

Network of Mutuality

Letter from Birmingham Jail, Paragraphs 1-5

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3 November 2013

In the United Church of Christ, we proclaim that “God is still speaking.” This twenty-first century catch phrase is based upon a core tenet of our 17th century forerunners who believed that God had yet more light and truth to reveal. Throughout our history we have been open to God’s word leading us in new directions.

Since the “God is still speaking” campaign began a decade ago, in casual conversations I’ve asked UCCers if they think that the canon should be open. Another way to approach the same concept is to ask people what documents they find to be authoritative for them in their faith journey. For a canon is simply that group of documents that the Christian community discerns to express God’s word; documents which we believe authoritatively guide us in our faith and practice.

When I have these conversations, I always state that for me, the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” holds that place. If the canon were open, I would include it, because I believe that it speaks an authoritative, inspired word of God for the church.

This 50th anniversary year, I felt compelled to explore the letter, not simply in an educational forum, but to do so as an act of worship and proclamation. And when the Neighbors in Need materials came out with the theme “Imagining Another World Is Possible,” I thought the two fit very well together. Therefore, for the month of November, I will preach a series of sermons based upon this letter.

In the spring of 1963 the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference went to Birmingham, Alabama at the invitation of the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and other local leaders to assist them with integration efforts in the city.

1960’s Birmingham has been described as “a notorious bastion of racist terror.” Historian Edward Gilbreath wrote,

It was a city where not only were libraries segregated, but books containing images of black rabbits and white rabbits on the same page were banned from the shelves. . . . It was a city where bullets, bombs and burning crosses served as constant deterrents to African Americans who aspired to anything greater than their assigned station.

Birmingham was notorious for its Commissioner of Public Safety, Bull Connor. It was a place of such violence that many in the movement feared taking action there. They thought that this would be the moment when they would likely meet their deaths.

The previous year, Rev. Shuttlesworth had negotiated with local department store

owners to integrate their stores, only to have them renege on their promises. It was determined that more pressure would need to be applied through a direct action campaign in order to generate a new round of negotiations, which would hopefully result in a kept promises. Shuttlesworth rightly understood that they were engaged in a spiritual contest; he proclaimed, "This is a religious crusade, a fight between light and darkness, right and wrong, good and evil, fair play vs. tyranny."

The SCLC leadership was also aware that Birmingham might just provide the opportunity to gain more national exposure for their efforts, which would help them in moving the country forward in its commitments to equality and civil rights. Birmingham might provide the scenes of violence which would provoke the conscience of the country. And that is exactly what happened over that summer of 1963 when Bull Connor released dogs on children and later when the four little girls were killed in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church.

So, that spring, Dr. King went to Birmingham to lead a campaign for racial justice. They planned for the campaign to reach its climax on Good Friday. Taking their cues from the Christian doctrines of the cross and the atonement, Dr. King and other leaders would sacrifice themselves on Good Friday, in an effort to redeem countless others. The night before, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy preached a sermon about the crucifixion, in which he proclaimed that at the moment of Jesus' death, "the world reeled and rocked like a guilty man." Just maybe the actions of the protestors the next day would lead to seismic change in the nation.

Dr. King and the other leaders were arrested on Good Friday, and Dr. King was placed in solitary confinement, with no mattress and was not allowed to make a phone call. He spent eight days in solitary, including Easter Sunday. His friend Andrew Young, said that Dr. King was more afraid of the "mental anguish" from this form of imprisonment than he was afraid to die—that he had prepared himself for. King himself described those days as "the longest, most frustrating and bewildering hours I have lived." This was quite clearly what Christian mystics describe as a "dark night of the soul." It was while imprisoned in this dark cell, over those holy and sacred days, experiencing this moment of anguish and fear, that Martin Luther King, Jr. composed this prophetic epistle to the churches and to the ages. When I believe he was inspired by the Holy Spirit and shared God's word with us.

What prompted the Letter was a letter written by a group of local white clergy, a letter which criticized King's presence in Birmingham and denounced his methods. While in solitary, he was smuggled a copy of the *Birmingham News*, which included this letter entitled "A Call for Unity" which had been written by two Episcopal bishops, two Methodist bishops, a Roman Catholic bishop, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Synod, the Pastor of the First Baptist Church, and the rabbi of the Reform temple.

Let me first say something about the white church in the South during this time. As historian David Chappell writes in his book *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*, the white moderate churches were not active supporters of segregation. In fact, the denominations generally supported desegregation. Even the Southern Baptist Convention, the dominant religious organization in the South then and now, voted in the 1950's at their annual meeting to support desegregation, and that vote was 9,000 in favor and 50 opposed. In fact, many segregationist leaders and politicians openly criticized the white churches for their failures to support segregation. These exact same clergy had earlier that year published a letter criticizing Governor George Wallace for his inflamed rhetoric.

So, these white clergy were criticized from both sides, largely for their neutrality and their failure to act. Though the denominations opposed segregation, they did not actively participate in the Civil Rights Movement. And many clergy were afraid to speak against segregation, for fear of losing their congregations, as many members in the pew did support the old regime. I have a dear friend, the Rev. Bruce Lowe who is now almost 100 years old, who as a Southern Baptist pastor in Louisiana did denounce segregation and proclaimed his support for civil rights. Bruce was fired from his pulpit, and never worked in a church again.

The motivations of these white, moderate clergy, were complicated, and it is important that we see them not as rabid supporters of the status quo. Rather, the contest between the Black Church and the White Church is described by sociologist Jonathan Rieder as “the clash between an engaged church and one cowering behind stained glass windows.”

It is important for us to make this distinction, because the message that Dr. King’s Letter has for the church, the message which I believe to be a word of God, is not simply “don’t be prejudiced” but is a missionary and prophetic call for the church to be engaged in the problems of the world.

Getting back to the letter from the white moderates, “A Call for Unity.” These faith leaders believed that recent elections signaled a change in the attitude of the local government. They believed that there was an “opportunity for a new constructive and realistic approach to racial problems.” Now was not the time for protests and marches. They wrote,

We are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders. We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.

They denounced nonviolent direct action as extreme. While it was technically peaceful, it incited others to hatred and violence. They encouraged the Black community to withdraw its support and to “unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham.” They continued:

When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.

According to historians, when Dr. King read this letter, during his dark night of the soul, he was hurt and angered. According to historian Robert Westbrook, “In controlled fury, he began to craft a letter of reply in its margins and then on paper smuggled into his cell.”

Andrew Young said that in those moments, King was “like Jeremiah, with fire pent up in his bones, and that’s the way this letter was. It just spewed forth.” Jonathan Rieder wrote, King “took aim at the core of American culture, the vast universe of people who imagined themselves to be decent but never dwelled on the shame of American racism.” He adds, “after Birmingham, the foundations of the nation’s old racial order cracked in some elemental way and set the groundwork for the new one we live in today.” And the Letter played a critical part in that change.

For myself, born eleven years after this Letter was written, and educated in the new world it helped to create, it is strange to imagine that a person once had to argue for the things that King argues for in the Letter. For the world I grew up in assumes to be true so many of the things that in 1963 he was under pains to demonstrate as truth. And not just about racial equality, but about law and justice, civil disobedience, nonviolence, and even the role of the church and Christian theology. For Christian theology has never been the same. Not only has the church awakened to the reality that God has called us to be engaged in social justice, this Letter and the Civil Rights Movement, altered the interpretation of key doctrines of the faith. No more could salvation simply be about what happens to us after we are dead. True salvation, true redemption must also be liberation in our present lives.

But I get ahead of myself.

What Dr. King wrote was a letter to convict the consciences of people of faith. It was, among other things, a letter to the churches. Much like St. Paul wrote letters to explain his mission and to clarify points of doctrine, Dr. King wrote to explain his approach and to proclaim the “gospel of freedom.”

He was not some “outside agitator.” Not only did his organization have an affiliate in the city, not only had they been invited to Birmingham, but more importantly, they had been called by God, like Paul had been called to Macedonia. As disciples of Jesus Christ their concern must extend beyond their own hometown. Disciples of Jesus must be concerned with what happens in Birmingham. For, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

And why is this the case? Why should a problem in Birmingham bother someone in Atlanta? Because one of the core teachings of our Judeo-Christian tradition is that we are all children of God, united in one creation, filled with the same Holy Spirit. Dr. King proclaimed it most eloquently in words that will endure the centuries, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

There is an old spiritual in which the people sang “And did not my Lord deliver Daniel?” Jonathan Rieder writes that the song contains the implication, “And why not every man?” And King took that implication to heart and worked to make it a reality. If God delivered Daniel, then God will deliver every person. Rieder writes, “The sin is failing to recognize any of God’s children. . . . It is not enough to say that all people are God’s children and thus deserve freedom and recognition; you have a duty to do something about it. This is the gospel of freedom, plain and simple.”

The lessons of these opening paragraphs are clear. This network of mutuality which binds us together is not limited to our immediate connections. It is not enough to be our brother’s keeper. It is not sufficient to love our neighbors as ourselves. God desires that we extend our concern to all of creation. We must cross the boundaries that separate us from other people, for God’s family knows no boundaries.

And we are each of us called by God to be evangelists, sharing God’s good news with a world in need—a word of salvation, which bring forgiveness, deliverance, and freedom. It is the good news which challenges evil and injustice and helps to make a better world.

Maybe today, God is speaking to one of you, calling you, like Paul, like Martin, to come

to the aid of another. Let us listen to our Still-speaking God, and respond, that we might be the church that Jesus dreamed of, imagining another world is possible.