

Getting to Know You

January 14, 2024

MLK Day of Service

As we begin, I'd first like to offer a huge expression of gratitude to our member, Wendy Woodward. Last year, Wendy initiated a day of service over the Martin Luther King Day holiday and invited a few organizations she was active in to participate. It went pretty well, and through prayer, Wendy was inspired to dream bigger. She got to work, developing relationships with intersectional partners like We All Rise African American Resource Center, the Volunteer Center of Green Bay, and Rotary of Green Bay to bring to life a city-wide day of service, rooted in the initiative of the late civil rights icon, John Lewis, that the King holiday be designated a National Day of Service.

Wendy built bridges and a team of partners, and by November the coalition that she had gathered had lined up more than 200 opportunities for people to do service and carry on Rev. King's legacy. Unfortunately, the 13.5 inches of snow we got over the weekend resulted in this first Green Bay Martin Luther King Day of Service being canceled, but there was such great energy and enthusiasm around the event that organizers are already planning for next year, and will be working to plug volunteers in to the most critical of projects on an ad hoc basis. So again, please join me in thanking Wendy Woodward for this initiative, as well as Christie Reese for representing Union on the planning team, and Union's Gifts and Memorials Ministry for the grant they made for supplies for the event.

Getting to Know You

Back in October, when the war in Gaza broke out, I shared some reflections from my friend and colleague Rabbi Moishe Steigmann. Rabbi Steigmann expressed that he was conflicted, that his loyalties to his faith and his people were in tension with his humanness and compassion and the complexity of the situation. He wrote:

“How do I call out those who supported or elected terrorists in the first place without ceding my compassion for the interminable plight that drove them there? How do I call out a government for ongoing provocation without ignoring the pain their people have suffered from decades of bombings? How do I reconcile my belief that Hamas must simply be destroyed with the potential casualties that it will necessitate? How do I balance the dignity of life, the indignity of murder and killing, the urgency of war, and the scar that they sear on the soul?”

As we all know, that war rages on.

Recently, Rabbi Steigmann shared that each week, as he blesses his kids for Shabbat, he looks to the Torah portion for the week. Last week's passage was the section that Jeff Gibson read for us today from the first chapter of Exodus, where we read that “A new king rose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.”

If you remember where the story left off just before this, Joseph had been sold by his brothers into slavery, and yet through dreams, wisdom, and courage, he had become a trusted advisor to Pharaoh, and had saved the Egyptians from the draught and famine that had plagued the rest of

the region. Pharaoh and the Egyptians were deeply grateful and indebted to Joseph, and in turn his people, the Israelites, who had migrated to Egypt.

But, as our scripture passage read, “A new king rose over Egypt who did not know Joseph,” and fearing these people he saw as “other,” the new king stirred up that fear among his people, initiating oppression, hard servitude, and ruthlessness against them. Knowing this, Rabbi Steigmann’s blessing for his children as they prepared for Shabbat was this:

A new king arose who somehow didn’t know Joseph – which, by the way, is nonsensical. It probably makes more sense that it was a generation or a couple of generations later and the new king Egypt didn’t remember all that Joseph had done.

By that point, the Israelites had grown much more numerous, and this new king acted out of fear, acted out of perhaps jealousy, out of whatever reason. And instead of going to learn about Joseph and his history, where he had come from, what he had done, and what his people hoped to contribute to Egyptian society – instead the new king decided to try to subjugate Joseph and all of his people.

So, my hope for you is: unlike this new king, if there’s someone you don’t know, if there’s a story that you don’t know, if there’s a narrative you don’t know, a history that you don’t know – you take the time and energy to try to learn about them, to try to understand their narrative, and, in turn, unlike what happened to the Israelites, perhaps, you all can find a way to live in some form of peace and harmony.

Rabbi Steigmann crafted this as a blessing to his children, yet he shared it as a prayerful, faithful response to the ongoing war in Gaza, and I lift it up as we celebrate the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (You’ll note that I work to refer to him as Rev. King, not Dr. King, as he himself would remind us that his rootedness in his faith took precedence over his intellect.) Rev. King, while best known for his civil rights work, was also a vocal opponent of war. He spoke out against the war in Vietnam, in part because, even with the draft, the war disproportionately affected the poor and people of color, as those with better educations were less likely to be on the front lines.

But Rev. King’s critique of war was even deeper. Hear these words, from the prophet’s own mouth:

Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal.

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality...I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.

Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you refuse to hate him.

If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in the struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.

We have guided missiles and misguided men.

Those who love peace must learn to organize as effectively as those who love war.

It's interesting, the Gospel passage that we read today is typically called the "call of the apostles." Every year at about this time, once we've celebrated Christmas and Epiphany, we read this or a similar passage from one of the other Gospels, which fast forwards us 30 or so years past Christmas, to the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Most years, I'll use this text as a springboard to reflect on how each of us is called to follow Christ, or what it means to commit ourselves to following Jesus and his ways rather than our own impulses and desires. But in light of Rabbi Steigmann's blessing to take the time and energy to learn about the people, things, and ideas we don't know, even those that scare us, something else stands out in our Gospel passage this week.

Nathaniel starts out contemptuously, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" He's got his biases, his preconceived notions. He feels better than this itinerant preacher he's been hearing about. Philip's response is, "Come and see." Which you and I know means, "Come learn about him for yourself."

It's so fitting that this version of the call of the apostles from the Gospel of John really hinges on knowing someone. When Nathaniel didn't know Jesus, he looked down his nose at him. In our Old Testament reading, when the new king didn't know Joseph, he feared him and his people and was ruthless and set out to oppress them. The key in both of our scripture texts, and which weaves its way through the life and teachings of Rev. King, is coming to know people, which in turn re-connects us to their innate human dignity and worth.

Conclusion

Friends, when I preached about the war in Gaza as it was beginning back in October, I acknowledged that there's not a whole lot that any of us can do about it. We can call and write to our representatives. We can support humanitarian efforts. But this horror is so much bigger than any of us. But that does not wash our hands. If we are to be a society that does not oppress and make others' lives bitter to the point of desperation, if we are to be people who do not default to violence to solve our problems, if we are to heed the prophecy of Martin Luther King Jr., we must start with the attitude of Rabbi Steigman's blessing, start with the mindset of Philip from our Gospel, not Nathaniel. We must commit ourselves, train ourselves, to following Jesus by getting to know the people and things and ideas around us, particularly those that scare us the most. Not only is this the Godly way, it is the only way for our survival.

And this plays itself out not only in the scope of global war and racism. It can be applied as close to home as with a co-worker or neighbor or even partner you're struggling with. When you butt up against something that makes you fearful or look down on another, something that gets your dander up, the faithful stance is to get to get to know them, to approach with an attitude of

learning and growth. If even a portion of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah were to do this, it would spark a revolution.

As we wrap up, I offer you this last quote on the subject from Rev. King:

“I am convinced that love is the most durable power in the world. It is not an expression of impractical idealism, but of practical realism. Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, love is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. To return hate for hate does nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe. Someone must have sense enough and religion enough to cut off the chain of hate and evil, and this can only be done through love.”

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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Exodus 1:8-14; John 1:43-51
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