

THE COST & PROMISE OF LOVE

Genesis 45: 1-11; Luke 6: 27-36

On August 28, 1963, 250,000 people marched on Washington protesting unequal treatment of blacks compared to whites when it comes to economic and social rights. Here's part of a speech they heard that day:

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed - we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today!...

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... I have a dream today!...

This is the faith that I will go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. 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... I have a dream!...

And when this happens... we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"...

Many of you will recognize this speech. It was delivered by Martin Luther King Jr., the acclaimed leader of the black civil rights movement. In this month of February which is Black History month, it is good to remember that human rights is something that must be fought for in every generation. Racism continues to be a huge problem in many places of the world, including Canada. Things may have improved in many ways, but there continue to be challenges. As soon as some leader is voted in who polarizes people, racists see this as an

opportunity to act out their hate against all who are different, whether it's the colour of their skin, their religion, their gender, their sexual orientation, their culture or whatever. Think about Quebec and Pittsburgh and the Charleston African Methodist church shootings for example... Think about how long it took to put sufficient resources into the murders in the gay village here in Toronto, for example... Think about the Yellow Vest movement from out West protesting against immigrants to Canada...

Now, even though there were great hopes for the civil rights movement, King also experienced great opposition. And this opposition was not only from whites but from blacks also. Some felt he wasn't militant enough. Some felt he was too open to reconciliation and friendship with the enemy. Some felt that more forceful means were necessary to achieve their goals. King also experienced threats against his own life. In fact, he had this mysterious premonition that he would not survive to see his hopes for the movement fulfilled. Like Jesus who was crucified and like many prophets killed because of their stand on justice, King foresaw this to be his own fate too. But whatever would happen, he was living by faith, faith in the promise of love whatever the cost. Love had to win, and in order for love to win, it had to bridge as many divisions as possible.

So what are those divisions in your life and in mine? Where are those places and spaces we have not had the passion, the grace or the willingness to love more courageously? We all have those places and spaces in our lives. Many of us continue to live them – strained and fractured relationships, situations we feel we cannot change even as we have tried, failures to love which have cost us negatively. And so, too often we've just given up or just go with the flow of the status quo. We're not prepared to try any harder because, maybe, we don't believe it can make any difference for good in the end. Maybe we've lost our faith in the miraculous power of love, trying again and again in ever new and creative ways to build bridges toward new places and spaces in relationships and in the way we think and feel toward others. Can things really change? How much will it cost us?

Well, we come to church, we gather as community, why? We need to get inspired and empowered, to build up some fresh faith and hope in the promise of love to make positive change in the world through the hands, feet and heart of Jesus which we are called to become... So what would this look like? How can we get some inspiration today to build on King's legacy? Let's ponder our scripture readings more closely.

Our Old Testament reading from Genesis presents us with a climatic moment in the relationship of Joseph with his brothers. They are all sons of Jacob, but because of serious conflict and betrayal, Joseph ends up in Egypt, presumed dead, while the rest of the brothers make their life without having to deal with Joseph any more. But Joseph's journey becomes a fascinating one, where he grows up and learns some powerful, life-transforming

lessons. His life of privilege being his father's favourite is taken from him and he is forced to be a slave in a foreign nation. He experiences mistreatment, injustice and imprisonment. But rather than grow bitter, angry and shutdown to any future possibilities, he somehow finds the courage, strength and grace – like King in the face of constant opposition - to keep believing good things are possible.

For Joseph, like King, his faith in God is at the core. Joseph somehow comes to a faith that God can resurrect new possibilities of love even in the worst situations and through the worst kinds of injustice and betrayal. God is that powerful in God's love for him that Joseph will not be abandoned but empowered through all he goes through. And so it is. Imagine this final scene with his brothers. They had totally done him in and now he, Joseph, is in a position of power as a royal official to do them in, or at least make them suffer. Instead, we encounter a man whose heart is so full of love that he cannot control himself. His weeping is so loud, we're told, that it's heard throughout the palace.

But love is not just emotion and sentiment for Joseph. It's about creating new possibilities past the divisions and fractured relationships: "do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here..." he tells his brothers. "for God sent me before you to preserve life." And so, Joseph will save his family from sure starvation and sponsor them all as refugees to Egypt. What a beautiful story.

And we see the very same Spirit of love in the revelation of Jesus in our gospel reading. King had clearly internalized Jesus' gospel in his approach. There is power commonly known as force, coercion, and the ability to make people do what you want or cause them to suffer because they have harmed you. But then, there is the kind of power where you resist playing by your enemies rules. Everyone knows tit for tat. Someone strikes you, you strike them back because they've gotten to you. You do to others what they've done to you, or do them first as a pre-emptive strike or, worse, showing your superior ability to crush them or humiliate them.

But what if your up against the wall? What if your options are: either strike back if you can or internalize the abuse as defeat and humiliation which crushes you inside. Or, what if you find the kind of power and inspiration to hold your head high and turn the other cheek. They take your coat and you give your cloak as well. They curse you but you bless them back. They hate you and wish you harm but you pray for them. They want to take from you but you keep giving generously trusting in a larger good to bless you. That's the Jesus way.

But how does that win? It wins because instead of being corrupted by the hate, spite and the toxic resentment of those who want to harm you, you're counterstrike of love will

liberate you from the chains of the vicious cycle of retaliation, and more... You're counterstrike of love may inspire some of them to rethink their hate, let go their spite, and begin a journey of healing. If anything is going to work to build a bridge over division it will be such counter-strikes of love rather than the same old, same old hate back and forth until everyone is left shattered, wounded, polarized, miserable and perpetually looking over their shoulder in fear.

We here in church are children of Jesus and children of King when we discipline ourselves through prayer and personal commitment, to refuse to strike back at those who strike at us with their words, actions, sentiments, attitudes and perspectives. We are inspired by love to discover creative ways to turn our other cheek so that we build a different way forward in our relationships. Through inspired leaders like Jesus who speak it, teach it, and live it even when tortured and crucified... from the precursor of Jesus in Joseph... from contemporary exemplars like King, and even Ghandi, Mandela, Malala Yousufzai and others, we can find our own ways in our own circles to be "kind even to the ungrateful and the wicked" as Jesus says of God, because we believe that change is always a possibility, even in the worst of circumstances. It takes a lot of faith in the power of love to believe that.

May we as individuals, and with one another in community, become inspirers of such faith in the promise of love, knowing that it may cost us if it matters to us, but always in the end, the rewards will be greater than any cost. May we come to such faith ever more deeply. May we inspire one another here in community; May love win among us and in our personal lives again and again; Amen.