

Voting to Save Our Souls

Luke10:25-37

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, (July 7) 2024

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Dr. Martin Luther King often preached a sermon called, “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” inspired by the Washington Irving 1819 short story of Rip Van Winkle. You remember that in the story, Van Winkle fell asleep sometime before 1776 and awoke 20 years later in a world filled with strange customs and clothes, and a whole new vocabulary. In the story, as Rip Van Winkle went up the mountain, he passed a sign that had a picture of King George III of England on it. When he came down 20 years later, the sign had a picture of George Washington, the President of the United States. Rip Van Winkle did not know where he was. He was completely disoriented and though he didn’t know it yet, he had slept through a revolution. For Dr. King, this was a call for us to wake up and not sleep through the nonviolent revolution of the civil rights movement. He said, “Let us not sleep through the world’s continuing cries for freedom.”

My suggestion this morning is that we too feel some disorientation, as if we are in a bizarre place and time. It is a strange day in American democracy, where we are facing a world where it seems that Rip Van Winkle is going backward. We are discovering that the signs have pictures of kings on them again.

What do we do?

We vote.

In a democracy that's what we do: we vote. We don't take naps or binge watch reality TV or live in the silos of social media or find other ways to stick our heads in the sand and ignore what's going on around us and we most certainly do not grab our guns and try to storm the capitol in an insurrection. We vote. We might organize, meet, have marches, hold vigils, have phone banks, and find any number of nonviolent ways to make our voices heard, but in the end, we vote.

Taylor Branch, the great biographer of Martin Luther King, says that the vote is the "most basic element of free government" and that "every ballot is a piece of nonviolence, signifying hard-won consent to raise politics above firepower and bloody conquest." He goes on, "the whole architecture of representative democracy springs from the handiwork of nonviolence" (*At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-1968*, p. xi).

Congressman John Lewis, said time and time again, "The vote is precious, almost sacred. It is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have to create a more perfect union."

I want to talk briefly about why we vote.

On several other occasions Dr. King preached on the Great Commandment of Jesus to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. In Luke, this commandment leads directly to Jesus telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. Sometimes Dr. King preached from the perspective of the man in the ditch and our need to be open to Samaritans or whoever it is we are suspicious of or just plain dislike or prejudiced toward. That's our Samaritan and that's who might very well get us out of the ditch.

Other times Dr. King preached this from the perspective of the Samaritan. In the parable, one after another, two big-time religious leaders walk by and see the man in the ditch but continue to pass by on the other side refusing to help. The Samaritan, on the other hand, not only sees the man in the ditch but stops to help him. Dr. King said that the religious leaders who passed by were concerned with “What will happen to me if I stop to help?” but the Samaritan asked, “What will happen to him if I don’t stop to help?”

And then, Dr. King took the next step and said, “We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. 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. Compassion sees that an edifice that produces beggars needs restructuring.”

In other words, we vote because we have compassion for our neighbors, especially those without power and without a voice, who keep getting thrown into the ditch. We vote for the sake of the immigrant family, for the poor family whose SNAP benefits have been cut, for the disabled neighbor whose Social Security benefits are under threat, for poor people without health care while local hospitals are shutting their doors because Texas refuses Medicaid expansion.

Eventually we must ask, “Why do so many people keep ending up in the ditch?” So, we vote for new policies and vote for structural and systemic change. Unjust systems will grind us individuals, no matter how caring, into the dirt, so we come together, organize, vote, and work together in the form of government to

bring about change against big structures of injustice. We work together, we vote, so edifices will quit throwing and leaving people in the ditch.

A few years ago, Jane and I walked into the courthouse annex to vote during a primary. One of the election judges at the table of one political party was a woman we know. She is a devoted Christian with a big heart, who works selflessly and sacrificially helping feed hungry people. We all waved but as Jane and I walked over to our party's table, she shrieked with genuine alarm, "But you're going to the wrong place!" Here was a devout and loving woman who served the people in the ditch, but who voted for policies and systems that either put people in the ditch or kept them there, and she saw no inconsistencies.

Therefore, we vote to bear witness. To say that loving our neighbors as ourselves has consequences beyond the personal and individual, but also are social and political. We bear witness to another way, no matter if we think we can "win" this particular election or not. We bear witness that we see differently, and vote toward a world where people are not left in ditches.

Years ago, I was working in a homeless shelter in Atlanta, Georgia on a cold December shortly before Christmas. The fellowship hall of the church housing the shelter was decorated for Christmas with green and red tinsel. On the walls were phrases: Merry Christmas! Peace on Earth! Good News! Good News! During the meal one of the homeless men looked up and said out loud, "What is the good news anyway?" There was a long pause. No one knew what to say. Then from another part of the room, another homeless man spoke up, "The good news is that it doesn't have to be like this."

That's why we vote. We vote, we show up, we bear witness that it does not have to be like this.

I'm a Christian pastor and I also believe that voting can be a prayer and can be sacramental. In James 5:16, in the old King James version, which is the way I memorized it, it says, "The prayers of a righteous person availeth much." In other words, I believe that we can offer our vote as a prayer to God, and that God can work in and through that vote, that prayer, in ways beyond our understanding. I may be outnumbered, out-funded, out organized, and standing against powerful forces and systems, but God is at work, too. To say that my vote is sacramental means that when I show up and vote, God works through it. So I vote.

Which leads me to the last thing I want to say about why we vote: we vote to save our souls.

One of my heroes was A.J. Muste who was the field organizer for the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) in the 1940's and 50's. He was a peace activist, labor organizer, and Christian pastor. For many decades of his life he participated in marches, demonstrations, prayer vigils, and all sorts of nonviolent ways to make his voice, and the voice of the downtrodden heard. Sometimes, he was the only voice.

Throughout the 1960's, Muste organized candlelight vigils outside the White House to protest the Vietnam War. In his 80's he often stood out there by himself, holding a candle, night after night after night, in solo vigil, bearing witness.

A reporter said to him, "You know, you're not going to change anyone by standing out here alone?"

Muste replied, “Oh, I know, I know. But I can keep them from changing me.

Sometimes when I ask myself why bother to vote? And wonder if my vote can really make a difference, in the face of billion-dollar campaigns and dark money contributions, I remember A.J. Muste. I vote to save my soul. I vote to keep the powerful and what my grandfather called, the “big boys” from changing me.

When Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself,” part of our loving our neighbors is the assumption that we have a self to do the loving. It means reminding myself who I am and who I want to be and what it means to be a person of integrity who believes in justice and who believes in God’s beloved community, and sometimes voting is one way of reminding me of all that.

I vote to keep the forces of violence and oppression from changing me because I believe that the long haul belongs to God and justice and truth. I believe that in the long haul I’m voting for right and someday God will bring about right. I’m voting for what is good and just because God will bring about the good and the just.

When Pharaoh had the power and the army, Moses and God’s people had faith that the Lord could make a way out of no way. When the segregationists of Selma, Alabama, had the governor and the law on their side, the unarmed marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge knew they had the truth. The question for them was never whether truth was going to win. It was always whether they would stand true to what was right while the forces of segregation and racism clung to power.

I vote to help me stand true to what is right. I vote to help me not give up no matter how long it takes.

In March 1965 John Lewis and others marched on that bridge in Selma for the right to vote. Two weeks later, Dr. King led marchers over 5 days and 54 miles to Montgomery, with 25,000 marchers making the last leg to rally on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol for the right to vote. Dr. King famously said,

“How long will justice be crucified, and truth buried? I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because ‘truth crushed to earth will rise again.’ How long? Not long, because ‘no lie can live forever.’ How long? Not long, because ‘you shall reap what you sow.’ How long? Not long, because ‘truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne, yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown, standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.’ How long? Not long, ‘because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.’”

That’s why we vote, and it is why we never give up.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.