

Being A Prophetic Community in Statesville

H. Stephen Shoemaker

January 20, 2018

I am so honored and so humbled to speak to you on this Martin Luther King Weekend and to share the pulpit with Rev. Glensie Rhedrick. Thank you Rev. Brunson for the invitation and thank you to the MLK Planning committee for your wonderful work arranging all the events of this important week for our community.

I am of the age to have been a teenager in the years of Dr. King's magnificent leadership. As a high school student in Charlotte I remember hearing racist and vicious jokes told about him and growing quiet. And I still feel the shame at hearing the jokes and of my silence. When he was assassinated in April, 1968, I heard cheers inside the dorm rooms of the Baptist University I was attending. I staggered to my room with the horror of King's death and the cheering ringing in my ears. That spirit is still at work in our land, but not *here!*

He was called a troubler of America, but he did not cause the trouble, he *revealed* it. This is what prophets do. When the Hebrew prophet Amos preached against the sins of Israel—trampling the heads of the poor into the dust, trading

the lives of the poor for greedy profit, tipping the courts of law in favor of the rich—the king’s priest, Amaziah (kings always have their pet preachers around) went to Amos and said, “O, you troubler of Israel, leave here and go do your prophesying *elsewhere!*”

I want to talk today about being a prophetic community in Statesville.

I

Prophetic Christianity has been around for 2,000 years, but often at the fringes. It has been kept alive in America mainly through the black church. Blessed be they; blessed be you. And it arose from the prophets of ancient Israel and the prophet Jesus.

There were two words for the prophet in Hebrew scripture. One was “seer”, those given visions by God; the other was “nabi”, or one who is called. And what were the “seers” called to do? To apply the visions given to them by God to the realm of history, politics and human endeavor. “Thy kingdom come... on *earth* as it is in heaven.”

The prophet has two kinds of visions. The first is the clear-sighted vision of the injustices and evils of the present time. The second is a vision of God’s dream for us. Dr. King offered our nation both.

In his famous speech at the Lincoln Memorial he began with a stark critique. “We have come to our nation’s Capital to cash a check”, a “promissory note” which the Founders wrote into the Declaration of Independence and Constitution that all the people of the nation would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, “liberty and pursuit of happiness.” “It is obvious,” he said that day, “that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned”. The check has come back marked, “insufficient funds.” “But we refuse”, he added, “to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt.”¹

Then under the urging of Mahalia Jackson who was sitting behind him who said, “Tell us about the dream, Martin,” King shifted from prophetic critique to the enunciation of God’s dream for America. You remember it: “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’...That his children and all children “will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”²

Did you hear it? Both clear-eyed critique of what is and God’s dream of what can be. That is what a prophetic community can offer our city, our community and our nation today.

II

Dr. King's path was at times a torturous one. It is not an easy path for us today. Jesus told us that if we stood for his values we would be opposed. And who wants to be opposed?

One night early in days of his leadership, Dr. King received an obscene, racist phone call telling him that his house was going to be blown up, and he and his family killed. It was only one of many calls threatening his life and the life of his family, but he was deeply shaken. Doubts and fears overwhelmed him. Should I go on, keep on? Then as he prayed he heard an "inner voice", the voice of Jesus say, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you even to the end of the world." As Dr. King's remembered it, "he promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone."³ He now could go on. There were other nights when he was restless and anxious and would call Mahalia Jackson on the phone and ask her to sing to him over the phone. Jesus is, as the song goes, "our song in the night." And courage is, as someone has said, "fear that has said its prayers."

III

The prophetic community remembers the courage of those brave souls who risked their lives—and some lost their lives—to help black people register to vote

in the early 60's. Today, almost 60 years later there are schemes in states across our land designed to suppress the vote of people of color and the poor.

The prophetic community remembers the heroic leadership of Fanny Lou Hamer who was tortured and jailed, but who kept on leading, who said, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired", and when things grew tense would lead us in singing, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine."

The prophetic community remembers February 1, 1960 when four young black students of Greensboro A&T began a sit-in at the lunch counter of Woolworth's, and ignited a movement toward de-segregation of public places. Today, almost 60 years later, the 11 o'clock hour on Sunday mornings is still the most segregated hour in America, and decades after Brown vs. the Board of Education and the de-segregation of our schools, America's schools are being re-segregated by race and economic class.

Jesus was a champion of justice, though too few recognize it. In his "inaugural sermon", his programmatic sermon, in his hometown Nazareth, he read from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18)

His hometown congregation loved his choice of scripture—until he began to *interpret* it and *apply* it. Then “rage” filled the house, and they hauled him out to a high hill to throw him off. He escaped, but it was a sign of things to come.

And in Matthew 23:23, he said, “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees”—which we should translate today “preachers and deacons”—“for you tithe your little herb gardens and have neglected the weightier matters of God’s commands: justice, mercy and faith.” Which was a wonderful paraphrase of the words of the prophet Micah:

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and love mercy and walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8)

In his “Letter From a Birmingham jail”, King wrote: “Too many church leaders have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.”⁴

What does justice look like? Philosopher John Rawls paints us a picture. He gives us this thought experiment: what nation in what period of time would you choose to live in if, *if* you could not choose *where* in that society you were born? The implication is that the more just a society the less difference it would make where in that society you happened to be born. How would Statesville stack up? What can we do about it? I know that Charlotte, my *other* home town (I was born

here in Davis Memorial Hospital) was ranked 50th out of 50 major cities in how hard it is to rise out of poverty.

Let me offer another image, this one from hymn-writer Brian Wren. Speaking of the church as the Body of Christ, he said that there is a big difference between a *broken body* and a *divided body*. This also applies to a community and nation.

In a broken body, the foot can feel the pain of the arm; the shoulder can feel the pain of the elbow. But in a divided body, no part of the body can feel the pain of any other part. A broken body can be healed. But a divided body cannot.

In a divided community the north-side cannot feel the pin of the south-side; the west-side is oblivious to the pain of those on the east-side. But in a broken community where we can still feel the pain of the other parts, healing is possible. We are given a *divine empathy* for one another. We realize that we are “members of one another”, to use Paul’s phrase. We know each other’s joys and pain, successes and hardship. In such a community we *learn* how to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly—with each other and with God.

IV

Finally, how do we do this work as a prophetic community? With love at the center of our hearts and our methodology. So Dr. King showed us and taught us:

Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.

He was once asked, “How can you love those who mean you harm and do you harm?” He answered, “Because I believe that there is something of the best in the worst of us and something of the worst in the best of us.” We would live together better if we took that to heart.

He led a movement of *non-violent resistance* against injustice and evil. We must *resist* and we must do it with *love*. He learned the methodology of love from Jesus and Gandhi, who changed his nation with non-violent resistance. We use Gandhi’s words as our theme this week; “Be the change you wish to see.”

Bayard Rustin, one of the most important leaders of the Civil Rights Movement was well-versed in non-violent resistance. He said we are called to be “angelic trouble-makers.”

Love is the way. It is a love that stands up to injustice and evil but does not strike back—in word, spirit or deed. So many civil rights activists endured beatings and did not strike back.

So let us join with all people and all faiths in Statesville to become a prophetic community. Let us be a people of prayer, and let us *also* “pray with our

legs”, as Rabbi Abraham Heschel said while walking arm in arm with Dr. King.

We must keep the faith of Dr. King who said in the midst of the tumult,

How long will it take?...Not long because no lie can live forever. How long?

Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.⁵

I know a group today who call themselves “Arc-Benders”. Let us be so, partners with God as we help bend the arc of justice towards earth.

Let us be by the sides of those who “live on the outskirts of hope”, to use the

Let us join church with church, church with synagogue, temple and masjid, become partners with schools, businesses, city leaders and those whose “backs are against the wall.” (Howard Thurmond)

And let us do it *together*! As Reinhold Niebuhr, the great American theologian, wrote:

Nothing worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone.

Therefore we are saved by love.⁷

Yes faith, yes hope, and the greatest of these, *love!* Relentless, resilient, compassionate, all-embracing love.

1. As cited in Stephen B Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (N.Y. Harper+Row, 1982),p. 259-260.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

4. Oates, *op.cit.*, p. 228.

5. Frye Gaillard, *A Hard Rain: America In the 1960's, Our Decade of Hope, Possibility, and Innocence Lost.* (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2018), p. 158.

6. As cited in Gaillard, *op. cit.*, p.181

7. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy*, ed. Ursula m. Niebuhr (N.Y.: Harper+Row, Publishers, 1974), frontispiece.