

“For the Common Good”

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel A. Smith
At Hancock United Church of Christ
Sunday, January 18th, 2004
Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday*

Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12: 4-27

Today is the Second Sunday of Epiphany. On the Christian liturgical calendar, just as there is a Season of Advent and a Season of Lent, there is also a Season of Epiphany which begins on the twelfth day of Christmas - January 6th - and lasts until the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday. Epiphany comes from a Greek word which means “appearance” or “showing forth” or “manifestation”. For many Christians throughout the world, Epiphany marks the church’s commemoration of the coming of the Magi as the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. Webster defines Epiphany in more general terms as “a moment of sudden intuitive understanding” and as a “flash of insight.” I’ve been asking some of you lately to share with me and with others what has been a recent Epiphany of yours, either in terms of God’s presence being made manifest in your daily life, or even in the more general sense. I’ll come back to that question in a moment, but I’d like to warm you up a bit first if I may.

From the Three Kings that came from the East, we turn our attention this weekend to another King that came from the South – the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. I am certain that King was a man who experienced many epiphanies throughout his too short life. I’d like to call your attention this morning to just one. In a sermon he preached in Chicago in August of ‘67, King bore his soul to the congregation by sharing his reaction to a late night phone call, a death threat that he received early on in the civil right movement. He preached: “The telephone started ringing and I picked it up. On the other end was an ugly voice. That voice said to me, in substance, “Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going to blow your brains out and blow up your house.”” King had heard these things before, but this one got to him. He got up and made himself a cup of coffee. He turned over theological and philosophical reasons for the reality of sin and evil, but the answers did not come there. He thought about his wife and the one child he had at the time. He got to the point where he could not stand the thought of losing them. I’ll let his words take it from here which I’ll now quote at length:

“I was weak. (Yes) Something said to me, you can’t call on Daddy now, he’s up in Atlanta a hundred and seventy-five miles away. (Yes) You can’t even call on Mama now. (My Lord) You’ve got to call on that something in that person that

your Daddy used to tell you about. (Yes) That power that can make a way out of no way. (Yes) And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me and I had to know God for myself. (Yes, sir) And I bowed down over that cup of coffee—I never will forget it. (Yes, sir) And oh yes, I prayed a prayer and I prayed out loud that night. (Yes) I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. (Yes) I think I'm right; I think the cause that we represent is right. (Yes) But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now; I'm faltering; I'm losing my courage. (Yes) And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak." (Yes) I wanted tomorrow morning to be able to go before the executive board with a smile on my face.

And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, (Yes) "Martin Luther, (Yes) stand up for righteousness, (Yes) stand up for justice, (Yes) stand up for truth. (Yes) And lo I will be with you, (Yes) even until the end of the world." And I'll tell you, I've seen the lightning flash. I've heard the thunder roll. I felt sin-breakers dashing, trying to conquer my soul. But I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me, (Never) never to leave me alone.¹

(Pause)

If only Webster had the space to quote this sermon in a definition of “epiphany”. What King experienced, sitting at his kitchen table in Montgomery in the middle of night was not merely a flash of insight, but a lightning flash of faithfulness, a thunder roll of assurance, a sea swell of courage. King discovered that if he was going to continue to endure threats upon his own safety and that of his family, he needed religion to become real for him. He needed to know God like he had never known God before.

Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians that we just heard, “Now there varieties of gifts, but the same spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates them all. To each is given a *manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*”

To Martin Luther King, Jr., on that night in Montgomery, was given “a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Before this wave of Martin’s courage drowns us out, before we ask and wonder where the prophets are today, where the drum majors for righteousness, let us hear Paul’s words again. To EACH is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the Common Good. Paul does not say “to Martin will be given a manifestation” or “to Mahatma will be given a manifestation.” But to EACH one of us is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the Common Good. Apparently, this is not a matter over which we have much choosing.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. from a sermon entitled, “Why Jesus Called A Man A Fool,” delivered at Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, on 27 August 1967.

http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/sermons/670827.000_Why_Jesus_Called_a_Man_a_Fool.html

Imagine for a moment -- and this is especially for you seekers and searchers – imagine that you're being a Christian is not a personal choice. Imagine that religion is not something that you shop around for and find what feels like the right fit for you. For most of us, at least for those of us raised in a church, being a Christian is not nearly as much of a choice as we tend to think. I once heard the scholar of religion and African American studies Cornel West give a talk about identity. He was speaking of the ways that race and gender and religion were all constituent parts of his identity. I wanted to be clear about what he was saying so I went up to him after his lecture and I asked him, "Do you really believe that your being a Christian is as much a part of your identity as is your being a male and an African American?" Through tired and blood-shot eyes, he looked at me and said with utter conviction in his voice, "Absolutely!" For Cornel West, Christianity had somehow found its ways into his very blood and into his bones and it could no more be removed from his person than could the color of his skin.

I wonder if the same could be said of the gifts of which Paul speaks. If we take seriously what Paul says, then we have within us, within each of us, some manifestation of God's Spirit, some gift that is to be used for the Common Good. On this Second Sunday of Epiphany, this passage may call us to stop looking for God somewhere outside of us and up there and beyond us, but to look deeply within our very own hearts for a manifestation of God. Like Martin, if we take religion and God seriously, if we take them to our hearts, perhaps we too may hear an inner voice of justice and truth that is driving us to engage in our public life for the common good. Asking the question of how God's spirit is made uniquely manifest within each of us is not merely a mental exercise for a Sunday morning but is part of larger spiritual reality which most of us have heretofore ignored or denied. Could it be that the answer to our questions of where are the prophets, where are the healers, where are the teachers, is right here in this sacred text, right here in these very pews. When we can discern and release the gifts of God spirit that are given to each of us for the Common Good, we may find just this answer. Could it be time for us too to recognize, if we haven't already, that religion needs to become real for us, that God has to become real for us, all for the sake of reigniting our interest in the Common Good?

I wish I had been on my toes enough this week to have asked our in-house scholar of religion and the public life, Brent Coffin, to offer us a historical sketch of some of the ways that people throughout the generations have wrestled with the question "What is the Common Good?" and "How do we get there from here?" In the context of our American history, the framers of our Constitution had a broad and lasting democratic ideal in mind. Philosophers, economists, social and political theorists, even Presidential administrations have been adding their two cents ever since, all in an effort to reconcile diverse interests hopefully with an eye for the well-being of the human family. Rather than trying and failing to sketch different theories of the common good – theories with labels like free-market conservatism, or liberal welfare theory, or democratic socialism - lets try to keep it simple and hopefully a little more fun.

Imagine with me, if you will, a board game called "The Quest for the Common Good." It is a game in which we are all players by virtue of our citizenship. The point of the game is to achieve the goal of liberty and justice for all. We all start on the same square but with a few quick rolls of the dice, we're off and running and the pack begins to separate quickly. While the rolls of the dice are the largest determinants of who is winning and losing at any given point, the

game also offers opportunities for decisions, strategizing and risk-taking that can advance our positions, or not .

Given the culture that we live in, many of us have learned to play our roles in “The Quest for the Common Good” with one thing primarily in mind: to get ahead of the game, and to stay ahead of the game. By a global, national and even statewide standard, we are so far ahead of the game right now that we rarely even stop to wonder who else is still playing with us. For some of us, the game is getting just plain boring. We are like my 8 year old niece when she is creaming her younger and brother and sister at Candyland. She’ll even get up and leave the room for a break - while the game is still on - only to come back and find that she is still winning. If someone moves their playing piece to a square that is closer to her on the board, her interest is peaked and she starts playing again. We take some comfort in our winning positions because we know we haven’t broken any rules to get to where we are – its the roll of the dice, along with some wise decisions that brought us to the head of the pack. Call it our inbred individualism or careerism, call it market forces, call it what you will, but doesn’t this game sound just a little familiar? In the real life version of the Quest for the Common Good, we have gotten so far ahead of the game that most of us no longer have contact with the other players who are losing. They are twenty, thirty, forty squares behind us and they may never catch up. Have you noticed the articles lately, to name just one example, about the racial inequalities in public education? So many of us are losing contact, and without contact with the people who we started out the game with, we are losing interest in the game itself, losing interest in our public life, losing site of the original goal – the Common Good – liberty and justice for all.

The Quest for the Common Good cannot be won when we are playing the game to get ahead of the game or to stay ahead of the game. It cannot be won when we are modeling this competitive behavior for our children, nor even when we are trying to get ahead of the game just enough to retire and then, later, turn our lives to the Common Good. The Common Good cannot be won when we are playing roles that the market gives us, the roles that television gives us, the roles that our bosses give us, or our neighbors or even the role that our own families sometimes give us. The Quest for the Common Good can only be won when we start playing the role that God has given to each of us *and* when we are clear that each player in the game is an indispensable part of our own existence.

We are Christians, and so the hope is that we see the game and play the game differently than the folks who like to get ahead and stay ahead. We have been baptized, and reborn into a new game, where we are called to live our lives not as individual playing pieces making our moves to advance at all costs, but as many members of one body – Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, execs and janitors, gays and straights, blacks and whites and browns and yellows. We are one in this Body of Christ and we recognize that we have obligations and responsibilities to act accordingly in church *and* in public life. To paraphrase another of Paul’s lines from our scripture, ‘God has so arranged this body, this game if you will, giving greater honor to the inferior members, that there may be no dissension with in the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it.’ King put it this way: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a singly garment of destiny. Whatever affects on directly affects all indirectly”².

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter From Birmingham Jail” in a *“A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.”* Ed. by James Melvin Washington. San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996.

King also wrote in his Letter from the Birmingham Jail, “Yes, I see the church as body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being non-conformists!” We scar our beloved Body whenever we try to get ahead and to stay ahead of the game. We scar our beloved body by letting the language of individualism be our first language and the language of community our second. We blemish our beloved Body by being afraid to claim our identity as Christians in the public square, by getting bored and tired of the game, by losing contact with the least of these, and by ignoring the manifestation of the spirit that is within each of us. It is time for God to become real for us again. It is time for religion to become real for us. And we must stop acting as if we had the choice. God IS with us. God will NEVER leave us alone. And, so we must be with God and never leave God alone.

Our gifts may not be the gifts of Martin Luther King Jr., the gifts of an enduring faith that God’s justice will prevail, the gifts of prophecy. It is ours to discern what contributions we can make to the Common Good. If we feel weak, and if we are faltering, we must pray out loud to the power than can make a way out of no way and that will speak to us through inner voices saying, “Stand up for righteousness, Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth.”

IF all of this is sounding a little esoteric, let me bring it down to earth, right here to this land of privilege called Lexington, Massachusetts. Guess what? I have seen God give to some of you the manifestation of the Spirit for the Common Good. I have seen it with my own two eyes. I have seen some of you trying to play the game by God’s rules! I have seen some of you learn to play the game with the knowledge that we are one in the Body of Christ and that the Common Good expands beyond what is good for *our* families and *our* town. I have seen some of you trying to cut against the grain of the get ahead and stay ahead lifestyle that is so prominent in this town. I have seen some of you sharing your gifts for the Common Good in the halls of government, of schools, of public policy, of boardrooms, standing not merely for narrow and private interests of the company or the client or the privileged but standing up for justice and standing up for righteousness and standing up for the truth in solidarity with the least of these. I have watched some of you see beyond the so-called bottom line of corporate profits and your own stock portfolios. I know some of you have prayed out loud late at night and have said, “God, I now know you’re real! I know what you ask won’t be easy for me or for the kids. But I know your real and I know your needs are real and I know you need me somewhere because I can feel you activating my soul for the Common Good.” You know who you are.

May we all be so blessed to see this Season of Epiphany as a season to discern within our very selves the manifestation of God’s spirit for the Common Good. May we each pray the question “God, what is it that you are trying to activate inside of me for the common good?” And may God speak us too with lightning flashes of faithfulness, with thunderbolts of assurance, and with sea swells of courage, that we may stand with Martin for justice and righteousness and truth. May tomorrow not just be another day off. May tomorrow be another day on in which to recognize the roles we each must play to win the Common Good.