



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Lockett Currie

Who Will Speak for Our Souls?

Sermon for 1-16-11

Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-9 and John 1:24-39a

A little over a week ago our country experienced another tragedy of violence. I'm sure you all are familiar with the shooting in Tucson, Arizona, of Representative Gabby Giffords and others who were killed and injured. I had a minister once in DC who preached with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. To witness to Christ, it is essential that we keep aware of what is happening in our world, near and far. This past year has been a tough one. What has happened to the people in this country? What has happened to our souls? Jim Wallis of Sojourners asks, "Have we sold our God-given souls to political ideologies? ...Is the only framework in which we think a framework of win and lose?" What part of Christianity supports the violence, the hatred, the separation that we see, hear and read about all around us?

Diana Butler Bass wrote a powerful blog right after the shooting where she tells ministers not to get into the pulpit and blame one side or another. She suggests that any sermon on this topic should go beyond expressions of sympathy and calls for civility and niceness. Instead she



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recommends that we do some serious reflection on our faith, on our spirituality. What better day to do such a thing as on the Sunday before the 25th year celebrating Martin Luther King's birthday! I love celebrating Martin Luther King Sunday as it gives me a chance to remember the passion I felt back in the Civil Rights Movement days. I first became aware of King when I was about 15. Although I had been very much involved in church since childhood, King was the first person alive that I knew about that seemed to actually put into practice what Jesus said about love. This impressed me a great deal. As most of you know my first husband and the father of my children was an African American from Jackson , Mississippi. I met Roland in Maine in the summer of 1960 and we married in 1964, at a time when interracial marriages were rare and were illegal in some states. My marriage led me to become even more passionately and personally involved with the Civil Rights movement. Then and now Martin Luther King, Jr. is my hero.

The lectionary focus both last Sunday and today is on Jesus' baptism. I have chosen the Isaiah reading from last week. The accounts of the baptism are slightly different. In the reading last reading Matthew talked about Jesus being baptized by John and his seeing the dove descending on him and heard a voice from heaven say, "This is my Son,



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the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” In today’s gospel reading it is John that says he saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on Jesus. John says further that God had told him that the one on whom he saw the spirit descend is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. John ends with “And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” V. 34.

Butler Bass says that there are two powerful symbols of baptism: Jesus’ baptism in water symbolizes life; however, there is also a darker symbol of baptism—that of blood and she quotes Episcopal Bishop Stephen Elliot from 1862, “All nations which come into existence...must be born amid the storm of revolution and must win their way to a place in history through the baptism of blood.” Are the people of our nation caught between these two powerful symbols of baptism? Do we need the life-giving cleansing of the water of God or the blood of a U.S. representative, a federal judge, a nine year old girl and others lying on a street in Tucson ?

Are we innocent of contributing to this atmosphere of hate and cruelty? Have any of you demeaned any of our public servants? Have any of you laughed at clever put downs of the politicians on “the other side”



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whatever your side may be. Even if you have never come close to inflicting physical violence, have you been guilty of violent thoughts and words? What have we done to become a peacemakers, we who are followers of the Prince of Peace? Remember that peace is not only the absence of conflict but also the presence of a justice. How can we not only stop violence and hate but also be a part of bringing about a community of justice and peace, of wholeness and caring for all people? Can we relate to others that are different and with whom we disagree, without putting them down or calling them evil or stupid? And what about Jesus' command to love each other, even our enemies, as ourselves?

There's no doubt in my mind that Jesus sees his baptism as a call to walk in the ways of righteousness. The Hebrew Bible reading brings us Isaiah, quoting God, giving us strength to accept that same spiritual call: "I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." 42:6-7. If we do not follow God's call to be a healing presence, what will happen to our souls?

Martin Luther King, Jr. had the kind of faith that made it impossible to avoid the folks in trouble. King originally resisted the call to lead the



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Montgomery boycott; however, as he prayed he realized that the spirit of the Lord was upon him so that he must stand with the poor, the oppressed, the beaten down. He felt that spirit pushing him on. He didn't just come preaching, "I have a dream" and disappear. He stayed in the struggle, preaching non-violence as Gandhi had inspired him. He called upon the nation and told them they were not what they should be. His spirituality led him to go to Birmingham to mourn with the parents of those 4 little girls that were bombed to death. It led him to stand up to white people for equal rights for blacks. His faith led him to Selma to challenge voting discrimination. He organized a march to call for jobs. His faith caused him to call thousands of blacks and whites to risk their lives for true democracy.

His long time close friend, Vincent Harding, states that this was Martin's spirituality: I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to live for and with those who find themselves seeing life as a long and desolate corridor with no exit signs. This is the way I'm going. If it means suffering a little bit, I'm going that way. If it means sacrificing, I'm going that way. If it means dying for them, I'm going that way. Because I heard the voice saying: do something for others.



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In the end King extended his work internationally, calling for the end of the Vietnam war, an action that many believe was the final straw, causing his assassination. When asked some Christians will tell you that the most important thing about their faith is that they are saved and will be going to heaven. Jesus speaks of eternal life; yet he speaks much more about how we ought to live in this lifetime—to love our neighbors, to care for the poor, to visit those in prisons, to welcome the marginalized and outcasts, to forgive both ourselves and others. King in his protest of the Vietnam War said, “I identify with those people you call gooks and enemies and Viet Congs...they are my sisters and brothers. That was his spirituality.

Christian spirituality is not a simple thing. Jesus did not give simple answers to questions. In the gospel reading when asked about himself, he says come and see. To me that means that Jesus’ life is what we need to look at when we are wondering what it means to be a Christian. In our gospel when John’s disciples were following Jesus, he turned to them and asked, “What are you looking for?” and then told them to follow him, to come and see. Christian life is not an easy life. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of those followers that tried to live his life as



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Jesus taught. He embraced all people, followed the ways of nonviolence to work for justice and peace.

He liked to talk about the “worldhouse”, a term that captured for him the ideal of a totally integrated world based on love, justice and equal opportunity—a world in which loyalties to race, class, sex, tribe, religion, philosophical orientations, political differences, ethnicity, and nationality would be transcended in the interest of the total human community”

(Lewis Baldwin) He advocated a world-wide fellowship based on neighborly concern, agape love. For Dr. King, the Beloved Community was a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry, and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

This weekend as we celebrate the life of this great man, who would have been 82 this birthday, I ask you to reflect on your own faith, your own spirituality. What is going to happen to your soul? We all make choices in our lives. Will your choice be to help our nation to go forward



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in peace and well being for all? Will you be a bridge that will help unite people? Will you be the change you want in the world? Because in the end, as Butler Bass writes, "If we don't speak for the soul, our silence will surely aid evil." I challenge each of you to reflect and act on how your spirituality will make this nation and our world a more loving, more compassionate, less violent place. Amen and Amen.