see, Rev. King used the church and the teachings of the Bible and Jesus Christ to make that change happen. Now I'm not saying King was a saint – from what I've read, far from it. But neither was Moses, Noah, King David, St. Paul, and many, many other individuals in the Bible God used for his own purposes, which I'll talk about in a minute. But think about what Rev King did. He brought religious discourse directly into the public arena. As a Christian preacher, he knew all about nonviolence and the great themes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, about loving your enemy, turning the other cheek, forgiving seventy times

seven! And just like Jesus did when he suffered the affronts and insults of his enemies, King was able to put up with arrests, water cannons, attack dogs, and more, by taking the moral and spiritual higher ground. And just like Jesus did, he was able to mirror back on those bent on violence, their own cruelty and ignorance and sin, so that they might see it, and own it, and then change.<sup>1</sup> Imagine that – the teachings of Jesus Christ actually worked! And look at where we stand today. Things may not be perfect, but at least we are no longer on the brink of a civil war, and we as a country now uphold those Christian principles of love, acceptance, justice and equality for people of color.

So before we go further, the next time you hear someone talk about the “separation of church and state,” remind them of Rev. King's “I Have A Dream” speech, or should I say sermon, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Because there at that incredible venue – the capital, the seat of our government, with the image of President Abraham Lincoln behind him, King quotes the prophet Isaiah, “Every valley shall be exalted... every hill made low... every crooked way made straight... and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.” This is explicit biblical language. Remind that person that King then links Isaiah's dream, to the American dream, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”<sup>2</sup> He talked about faith, about prayer, about how we are all God's children. And then ask that person what our country would look like today if it hadn't been for King totally disregarding that separation of church and state. Can I get an Amen!

Now let me get back to the comment I made earlier about how God uses various individuals for his purposes. Even imperfect people like King David, Paul, me and you. Because it's interesting how God speaks to us, or gets our attention, in ways we don't expect. In today's Scripture we hear God calling Moses through a burning bush in the desert, promising Moses that he would lead his people, those enslaved in Egypt, into a new land of milk and honey. There's God showing up in the middle of the night to wrestle with Jacob until dawn, when God then calls Jacob a new name, Israel. And I'm sure Mary didn't expect God, through his messenger Gabriel, to show up in her bedroom telling her she would be a new mother. Or how about Jesus blinding St. Paul on the Damascus road, giving him a new theology. You may not know this, but there's even a story in the Old Testament where God spoke to a prophet named Balaam through the mouth of his donkey. You see, the point I want to make is that God does reach out and speak to us. Sometimes in big ways like I just described, but mostly also through 'his still small voice'. And that's the voice I want you to talk to you about now.

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<sup>1</sup> Word on Fire, Robert Baron

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

You see, the United Methodist Church is going through some major turmoil as it pertains to the LGBTQ issue and whether or not we are going to fully welcome and accept those of differing sexual orientations into this church. Most of you have probably read about it or heard about it on the news. There's talk of a breakup of the denomination, with the traditionalists taking one side, the progressives taking another side, and, of course, the moderates in the middle. All sides are moving in the direction that a final decision needs to be made this coming May by our governing bodies. In fact, our Leadership Team had a lively discussion over the matter last Monday night at our meeting as to how we're going to approach the issue. So I thought it would be appropriate this Martin Luther King weekend, given the parallels that can be drawn to those who are marginalized, to talk about our church and what it means to accept all people. The fact is, our church, John Wesley, is a special place. It is a place of refuge and renewal, a place to grow in our faith with one another. You all feel the love and fellowship that emanates from within these walls, don't you? I've not felt it in any other church the same way. And as we anticipate what might happen this May and how it may affect us from the outside, I'm hoping that what exists inside here, stays exactly the same. That we will be unified in living out our purpose... to love God, love others and serve the world. That is who we are and that is who we should always be. But, it will all depend on you and me. It will depend on how each and every one of us listen to that voice of God as he speaks to you, to us, about this matter. Because consider our God for a moment. He came to earth as our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And his ministry can only be described as a radical ministry – one that challenged those who quoted scripture and the law because they didn't understand that the whole basis of God's word, scripture, is all about love! Love for God and love for others! It was a radical ministry of reaching out to and accepting the marginalized, those excluded because of race, gender, economic status, social status, as well as all those “sinners”. There is example after example of this in Scripture. When there was confusion as to the law, Jesus would issue this reprimand: “You have heard it said this... but I say this.” “I say this!”

That's why we must listen to the voice of God. Not to our own inner voice which is often spoken out of fear, self-righteousness, or unexamined conviction, but to the voice of God. Remembering that the voice of God reveals the character of God, who shows no partiality. Let's go back to Moses and the burning bush a minute. Before God would even talk to Moses, God told him, “Take off your sandals, for the place you are standing is holy ground.” Now, in ancient times – and this is how you understand scripture – in ancient time, shoes, sandals had symbolic value. Not everyone had sandals. But if you did, it symbolized a certain degree of power and respect. So you could use your sandals in different

ways. For example, even recently, many of you may remember when Saddam Hussein was overthrown, people would wave or throw their sandals to show the dirt on the bottom of the sandal – a sign of disrespect. Another example, in ancient times a purchase became legal only after the seller took off his shoe and handed it over to the buyer. It was a symbol of giving up ownership of something important. And so here, at the burning bush, God is telling Moses – take off your sandals, and give up ownership to your ways, your plans, your thoughts, for this is holy ground, and I have other plans for you. It's a new time. And, as we listen to the voice of God, we too will need to take off our sandals – take off our preconceived ideas, our prejudices, our unwillingness to listen, our unwillingness to change. For some of us may be called to a new understanding, a new way of thinking. Just as all of us were called to a new way of thinking during the Civil Rights Movement.

You see, serious Christians, serious John Wesleyans, shouldn't believe that as individuals we are the only ones upon whom God has placed his love and blessings. Because if we are to take the Bible seriously, how do we explain that entire concept of a chosen people is one that must expand rather than contract? And, if our Lord Jesus Christ is the center of our belief, and the one who best explains who God is, then how do we reconcile his expansive and inclusive behavior as recorded in Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Especially his words, "But... I say this."

So remember, burning bushes show up in many forms. They rarely make our life easier, but they do make our life more faithful. They are meant to be impactful and life-changing. And as we anticipate what happens to the United Methodist church as a whole, and John Wesley Church specifically, I have a dream: that each and every one of us may we listen carefully to what God is saying to us, and then boldly follow him. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> The Good Book, Peter Gomes