

Sermon on the Letter from a Birmingham Jail

Beyond Peace-mongering
By the Rev. Salying Wong

A few years ago, when commemorating the feast of Martin Luther King at our Wednesday service, Norma Medlin related to me a story. She was attending St. Timothy's in Mountain View at the time. It was the year 1965, a few weeks before the march in Selma, Alabama. When the rector, the Rev. Dwight Edwards, told his congregation that he was going to march in Selma, about ten people stood up and walked out of church.

In those times and in our time, race remains a divisive issue—not just in the world at large, but in church. Usually, the word “peace” gets bandied about in this division. When Martin Luther King wrote his letter from a Birmingham jail in 1963, it was in response to white clergyman who accused him of being a disturber of the peace. Peace, ostensibly, was the white churchmen's concern. It was also MLK's concern. But, apparently, the word “peace” described two different visions of the world. Today, I'd like to focus my sermon on peace. What sort of peace did Jesus stand for?

First, let's hear from Luke's (12:49-53) gospel, which describes a baptism that is not of water, but of fire.

Jesus said to his disciples, “I have come to set the earth on fire and how I wish it were already blazing. There is a baptism with which I must be baptized and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished. Do you think I have come to establish peace and honor? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three. A father will be divided against his son and the son against his father, a mother against her daughter and the daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

For people who come to church looking only for comfort, these words offer none. Thomas Keating, the great contemplative, reminds us that there's a difference between being a peace lover and a peacemaker. This is what he says:

It is only [peacemakers] that Jesus congratulates in the beatitudes: Blessed are the peacemakers—[to be a peacemaker means] a very high level of participation in the values of the kingdom. Peace lovers like the way things are, either at home, in their community, in their nation, or in their religion. They don't want anybody to rock the boat by raising inappropriate questions or pointing out things that need serious improvements or possibly things that are unjust.

Peacemakers are the voice of the voiceless...Peace lovers like everything as it is, for fear of losing the kind of peace they mistake for the true peace that Jesus brings.

It is also important to remember that when Jesus spoke the beatitudes, he spoke in the time of the Pax Romana, that was the policy called the Peace of Rome. This peace allowed for economic and political stability of the empire (Pax) by brutally policing any dissent of minority voices. Crucifixion was a political tool of torture and terrorism that protected this so-called peace. Outside every major city gate hung the multitude of the crucified. Remember, Jesus was, like all others, crucified outside of city gates. This is so that everyone who went through the city gate would know, "Do not disturb the peace. This is what will happen to you if you do."

So peace can mean a feeling of tranquility at the cost of violence on the oppressed. Of course, this is mentally disturbing. Some will choose to wake up from the mental sleep of such knowledge and offer their lives in service for the costly peace of Jesus. Some will not only choose to remain asleep, but will by mental gymnastics argue for others to remain asleep. One way in which church people do this is to support charity and handouts, which leave the needy in their place, but do not support changes to structures that create poverty. Rabbi Edwin Friedman has a less gentle term for these people. He doesn't call them peace lovers; he calls them peacemongers. Like warmongers, peacemongers make peace with oppression.

Today, you hear MLK's frustration as he tries to explain his pain that his own among the ordained who are telling him to make peace by waiting and waiting for freedom and justice. He takes pain to show them that his people have been waiting for a long time. The 14th amendment passed in 1868 had granted the African American full citizenship and legal protection—but in 1963 this amendment was nonetheless flouted by the Jim Crow apartheid laws and the inability to vote. He also explains that it has never been the case that freedom is granted by the oppressor out of the goodness of their heart when so much privilege is at stake. But rather, they must be pushed to a tension that demands a change, with boycotts and strikes. It is this tension that allows for real peacemaking because it means peace and justice for all. As the prophets proclaimed of old, as Isaiah proclaimed, "The work of justice will be peace." (Isaiah 37:32). It is justice for the oppressed that brings peace and security, not some form of the pax Romana.

At the end of most services, you hear me giving a blessing. May the peace that is beyond understanding...There are a lot of forms of peace that is within easy grasp—like a drink in the hand, a pill in the mouth, a story of just desserts, even a charity to do so to pat yourself on the back. And then there is this peace that is beyond understanding. It is beyond understanding because it is not easy. It depends on grace while it demands our making, our sacrifice, our courage; it demands a vision of belonging that is greater than tribe or race. When last we have this kind of peace, we behold it with awe—This peace that is kingdom peace that God desires first for the lowly and then for the rest. Let us work for this kind of peace. Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.

