

The Hope of the World
Letter from Birmingham Jail, Paragraphs 25-39
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational UCC
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In the autumn of 2007, while I was still living in Oklahoma, I was asked to lead a session on the intersection between religion and bullying. It was for a conference entitled “Stop Hate in the Hallways” which was organized by the Cimarron Alliance Foundation to address bullying based on race, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity. That year in Oklahoma, there was particular concern that year for the mistreatment of Latino, Muslim, and LGBT kids because of the rhetoric in the political sphere targeting those populations.

The session I organized was entitled “Religion: Both Cause and Cure.” I assembled a diverse panel – a Conservative Jewish rabbi, a Catholic priest, a Sufi Muslim professor, a Baptist youth minister, and a Unitarian. And I framed the discussion around a paradox which baffled me. On the one hand, all the world’s major religions teach respect, compassion, even love of other humans, particularly those who are different from us. As such, religious faith should help to cure our prejudices. Yet, on the other hand, religion is often the source of prejudice that leads to harassment, discrimination, and bullying of others. “How do you explain this paradox?” I asked the panelists.

I don’t remember any of the answers, but I remain bothered by this paradox.

In recent years our brothers in the Roman Catholic hierarchy have taken a strange position on religious liberty, which further illustrates this paradox. They have argued repeatedly that it violates the religious freedom of a Catholic business person to make it illegal for him to discriminate, particularly against LGBT people. I’ve highlighted some of the danger of this view before, but one thing that puzzles me about it, something I’ve directly confronted some of my Catholic brothers with, is the question, “Isn’t it your responsibility as the pastors to teach your parishoners compassion towards those who are different, rather than defending their mistreatment of others as a human right?”

Dr. King was so troubled by the lack of support from the white churches, that in this Letter he dropped his diplomatic approach and moved to chastisement, powerfully articulated in those scathing questions, “What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?”

I have occasionally wondered the same thing about some religious people, even fellow Christians. Do they really practice the same religion I do? Do they really worship the same God I do?

In this section of the Letter, King shames the white clergy. They are hypocritical. They are failing to follow the teachings of their own faith traditions. They are blind to the “colony of heaven” eminently visible before them.

Their blindness, failures, and hypocrisies are signs that the church is weak, ineffectual, inauthentic, and irrelevant.

This word of God to the churches is a scathing attack upon complacency and the status quo. An attack that I believe the followers of Jesus Christ must listen to in every age to come, so that we too do not fall back into the same complacency, irrelevance, and complicity with evil.

This week we learned the sad news that T. Merton Rymph died in September. We were a little annoyed we had not heard before, but, more importantly, we were sad at the loss. Mert was the Senior Minister here from 1967-1975, a time of great cultural turmoil around the Vietnam War, race relations, the women's movement, and more.

Mert was actively involved in race relations while he pastored in Wichita, Kansas and Manchester, New Hampshire before coming here. He was a member of the NAACP and participated in lobbying Congress on civil rights legislation. He had even met Martin Luther King once while they were in seminary.

His Greenwich, Connecticut obituary described his time pastoring in Omaha as follows:

Omaha was a place of tumult at the time, experiencing some of the worst segregation and unrest of any urban center in America. Here he was highly involved in integration efforts and outreach across boundaries.

A couple of years ago I called Mert, retired in New Hampshire on his farm, Wit's End. We had the most wonderful conversation, which made it clear why he was so beloved by many of you. I had heard some tidbits about the racial issues he had encountered in Omaha, but I didn't know many details, so I asked him about them. His answer, "Well, Scott, that question can only be answered in person and over a glass of scotch."

He then invited Michael and me to come to Wits End to visit him and Jackie. They would be happy to put us up for a few days. We just had to bring the scotch.

I regret that we never took that trip. I intended to take him up on that offer, thinking I had more time. I guess this is a reminder that we shouldn't put things off.

Mert Rymph helped to guide this church through the transformational time that was the 1960's and 1970's. He did so believing strongly that the church should be involved in service to the community. That we should be relevant. He preached that spiritual renewal was possible with "faith, imagination, hope, determination, love and reconciliation."

Dr. King was angry at the failures of the Christian church. His criticisms cut deep. But they also came from one who served as a minister of the gospel, someone deeply in love with the church. Despite all its failures and sins, he still believed that the church could be "the hope of the world."

And what does a church that is the hope of the world look like? King gives some indication in the letter with descriptions like "sublime courage, . . . willingness to suffer, and . . . amazing discipline."

Reading this section of the Letter resonated with some things my friend, the Rev. Dr. Jim Antal, Massachusetts Conference Minister has said in regards to the church and its response to global climate change. Two weeks ago, while he was presenting to our First Forum, via Skype, he talked about how people of faith are uniquely positioned to lead this environmental

movement because our tradition teaches us about sacrifice and the common good. Jim has called for the American church to renew its understanding of and commitment to sacrifice.

Last year, delivering the keynote address to the Annual Gathering of the Nebraska Conference, he said,

strategically speaking, I believe that the only hope we have for a redeemed earth is the wholesale transformation of what it means to be religious. As we have learned from the major social change movements that have succeeded, people of faith have provided leadership without which the movement would have failed. As people of faith who are rooted in communities of faith, we bring to our engagement positive, transformative qualities that are essential to re-direct society's momentum – qualities like resilience, hope, imagination, vision and courage.

A committed and engaged church, which takes seriously the gospel of Jesus Christ – a church that is strong, courageous, and authentic, will be effective and relevant. It will be the hope of the world. I want to be part of a church like that.

The last month, as I have preached this series, I have been excited to hear the feedback from many of you. In particular, I have enjoyed the stories that some of you have shared about your experiences in the Civil Rights Movement. Luther MacNaughton was a Freedom Rider. Ken Friedman-Fitch attended the March on Washington. John Beerling participated in the march from Selma to Montgomery. Others of you may have had similar experiences.

When the church is obedient to the call of Jesus, we can be the hope of world. We can not only imagine that another world is possible, we can make it a reality. The "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and the Civil Rights Movement prove that.

In June of 1963, President John F. Kennedy, whom we remember this weekend, gave his groundbreaking address to the nation on Civil Rights. Prompted by the Letter and the events in Birmingham, he declared for the movement and against a more moderate approach. He said, "Now the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise." Many experienced this as a tipping point, as the moderate conscience was now fully aroused.

It did not mean that victory had been won. The next day Medgar Evers was murdered. On September 15 the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed, killing Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley. Bloody Sunday was still two years away.

Despite the reality of evil in this world, the tunnel of hope had been carved through the mountain of despair. In 1964 would come the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act the next year. And the Letter would go on to influence other campaigns for justice and human rights. It was used by leaders in the Solidarity Movement in Poland, in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, in the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, by dissidents in Argentina, and by Palestinian activists. The young Chinese students in Tiananmen Square wore shirts announcing "We shall overcome," and pro-democracy websites in Iran have translated the Letter into Farsi.

Jonathan Rieder, near the conclusion of his book on the Letter, entitled *The Gospel of Freedom*, declares that those who struggled in this movement were a testimony that normal people can bend the moral arc of the universe towards justice. That by "praying, working, and protesting together" they could "bring that day."

He then declares that even Martin Luther King, with all his faith and hope, did not foresee what would come. I quote:

He did not even know what we know, the even-greater fruits that his labor would help to bring in the decades ahead: the overthrow of Jim Crow, the erosion of the most brutal forms of racism, the making of a black middle class, the achievement of cultural pride and recognition, the growth of black political power, the election of the nation's first black president, and the extension of rights and recognition to women, gays, children, prisoners, the mentally ill, the disabled, and immigrants.

What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?

Here, it is the God of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar who delivered the people out of slavery and established them in a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. The God who proclaimed that justice will roll down like water and righteousness like a flowing stream. The God incarnate in Jesus Christ who invited us to love our enemies and who died to set us free.

The people who worship here, we hope, are those kind of people – authentic, courageous, sacrificial, imaginative, loving, determined, effective, relevant. People who are not weary in doing what is right. A colony of heaven. The hope of the world.