

“Martin Luther King and the Spirit of Jubilee”

*A sermon by the Rev. Canon Gregory Jacobs at shared worship with
Bethel A.M.E. Church and Church of the Redeemer, Morristown, New Jersey*

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Leviticus 25:8-13

I am truly grateful for the opportunity extended to me by the clergy of your two churches, Cynthia and Sidney, and to be among you this morning-- to spend a few minutes in reflection together on the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Your two congregations, by worshipping together this morning, embody Martin's Dream. Dr. King often pointed to the reality of Sunday morning at 11:00 as the most segregated hour in America. But you have put the lie to that reality, a reality which sadly is still pretty much true today. Somewhere, brothers and sisters, Martin is smiling down on you.

I have chosen as the biblical text for my remarks this morning, the great challenge given by God to the people of Israel to observe a Jubilee Year throughout the land, once every 50 years.

The Jubilee Year was forged in God's holy expectation that the Hebrew people would achieve peace, live together in love, and strive for justice. It was meant to be a time to give to all of God's creation the honor and respect with which it was endowed by the Creator.

Proclaiming liberty throughout the land meant setting captives free, forgiving the debts of others, and welcoming strangers into your midst. The land itself was to lie fallow: no sowing or reaping was to be done. The people were to take from the land only as much as they needed. The remnant was to be left for the poor.

Now, you will not find a reference to Jubilee anywhere else in the Bible. Indeed none of the Jewish texts chronicle an actual observance of a Jubilee Year. So it remains today, a dream unfulfilled, a challenge unmet, and a vision as yet unrealized.

What brought Jubilee to mind for me was the realization that this year marks the 150th anniversary of the Civil War—the so-called “War That Freed the Slaves”. In many black communities following the Civil War, 1865 was hailed as the “Year of Jubilee”.

Fifty years later in 1915, the Great Migration. Thousands of African-Americans left the South over the next 35 years, seeking better lives and opportunities in the North. 1915 for many of our grandparents was indeed a Jubilee Year, seeking to be free of Jim Crow laws and oppression in the South.

We move forward another 50 years to 1965, another Jubilee Year for black Americans with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That legislation was birthed in the bloody confrontation of the authorities in segregationist Selma, Alabama, and the Voter Rights Project sponsored by SNCC, the Student Nonviolent

Coordinating Committee, and Martin Luther King's SCLC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

[By the way, if you haven't seen the movie, Selma yet, you must. It is powerful in the testimony that it offers about the trials and tribulations of Dr. King and his followers.]

And now we arrive at 2015, and it is my fervent prayer that this year can somehow become a Jubilee Year inspired by the vision found in this morning's passage from Leviticus, and the hope that it offers to all of God's people.

I pray that we embrace that vision as an opportunity for us to make real that ancient call to a Community of Shalom—a Peaceable Community, if you will—answering God's call for us to become something more than we are now. ...to truly become instruments of God's justice and God's peace.

It is no coincidence that the fulfillment of the Jubilee promise was also Martin's dream. No man worked more passionately to proclaim liberty throughout the land. Indeed, his identity and vocation and ministry all cohered in this holy ideal of Jubilee.

Martin's Jubilee spirit shone forth in his leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, his unswerving commitment to non-violence, his pacifist opposition to the Vietnam War, and his insistent demand for a guaranteed and decent standard of living for all Americans.

At the core of Martin's vision was the “Imago Dei” (the Image of God)—his unshakeable belief that each of us is stamped with the mind and spirit of God.

Our Judeo-Christian traditions and beliefs, he preached, testify to the infinite worth of every human being. That in order to truly see the face of God in every person means that we must encounter one another in the spirit of love--not in the spectre of fear.

Listen to the words of this prophet:

We must embrace, the nonviolent affirmation of the sacredness of all human life. Every man is somebody because he is a child of God. Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illumines it.

Those words were written over 45 years ago in a book by Dr. King with the prophetic title: “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?”

We would do well to ponder the timeliness of the question that that book poses as we enter this new year. And if we are truthful with ourselves, we must admit that

as a nation, we are still unable to answer that haunting question.

We are as David Shipler so aptly put it in his penetrating examination of black-white relations in America, *A Country of Strangers*.

America at 2015 is an America in which even the modest beginnings of Martin's dream are presently being dismantled:

- Affirmative action has all but disappeared,
- Voting rights are being eroded in several states,
- Racism, sexism, and classism both overt and covert, are still alive and well,
- Equal justice continues to be denied, particularly to young men of color, and
- Economic wealth is more concentrated in the hands of a few (some 2% of the nation's population) than it has been at any time in this nation's history.

It is no small thing to realize that in every way that matters in the quality of life for the poor and for people of color, that we truly live in the Era of what Michelle Alexander has so aptly named, "The New Jim Crow".

There is a persistence of this myth that racism has all but disappeared in this country. The evidence is everywhere-- evident in recent court decisions, national and state legislation, denial of access to decent education, and even to the continuing disparate provision of health care—all of which threaten to undo any modest progress that may have been made during the Civil Rights Era.

Sadly, what Martin called the "congenital deformity" of racism is still embedded deep within the American psyche, and many in this country doubt that we have the will or the desire to search for a cure.

Today we face the choice of remaining a country of strangers or a nation earnestly seeking to become a community of Jubilee people.

So what does it mean to us here this morning some 3000 years after the writing of the book of Leviticus to hear the words: "You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land"?

What might God be saying to us in this age of anxiety and crass materialism--where so many of us feel isolated and alienated and in many instances, disrespected, and made to feel of little worth?

How are we to respond in an age when the voices of moral conscience in our communities are systematically being silenced by the forces of political expediency, where there is a callous disregard for basic freedoms, and where many openly seek to even roll back the status quo?

When I speak of Jubilee, I speak of a disturbing vision and rightly so. Jubilee after all, seeks to liberate us from those hurtful attitudes, prejudices, and fears that have become dominant patterns in our lives—

- Patterns of selfishness,
- Patterns of domination,
- Patterns of acquisition,

- Patterns of intolerance.

To proclaim Jubilee throughout the land, my friends, is intentionally subversive of the present order. It seeks to break the bonds of fear that have held us captive:

- Fear of differences among us;
- Fear of change;
- Fear of the stranger;
- Fear of venturing outside our self-defined comfort zones.

Martin surely dreamed of Jubilee: a vision of humanity that spoke of true equality, in a world where everyone pays lip service to equality but in truth, where everyone seems to want to have just a little bit more than his neighbor.

Martin spoke of the worth and dignity of every race, culture, and people. But his dream troubled us-- for we prefer to live in that Orwellian world typified in "Animal Farm" where every creature is said to be equal, yet some of us believe ourselves to be more equal than others.

The French (bless them) are fond of saying that "the more things change the more they stay the same", and that most certainly can be said of our society in this Year of Our Lord 2015. The continuing rise in hate crimes, bigotry, and demonization of persons foreign and domestic continues unabated, and in some neighborhoods is abetted by those who have taken a solemn oath to "serve and protect".

I rather think Martin would point out the unfinished social and spiritual agenda that lies before this great country. He would question the moral compass of a society that demands justice measured out only in doses of vengeance, retribution, and punishment. He would ask what had become of God's justice predicated on compassion, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

As he did in his "Letter from Birmingham jail", he would challenge the moral resolve of our churches to "break the paralyzing chains of conformity".

He would call upon us to champion the causes of those who have no voice, to stand up for those that society systematically and systemically excludes and chooses to hide from our view. His harshest words would be for those in positions of privilege and power who would oppress others and strip them of their dignity and humanity.

Martin would decry the "me-first", fast food/throw away culture that we have created.

- Our shameful neglect of our public education system.
- Our incessant preoccupation with profits instead of people.
- Our insistence upon demonizing those that we do not understand or even care to understand.

In sum, my brothers and sisters, Martin has truly left us an unfulfilled legacy-- an unfinished agenda. And like the prophet Elisha to whom it fell to assume the mantle of Elijah, we are called to live out the vision and dream of that modern-day prophet, Martin Luther King.

And we like Elisha might well ask the good Lord right now for a double portion of Martin's faith, spirit, courage, wisdom, and perseverance to carry us and sustain us in these perilous times. The boldness to speak Truth to Power. The unswerving commitment to make no peace with oppression.

And so it is that the Good Lord calls upon us to adopt Martin's spirit—to be inheritors of the vision and hope of Jubilee. For the promise of Jubilee is restoration: “return to the land; and return to the “family” of humanity.

The myriad of “isms” that we indulge in: racism, able-ism, classism, age-ism, sexism—all deny our humanity in one another. They serve to spit in the very eye of the One Who Created Us. Jubilee speaks of putting humanity in right relationship once more with the Creator and with all of God's creation.

What Jubilee calls for my brothers and sisters in Christ, is nothing less than a profound conversion experience—of our minds, our bodies and our spirits-- in response to God's call to transform the world and to reconcile all things to God.

Jubilee demands that we renounce our self-centeredness, our self-importance, our penchant for self-gratification. It calls us to embrace the promise of the Community of Shalom. A promise that will live out God's sacred expectation for humanity:

- That we can achieve peace,
- That we can live in love,
- That we can find justice,
- That we can live in harmony with one another and with our environment.

Now in this age of cynicism and broken promises, it is easy to dismiss the vision of Jubilee as “pie in the sky”-- as not being grounded in the reality of human experience. But as Christians, we know better! God is real! God is on the move in this country!

And our faith is rock solid--anchored in the reality of the one who has acted again and again and again throughout the course of salvation history. And it is out of this knowledge of God's love manifested in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that our faith is born and our hope is kindled.

Martin had faith and he had a dream. His dream continues to fire the hearts and souls of generations of those who still seek to do God's righteous will. You see, when Martin told us he had been to the Mountain Top, he was not speaking the words of a man desperately holding onto the remnants of a shattered hope. No, those words were uttered by one who had faith in the transformative

power of God's love-- a love Martin believed could dwell in every human heart.

It comes down to this: our willingness to see life through God's eyes. To grasp the most fundamental of realities--the reality of our interdependency. A reality that says: “I cannot be all that I am meant to be until you become all that you were meant to be”. What Archbishop Tutu calls the Spirit of Ubuntu.

It is this ancient call to community of Shalom and God's intention that we embrace our “interrelatedness and our interdependency” that is at the very heart of Jubilee. That call encompasses both the sacred and the common in our lives--to take the ideal of faith, the dream of the Community of Shalom, and to then make it a reality in the practical everyday lives of people like you and me.

So what does Martin require of us today?

- First, to nurture, protect and celebrate God's creation. To consume only that which we really need. To take what we have been so graciously and abundantly given, and share it with others.

To make sacred that which we so often take for granted. To consider carefully the choices we make. To refrain from waste and to give generously to others from what we have been so richly blessed with.

- Second, to share the wealth of the world fairly and equitably, and with a true sense of justice. You have undoubtedly heard about the initiatives to forgive third world debt. Jubilee impels us to set these captive nations free from burdensome debt so that their people may be given a chance for economic survival. Closer to home, it means working for a fair and equitable wage for all persons.

- Third, to release human beings from all forms of captivity. To reflect on how our relationships both personal and institutional alienate us from one another, and then for us to work actively for the eradication of those oppressive and manipulative systems.

Martin realized that it was not enough to just eradicate the racist structures in America. The real work involved conversion and transformation of the human spirit.

“There is little hope for us, Martin said, until we become tough-minded enough to break loose from the shackles of prejudice, half-truths, and downright ignorance”.

Finally, we must seek to bring the Community Shalom to people everywhere through reconciliation and respect. We embrace the “imago dei”--that the worth of all human beings must be honored because we are all made in the image of god, and are therefore our brothers and sisters.

So we will actively work to cast off those fears of the other that separate and estrange us. We will seek to discover one another as persons with whom we can share our experiences and as persons from whom we can learn.

Here is the bottom line: To seek Christ in all persons. To love not only thy neighbor--but thy stranger--as you love yourself. How easy it is to love those who look like us, think like us, and share the same values that we do.

But what about the stranger? Can we embrace those whose worldview is different from ours? Who worship a God we do not know? Whose manners and customs are outside of our experience?

...to respect the dignity of every human being. That is the heart of Jubilee.

Jubilee is not some pipe dream. It is a pregnant reality. With God's grace, we can take the ancient call to

wholeness and community and incarnate it into our own time and history. The choice is ours. The time is now.

Therefore, let us choose to let the dream of the ancient Hebrews and indeed the hope and faith of Martin Luther King inspire the committed and determined among us in this Jubilee Year of 2015. To create for ourselves, and to leave as legacy for our children, the spirit of Jubilee that fulfills the sacred covenant of ancient times.

In the words of today's scripture, "Let us proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants".

And may all the people of God say: AMEN.