

The Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration was a powerful one this year. Perhaps it is every year, but Kate had an especially strong response to it. Here is her message coming from that evening. It is called “A Church of Substance.”

I don't know the exact moment when I was called to my preaching vocation. The story is not as cut and dried as Matthew's of the two sets of brothers singled out as they are fishing and mending nets. One minute they are working on boats and the next they are walking down the road in the company of Jesus. I don't think callings come to us that dramatically, that immediately, at least most of them. In my experience, being called by God does not happen in a single moment, or with a single meeting. Even if you are struck down by a flash of light as was Saul on the way to Damascus, he still had to work to understand what his life was telling him. Even after you have chosen your vocation, or it has chosen you, you are not finished being called. There is more to hear. I was reminded of that this past Monday attending the vigil and program to remember Martin Luther King, Jr. The thoughts and feelings that I had at that event were complicated and may take me some time to unpack. But here goes...

From the beginning, sitting next to two committed activists for peace, Dana and Judy, I felt bowled over by the power of Rev. Dr. King's speeches. No, **not** speeches, but **sermons**, delivered to thousands at the Capitol in Washington many years ago. To be sure, I have always been **moved** by them, but this was different. My stomach was roiling as this man who I know was having premonitions of his own death continued to speak profound truth to power – excoriating the racism, the violence, the economic blasphemy that is our country's method of distributing wealth. I turned to Dana and said something vacuous like “I have to up my game,” but I felt like I was being knocked over by light. After a time, I started to cough and had to leave before it was over, which was probably just as well because I don't think I could have spoken to anyone with the storm going in inside.

What was going on? None of this was new, I had heard and done all this before. But

not in January 2020. But let me save that part. Earlier at the Post Office where we gathered with our candles, someone raised a beautiful placard of Martin, and we followed it up to the side door of the church, then went around to the front, first in silence then in song. We entered while the Belfast High School Choir sang “We Shall Overcome.” As I watched, the sanctuary filled. It was a beautiful crowd. One of the planning committee began with a thank you to all participants. I asked Joel, who is on the planning committee, why there was no welcome to the church. He thought it was because they did not want it to **be in any way a “church event.”** Now, many of the clergy from the Ministerium did attend. But, if I had to guess, I would say that this was not a “Christian” crowd. Now, that's not a judgment at all, but an observation that many who come to such events do not tend to be participants of church. When they have, their experiences have not always been positive or meaningful.

So, there I sat in our First Church sanctuary, singing spirituals with passion, listening to scripture rolling off the tongue of a Baptist minister, one of our modern-day martyrs, hearing a powerful message from a young indigenous woman who credited a UCC minister, the Rev. Dewey Fagerberg, with helping her family deal with the virulent racism in Maine, feeling the Spirit and having what I could call a religious experience, yet we could not call this church!?!

A light dawned on me – if we are to be a **church of substance**, a church that has weight and purpose, that moves people not only to “up their games,” but to give their lives for the suffering, the poor **and** the survival of this precious earth, we need to **find the courage** of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, and speak with the same urgency and conviction now. For the times, they are **not a'changing for the better**. You know it and I know it. And it is grieving us.

Three times in the last weeks, while in town in a store or a restaurant, I have run into someone who has stopped me and said “You are one of the ministers at that church, aren’t you?” Then they said “You have great programs” and “you do so much” and “I see you on TV. I might come someday.” I have smiled and invited them. We are the church on TV, known for our many activities. How nice. And that’s not bad, it’s better than the old “museum” image! But Jesus did **not** call the disciples to follow him so that they could plan some good activities. He called them together so that they would go out and proclaim the **good news** of the kingdom of God! They would preach the dignity of **every** living being. They would go out to cure every disease and sickness among the people! And oh, don’t we have sickness and disease to cure!

The truth is, we are dying. When the richest two people have more money than over half the people of the United States combined, that is a fatal condition! A **terminal economic disorder**. Racism rages like a plague among us – sometimes thinly veiled in words about protecting our borders, as everyone but the lily white becomes suspect. Sometimes not veiled at all. White supremacy spreads unchecked, a deadly contagion in a nation that has been proud to stand on the principle that all people are created equal with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We don’t need a doctor to tell us that we are sick, my people, with guns serving as the prescription for our carefully concocted fears! We have a cancer that has invaded and is weakening our common body. And its name is **hate**.

Once hatred takes in our body, the end is near. The infection spreads, all truth is tainted and we lose our bearings. We begin, as does cancer, to attack ourselves from the inside, breaking down all that was once healthy and whole. There is **only one antidote** to the evil that is hate, only one thing that can drive it out – **radical love**. Unconditioned and free. The kind of brave love that Jesus began to teach his first followers who were already raised suspect of Samaritans, and Romans, and, oh, those dreaded Gentiles. For there is no place for the contagion of hate in the kingdom of God. Jesus began gathering more and more people, not only to tell

them that, but to teach them ways to live it. You will hear the Sermon on the Mount next week – there is no better example how to live in radical love, how to disarm a broken humanity, to heal the festering sore of hate among us, and to bless the people with something new and different.

If we are to be a church of Jesus, a true body of substance, this is the call we must answer, the path we must follow. It is not enough to simply weather these tumultuous times, we must work to transform them with radical love. Since the light knocked me over on Monday night, my constant prayer has been “Oh God, strengthen me in love. Please strengthen me in love.” As we gather here a church, that is my prayer for us as well – “Strengthen us in love. With whatever we face, in whatever we do, strengthen us in love.” For only radical love can give us the **moral courage** to address the afflictions of our present time – the fear and resulting hatred that is tearing us up from the inside.

Less than one week ago, this sanctuary was full of people to address the perilous condition of our nation and world and honor the man who had the courage to try. They sang “We Shall Overcome” with strength and passion. Let us add our voices and, as we do, make a firm commitment to the way of bold and radical love. Let us be the church of Jesus, the church of Martin, a church of substance, a church unafraid to let the light in and let it lead us to bold new places. O God, strengthen us in love. Amen.

O
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