



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

MLK's Beloved Community

Psalm 36.5–12

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INTRODUCTION

1

I have to admit, and it may come of great surprise to, you, but I'm an optimist! Since I remember, I wake up in a good mood! I see the glass half-full! I can't help myself. For goodness sake, my maiden name is Bright—what's is there not to like about the myriad of nicknames that afforded me growing up. And, although at times, in the spirit of positivity, I have perhaps been a bit gullible, I like being an optimist. It's who I am.

To be honest, in spite of my optimist's lens, this has been a tough week. As we approach this day, when we honor the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, and while he was and continues to be an incredible mover and shaker and person of deep faith, I have spent much time reading about and thinking about the reality of racism and the multitude of other -isms that create chasms between peoples: antisemitism, sexism, ageism, islamophobia, homophobia and more. This week has been a reminder that hatred and discrimination and prejudice are present at every level of society, from personal interactions to oppressive systems to organized hate groups. There is no getting around it—racism and evil are alive and well.

Several decades ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., led a movement, including religious people, including some people in this very room, against the ugly hatred and reality of racial discrimination in the US, even right here in our own neighborhoods. Many of the overt examples of discrimination came to an end with the civil rights movement. "Whites Only" drinking fountains, restaurants and motels eventually disappeared. Segregated buses and trains became integrated. Equal opportunity slogans became popular in businesses. And white supremacy groups, such as the KKK appeared to be losing power.

However, just when we think that equality might be within reach, we've been reminded that things aren't as good as we had hoped. In fact, maybe they are even worse. We remember the recent horrors and hate displayed in Charlottesville. And more tragic shootings have ensued since then. We have

2 been shocked to see parents at our borders, separated from their children, even very young children.

And we learned just this week that those numbers are higher than we ever thought. In a faith heritage that values bridge-building, we find ourselves in a culture that prefers wall-building. And even on a more personal note for us, we didn't know fully the discrimination that our district would impose on congregations and on our LGBTQ sisters and brothers, through policies meant to exclude some of our church family from full congregational life. Although a punitive policy for officiating clergy at same sex weddings was thankfully defeated at district conference in October, the ugly rhetoric continues. I am certain that it's not over.

I've been thinking how we respond when faced with such unthinkable injustices. While we may celebrate the heroes who have tried, and have made a difference, even some at the expense of their own lives, we also lament the current state of affairs, and even perhaps cry out with the psalmist "how long, O Lord?!" Lamentation is an appropriate response, and we gather together to be a safe space to express and hear those cries.

And as a faith community we also gather together to look for guidance, instruction, something that will help to equip us to understand and to fortify our faith. And we turn to scripture. Hear these words of the psalmist:

PSALM 36.5–12

*Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.*

*Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgments are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.*

*How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.*

*They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.*

*For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.*

*O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your salvation to the upright of heart!*

*Do not let the foot of the arrogant tread on me,
or the hand of the wicked drive me away.*

*There the evildoers lie prostrate;
they are thrust down, unable to rise.*

The psalms give us words to express what we hold in our hearts and thoughts—they were written by people who lived life fully, with all of its intensity. People like us. And what I really love about this psalm, and what I find most helpful, is that it allows us to hold life in tension, and it's OK. On one hand, verse 11 acknowledges the presence of evil in the world... just as we lament racism and other injustices. And on the other hand, still we are assured that God is present with a power—with love—that the wicked cannot overcome. The psalmist isn't singing praise and prayer because everything is right in the world. To the contrary, God's steadfast love is proclaimed, even in the midst of opposition and threat.

Psalm 36 lies at the heart of the book of Psalms—at the very center of the entire bible. It is a radical profession of faith, even while hatred and violence are present. Psalm 36 assures us of God's gospel of radical love. And we remember.... that God so loves the world and God calls us to do the same. These are the words we need to hear and the encouragement we need when faced with evil, while standing for justice in the world.

Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream for this world. All of his work, from the very beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, was oriented toward the creation of a community characterized by love and justice, a society completely integrated among the multitude of races, a vision he called "The Beloved Community." Legislated desegregation was just the beginning; although laws could address the injustices of housing, education and employment, such legislation could not affect

4 the change of hearts and minds which would foster that true community. A wholehearted integration of society was King's hope and the hope of the movement he led. He knew that when he was gone, the Beloved Community could carry on his dream!

Last year we marked the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. All these many years later, the challenge for full integration continues and the cry for equality and a level playing field across the board, still remain unfulfilled.

Last weekend, there was a special event in Lancaster honoring the work of King. The Rev. Amos Brown, featured twice on the front page of the LNP, was invited to speak at the NAACP's event this past Sunday evening. By all reports it must have been incredibly moving. An ardent civil rights activist, he's known for not being afraid to speak his mind when it comes to racism. Having been mentored by civil rights activist Medgar Evers and a disciple of MLK, he has learned from the best and he laid it all out. "I have come to respectfully not tell you what to think," he said, "but to give you something to think about. It is time for the American people to rise from their slumber."

For all of us, the life and teachings of Martin Luther King represent a human prototype of the gospel of radical love, as seen in the life and teachings of Jesus. At the core of the message is the belief, the hope, that the Beloved Community is possible—when all will be committed to an ethic of love—an infinitely redemptive love, inclusive of friend and foe. Every group, clan and tribe is included and invited in. A beloved community, based on God's gospel of radical love, where love trumps hate. That dream and vision undergirded King's movement for civil rights, both spiritually and philosophically, and deeply reflected his own underlying moral belief, his hope and his call as a minister.

For me, there's nothing like the power of a story. I recently read an article "14 Unexpected Responses to Hatred" I'll share three of those stories, short vignettes that illustrate in a variety of ways, God's gospel of radical love.

1. Rabbi Daniel Alter was walking down the street in Berlin in 2012 with his six-year-old child when some young men approached him. Alter was wearing a typical kippah, which prompted the men to inquire if he was Jewish. When he replied that he was, the men beat him viciously and further, threatened to harm his child. When news of the anti-Semitic violence spread, Berliners erupted in support by forming kippah flash mobs, with local politicians even sporting yarmulkes in solidarity. That's a story of radical Gospel love.
2. In June of 1996 in Ann Arbor, a fairly liberal town in southeastern Michigan, the KuKluxKlan scheduled a rally at city hall. When locals heard the news, 300 protestors, including Keshia Thomas, then 18 years old, turned up to counter the KKK. A mere 17 Klansmen participated in the rally, grossly outnumbered by the protestors. When one white supremacist got mixed in with the counter-demonstration, the event turned violent, with the KKK member falling to the ground, getting kicked and beaten with sticks. It could have turned deadly if not for Keshia, who jumped on top of the man to protect him from the mob's blows. She very well could have saved the life of a man who was there to actively promote hate for people of color—a man who might not have cared whether she herself lived or died. That's a story of radical Gospel love.
3. When Chy Johnson, a special needs student at Queen Creek High School in Arizona, was being bullied at school, her mother called Carson Jones, a family friend and the school's star quarterback, to find out the students responsible. Carson did her one better. He and the other members of the football team, took Chy under their wing, walked her to and from classes, and even ate lunch with her. Oddly enough, the

6 bullies disappeared. That's a story of radical Gospel love.

We have been called. We are called to become the Beloved Community. We are, in a sense, an incubator of radical love. We need one another... and we need this place, this faith community where together we strive to share that Gospel of radical love. The generations to come will need this place, and the generations to follow that, because, I think, the world needs this place—

- We come here to lament and to repent of the divisions of hate and the injustices in which we have been complicit. That cause us to cry out to God, “how long?” We sit together and we pray and maybe we light a candle,
- We come here and gather to study together and learn and be reminded of our call to love our neighbors and even love our enemies. We remember with the psalmist that God's love is steadfast and only with God, is the fountain of life and the light of life.
- We come here and gather in a light-filled sanctuary to take refuge and to worship and to sing and to pray and we are inspired and re-fortified in our faith.
- And we are compelled, as followers of Jesus and as part of that Beloved Community, to move, beyond these walls, to share that gospel of radical love with the world, whether it's a few blocks away, a few states away, or around the world.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. SAID

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope.

...With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.

7

...With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

And that is the gospel of radical love and that is the Beloved Community. May it be so.

Lift every voice and sing, the National Anthem of the NAACP, was first performed publicly as a poem in 1900 to celebrate Abraham Lincoln's birthday. It was recited by 500 school children at the segregated Stanton School in Jacksonville FL to welcome its honored guest, Booker T. Washington! It has been said that "this hymn should be sung in an expansive style to allow the worshipers to experience the majesty of the melody."

