

Reading *Selected from "The Drum Major Instinct"- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Our reading this morning is from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sermon "The Drum Major Instinct". In this sermon, which was the last he preached to his congregation in February of 1968, two months before he was assassinated, he urged his congregation to seek greatness and leadership not for the ego, but for love.

He wrote:

"If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. And every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others.

I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question.

I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry.

And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked.

I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison.

I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind."

Sermon

“What Will We Risk For Righteousness?”

-Rev. Heather Concannon

King writes: “if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness... I just want to leave a committed life behind.”

King closes that same sermon that our reading came from with the a reference to the disciples who wanted to sit closest to Jesus in Heaven. He wrote: “Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right side or your left side, not for any selfish reason. I want to be on your right side or your left side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition. But I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world.

Make of this old world a new world. There are certainly some things in this world that need re-making, do you agree?

This summer, about a month before Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, MO, my driver’s license happened to expire. I was pulled over a week later in Western Massachusetts on a random license plate scan for driving without a license. The officer told me, politely, that technically he should have to tow the car, but if I had another licensed driver in the car we could drive off. My friend didn’t have her license on her, so he went to his cruiser and looked her address up to see that she was a licensed driver—no identification needed. He then kindly and patiently explained to me the process I’d have to go through to get a renewed license and the court proceedings—just show up with proof that I had renewed it. Although stressful and mildly frustrating, I could not believe the relative lack of consequences. No fine, no towed car, no arrest, no violent escalation. I drove away so aware that white privilege had been a part of that interaction, but with no answers to what, I, as an individual, should or even could do about it.

I imagine that you might be with me in my struggle to wrap my mind around the complexity of all the things in this world that need a remaking, and I imagine that you might be with me in the questions I hold about how to best do that remaking, those questions I hold about what a new world, a Beloved Community, would actually look like, and those questions about how on earth we can take steps to lay the foundation without having the final blueprint. If we have any architects here I’d venture a guess that they might tell me that laying foundation without a final blueprint is a bad idea, am I right?

But friends, we are architects not of buildings, but of faith, of hope, we are architects of the spirit, of the Beloved Community of Dr. King’s dreams. We lay foundations that we will not see finished. The cathedrals of medieval Europe took four or five generations to build. The builders in the first three generations never got to see the

outcome of their life's work, only ever dreamed of it and passed it on. Can you imagine *that* capital campaign?

What faith that required, to build those grand cathedrals. What vision, what ability to see yourself and your life's work as part of a larger story.

The arc toward justice is like that. The earliest women to fight for suffrage never saw the passage of the 19th amendment; those who fought for the abolition of slavery never saw the Voting Rights Act or desegregation. Nor is the work for racial and gender justice done now, or so many other struggles.

Last week I went to a conference on feminism and activism. In our closing circle, we went around and made commitments about what we would take with us from the conference, what the conference inspired or challenged us to do differently. I've been meditating on what I shared in that circle since then: I wanted to commit to take more risks.

But I've been wondering what that might look like.

And then almost immediately after I got home, this thing happened near the city of Boston, where I live, where a small group of activists blocked interstate 93 in hopes of turning the public attention toward racial justice in our city. And the media had a field day. People complained about traffic. And the police tweeted out with a hashtag #peacefulprotestspeakstheloudest. I think these responses have so many layers of nuance—for sure—some are smokescreens, distractions designed to uphold the status quo, some are heartfelt. Yet regardless of how we each personally feel about the tactics, whether we agree or disagree, the people who protested took a great risk for righteousness.

Although I do believe that a deep love and hope is what must ultimately sustain our long, slow march toward justice, I am coming to get in touch with how much we need our anger, as well. Our useful, holy, righteous anger.

I will be honest and say that I personally experienced quite a bit of anger about how the media portrayed the I-93 protest. How was it not peaceful, non-violent civil disobedience, in King's very definition of the term? What do we mean by peaceful? In what ways to our definitions of what peace is uphold the status quo? And how is it that this action by white and non-black people of color created such outrage, when I wonder: where is the outrage of white people, my family and friends and people of faith, at the violence of the system of racism? Why is it not louder? And if we have it, do we even know how to express it? How to make it useful?

Nonviolent civil disobedience has a long history of being something that ultimately moves a society toward more justice, and there are countless instances throughout history in which our laws just did not move unless pressured. King wrote, "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that

a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored...I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth."

Create tension it did. My friends, the things that the Black Lives Matter movement is bringing attention to are urgent. We cannot be saying "wait" when people are literally dying out there, being killed by police and the systemic violence of racism every day. Where is our outrage?

How can we say with such certainty that something was right or was wrong, when we don't know what the outcome will be? All we can do is act from a place of courage and faith, or from fear. And sometimes, I must admit, I can't always tell which is the soil that my instincts and my opinions are taking root in.

So this week, my spiritual practice has been to try to refrain from criticizing the tactics others, while I instead meditate on this question and wonder, really wonder: what am I myself willing to risk for justice, for righteousness, for my conscience and for that which I call God? And if it is not much, why? Why do I get to be so comfortable, so safe, so much of the time while people are literally dying?

I don't know, but I know that sometimes it feels like it breaks my heart. It breaks my heart that it happens, and it breaks my heart that I don't have a clear blueprint on how to undo what our society, our systems, have done. All I know how to do is to try to find people to walk with who are seeking that same vision—that Beloved Community, that righteousness, as we try to take risks to figure it out together.

Let's talk about righteousness. When we talk about righteousness, we are talking about helping to make the world more righteous, becoming a part of a larger whole, not being righteous in the world—we are not talking about the kind of ego-driven self-righteousness that cannot hear the truths of others. Righteousness is an aligning, a *righting*, of our lives with God; to put our actions in right relationship to our deepest values and sense of the good and the Holy. It is a creation of space for the Holy to enter our lives, our interpersonal relationships, and our world. It is about actions that we take with a faith in something bigger, trusting, hoping, but not *knowing*, that our actions will help to lead to more wholeness and connection.

In the Hebrew Bible, the word "tsedek" is interpreted 128 times as "righteousness", and 23 times as "justice". There is a close relationship between righteousness and justice, and I would say that we cannot have peace, have wholeness, have authentic connections in our lives and in our world without justice.

What are we willing to risk for righteousness?

I ask us this question because I am asking myself this question. I don't know what I'm willing to risk for righteousness. I think we never know until we are tested. I've

often heard about different historical moments—Selma, Stonewall, sit-ins, nonviolent civil disobedience—and romanticized these pictures and stories that history has preserved, honored, and I’ve wondered and hoped that I would have been the type of person who would be there for those moments, despite the risks, despite the public scorn. But would I have? Would you?

King’s words again: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige and even his life for the welfare of others.”

I am not saying that there is a right or a wrong way to take risks, or that we all must be willing to take risks that seem too great a cost to us. The risks that each of us are able to take are influenced by a number of factors, the weighing is deeply personal—but we all can take risks toward that zone that is known as “productive discomfort”—that edge where we find ourselves wondering—should I say something to this family member? Should I post this on Facebook? Should I preach this sermon?

I’ve wondered where I would have been in history, but history is happening now. Another civil rights movement is happening now, it is growing, and now is our chance to show up. And I pray that I, that we, will look back and believe that we were on the right side of history. But we cannot actually know how what will one day be history will unfold, we can only with faith walk together into the questions.

What will we risk for righteousness?

If our answer is honestly “not much”, we need to ask “why?” Why is it that we can choose the comfort of complacency over the risks of righteousness?

I’m sometimes wondered when the costs will become too high, when it will finally spur me, my communities, to action. But the costs are already too high.

I discovered, in myself, that it can be hard to relate in that visceral, emotional way, to the cost that black people pay for systemic racism in this country. Maybe this is true for some of you, too. I discovered a hard truth: it is much easier for me, as a white person, to relate to the inconvenience, the building of anger of being stopped in traffic for hours, the growing anxiety of impending missed appointments and being late. I know that feeling, that anger. I’ve been in massive traffic jams. It is easier to empathize with those who we see as “like us”, those shared experiences.

It is harder to me to relate viscerally, emotionally, to the experience of negatively racialized interactions with the police, because I just don’t have that personal experience to draw from.

But if it were children who looked like our children being so many times more likely to be pulled over by the police or incarcerated for drug offenses or dying on average every 28 hours at the hands of law enforcement, wouldn't we try to move heaven and earth to change that, to get people to pay attention? Or at least stop traffic for an hour?

We think of anger as a destructive emotion, but there are things in our world that need to be destroyed in order to build the Beloved Community. Things that need to be destroyed in the name of righteousness. so that we can make of this old world a new world. Racism is one of those things.

In my culture and my upbringing, I was conditioned to push anger away because of it was seen as destructive, as scary, bad, wrong. But what if we also understood our righteous anger as generative, as destroying what needs to be destroyed so that justice might roll down past that old dam like waters, and peace like an ever flowing stream—to see that righteous anger like compost, which gets very hot, and breaks down the old so that the new might be nourished, the world might grow anew.

Righteous anger is an act of hope. It is an act of hope that we can be called back in to right relationship, called back to righteousness before all we call Holy. That this old world is worthy of redemption, of being made new. It is an act of hope that things could be different, that we can help to make that happen. Righteous anger is the antidote to despair. It can foster a resilience in the face of a sometimes overwhelming system of injustice and it counters complacency. It calls us to faithful risk-taking, as a congregation and in our own lives.

Having righteousness in our view allows us to take risks when we don't know the answers. Faith calls us to risk taking the first step even if we cannot see the whole staircase—whatever that may be for us.

My righteousness, being right before God, before all that we claim is Holy, depends on me, on us, taking these risks with courage and companionship, and not shrinking into fear or complacency.

So what will we have the courage to risk for righteousness?

Perhaps we will risk our comfort.

Perhaps we will risk our reputation.

Perhaps we will risk getting into a few more arguments online.

Perhaps we will risk having our names published in the paper.

Perhaps we will risk tension in our families, around the holiday table.

Perhaps we will risk getting arrested, or going to jail.

Perhaps we will risk showing what we don't know.

Perhaps we will risk being wrong.

Perhaps we will risk failure.

Perhaps we will risk asking for help.

Perhaps we will risk our financial security.
Perhaps we will risk asking questions and looking foolish.
Perhaps we will risk vulnerability with another person.
Perhaps we will risk wasting our time at meetings or marches that we won't see the immediate effects of.
Perhaps we will risk relationships.
Perhaps we will risk our surety, not knowing if our tactics are ultimately right or wrong.
Perhaps we will risk organizing ourselves and other people of faith to help to create systemic change.
Perhaps we will risk our faith, in God, in the world, or in each other.
Perhaps we will risk taking the first step, without seeing the whole staircase.
Perhaps we will risk becoming more connected to the struggles of our fellow human beings.
Perhaps we will risk becoming more human ourselves.

May we all have the courage we need to take risks in the name of righteousness.
May it be so, and amen.