



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Harmony With The Moral Laws Of The Universe

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.
January 17, 2010 - Martin Luther King Sunday

We come to this worship service this morning with hearts broken and spirits made heavy by the death and devastation in Haiti after the earthquake last week. More than 100,000 thousand brothers and sisters have died. More will die this morning and this week because of lack of water, food, and health care due not to the lack of generosity of the world in reaching out but due to the almost nonexistent infrastructure of the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. I am grateful for all of you who already have contributed to the humanitarian and relief agency of your choice. I pray that each of you who have not already, will go by the action table today before you leave to make a contribution to the Episcopal Relief and Development organization who is on the ground in the presence of brothers and sisters who are members in Haiti of the Episcopal Church. Haiti is the largest diocese of the national Episcopal Church. They are relief workers, they are humanitarian givers. They actually live in Haiti and will be long after the media's headlines have left.

The religions of the world agree that every human being is interconnected with all the others. In Islam the words of the Persian poet, Sa'adi says, "The children of Adam are limbs of each other having been created of one essence .When the calamity in time afflicts one limb the other limbs cannot remain at rest. If you have no sympathy for the troubles of others, you are not worthy to be called by the name of "human".

The words of Sa'adi certainly call into question for me the humanity of Pat Robertson and Rush Limbaugh in their statements this past week about Haitians. I happen to believe that Sa'adi is wrong on one count, we can never put a human being in the category of not being worthy to be called human. But we who know that the Haitian calamity is neither the punishment of God nor the punishment of the devil, as Robertson said, and that there is no reason for us not to react compassionately toward the suffering of the Haitians because out tax dollars have already taken care of that, as Rush Limbaugh said, we cannot be silent in protesting the comments of those two men. Dr. King said that there are times when silence is betrayal. We can't waste good and sacred moments of this pulpit spending all of our time refuting everything Pat Robertson says, but it is important to say in the face of his disgusting and distorted speech about Christianity that he does indeed give religion a bad name. Always looking for a scapegoat for any tragedy. He blamed 9/11 on the ACLU and gay folks and now he blames Haiti's earthquake on their throwing off the bonds of French colonialism. True religion does not scapegoat. It asks, "What can I do to prevent this from happening again and how can I help those who are suffering?"

St. Paul who wrote poetically about all of us being a part of one body, each limb and organ depending on every one of the others for its own proper functioning. St. Paul said that we are so interdependent on one another that no one can ever say about another human being “I have no need of you.”

Central to our being together this morning is the life, the values, the words, and the witness of arguably the greatest prophet of modern times, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.. Central to Dr. King’s life was his life-long articulation of the moral laws of the universe and then applying those laws to the issues of discrimination, poverty, and war in his day. He saw Jesus as living with a unique God-consciousness that embodied those moral laws in Jesus’s central message – that of the Kingdom of God or as Dr. King called it, God’s Beloved Community. And Dr. King in turn sought to have the same God-consciousness in himself that Jesus had. I believe with all my heart that we are in turn are called to have the same God-consciousness in us that Jesus uniquely embodied and that Dr. King embodied. We are called to make God’s Beloved Community tangible in our time and in our history. But in order to do that we have to get something right. It is much more important to follow Jesus and Dr. King than to praise them. Give me a follower over a praise-er any day.

I believe that in order to follow Dr. King we must learn and remember as well as embody what he understood about morality and justice.

1. The first concern I have in following Dr. King is to absorb what he taught about law and justice.

Dr. King was passionately clear about what made certain laws just and other laws unjust. He wrote in his letter from a Birmingham Jail.

How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? The answer is: A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. He quotes St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.

Speaking of the laws he was combating at that particular time the segregation statutes he said they were unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. Something that is the case about all laws of discrimination. It gives the discriminator a false sense of superiority and the discriminated against a false sense of inferiority. **Discrimination, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship and ends up relegating all persons to the status of things.**

An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself.

This is what is at issue in the court case being argued now over marriage equality in California. One of Dr. King's students, NAACP chairman Julian Bond, said about the issue of Proposition 8, "The humanity of all Americans is diminished when any group is denied rights granted to others." When the people of California last year voted to deny marriage equality it was an event of majority rule not sufficiently protecting individual liberty and compelling the homosexual minority of citizens to follow a code that the majority heterosexual citizens did not make binding on themselves. That is why it is crucial that our courts exercise our constitutional system of checks and balances to guarantee and protect the right of marriage for all citizens.

Dr. King said, "I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law."

This is why the Vestry of All Saints Church passed a resolution saying that the clergy of All Saints Church would not sign marriage certificates here for heterosexual couples until we can sign the same for all couples. [applause]

2. The second aspect of Dr. King's moral vision is the importance of addressing *conditions* underlying human suffering, discrimination and violence.

From the Birmingham Jail, Dr. King wrote (he had been criticized by some conservative and moderate white Christian leaders and rabbis) "You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the *conditions* that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the **superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes.**"

In a speech protesting the Vietnam war Dr. King said:

A true revolution of values which is needed in the United States will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act to be the Good Samaritan. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars and that that edifice itself needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth throughout the world. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and we will say: "This is not just." The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say about war: "This way of

settling differences is not just." This business of burning human beings with napalm today he would substitute drones, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into veins of people normally humane, of sending men and women home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, that cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. [applause]

My friends, it will be very important for us whose hearts are broken over Haiti to do everything we can to alleviate the immediate suffering and pain there. But we will not follow Dr. King, we will not follow Jesus, if we do not look at the conditions that made this earthquake kill so many people and ask why 100,000 people were killed there where the same magnitude earthquake would not have killed nearly that many if it had taken place in San Francisco. We must ask what part our country's foreign policy, what role did it play in that country Haiti in their not having sound housing and effective infrastructure to live in cinder block houses that would fall and kill vulnerable old people and children.

3. The foundation of Dr. King's moral compass, the very cornerstone of Dr. King's moral compass was his belief that the universe is moral and that we are called to be in harmony with the moral universe. He described it as the interrelatedness of every human being. It was his understanding of the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community.

He wrote, "I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." And then on the last Sunday of his life, preaching from the pulpit of the National Cathedral in Washington, Dr. King said:

"Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood, a sisterhood. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. We must all learn to live together as brothers and sisters or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you will never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured."

The gospel appointed for today is the story of Jesus turning the water into wine at a wedding reception in Cana. Jesus entered a picture where the power of Love as symbolized by wine needed to be restored to an environment.

This is our work to turn the everyday watery needs of our lives into the creative compassion and the creativity to which every human being was called and created to embody. It is our job to turn water into wine. In order to do that we must find a new model for being church. We must become the creative instruments of the power of love in history. And forswear the deadly dehumanization of the politics of fear and war.

Just breathe in a deep and intentional breath right now. That is nothing less than the divine power of love entering into you. God doesn't care what you did the last minute, yesterday, or where you came from. God is giving you new love right now and God wants you to remove every boulder that keeps you from letting that love flow through your life into the lives of other people. Remove unforgiveness, remove retaliation, remove addiction to fear, remove addiction to war.

As we saw in the health care debate, war is the enemy of the poor. It will sap all of our resources so that we cannot take care of ourselves and other people and we must attack it as such.

The church must not be a tail light but a head light.

Dr. King said, "I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to **the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today -- my own government** and the church has to call the government to accountability."

The church is not called to be merely a thermometer that records the ideas and principles of popular opinion; the church is called to be a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.

So, my friends, become a thermostat. Change water into wine. Haitians today need water literally, but they also need the wine of the international banking system forgiving that country of its debts and rebuilding their infrastructure. The people of Afghanistan need the water of no more United States war on terror and occupation, but it also needs the wine of schools and hospitals. The lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender community needs the water of respect, but even more it needs the wine of marriage, justice and equality. The people of Pakistan need the water of no more drones, but they also need the wine of our settling diplomatically the issue of Kashmir. The people of Gaza need the water of humanitarian relief, but they need the wine of respect of a two-state solution.

When you and I take in that breath of love and **persware (do you mean foreswear??)** all the impediments that keep us from sharing that love with every other human being and do that spiritually, but also do our politics as well and call our Federal Government to policies that give wine to people then you and I will be used by God to transform the human race into the human family.

Amen.