

THE CALL TO SPEAK UP
Sunrise Presbyterian Church
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Last week we began a series of Epiphany sermons concerning the theme of "Spreading Light." We recall the star which led the wise men to find the Christ child. We remember the Christ light which shone from the manger - and we look for that light in our world. We look for ways that we can, in Edith Wharton's words, "be the mirror which reflects that light."

Today, as we honor God's calling to our congregational leaders with ordination and installation - I want to lift up a calling I learned from a preacher we will honor in a community worship service here at Sunrise this afternoon. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was a light bearer for me - and for countless others. His life was a mirror which reflected Christ's light. His light shone brightly and lit similar lights around the world.

I was born and raised in South Carolina. I was baptized and confirmed in the Presbyterian Church. I was surrounded by good people throughout my youth. I was taught to be good person - and yet, when I look back on my church and my community and my state - I'm saddened and shocked with the racism which I now see. Good people - leading good lives told me that separation of the races "was just the way it was." They told me that it was better for both races to have separate schools and churches. The adults around me told me we had to "take care" of the black people in our community - they indicated that they could not govern themselves.

We never discussed race in my Sunday School classes - but I was taught to sing "Jesus loves the little children - all the children the children of the world - red and yellow - black and white - they are precious in his sight." My teachers never talked about what that song means. Instead, I heard leaders in the congregation shake their heads and sigh over school integration. "Doesn't the federal government know that change takes a long time - we can't just mix the races without trouble?" This was the background conversation throughout my youth. Good people who meant well upheld segregation. Good people who meant well made it very difficult for us to recognize the truth of the children's song - that Jesus loves us all.

It's into this culture that Martin Luther King began his ministry. In seminary, he was particularly moved by his study of the concept of *agape* - love - in John's gospel. He wrote: "[*Agape*] is n overflowing love which seeks nothing in

return. . . . when you come to love on this level you begin to love men not because they are likable, not because they do things that attract us, but because God loves them."ⁱ It was Bible study which led King to hear God's call not only to his people - but to all God's people - God's love is for all - and if it is for all - then it is sinful for one race or one nation to lord it over the other. King preached that message of inclusion in love. He continually spoke of our need to reach out in love to those who hurt him. He preached of the power of love to confront the power of hate. Martin Luther King was a torch bearer for God. His light brightened up our world.

And yet - in my world, the adults called him a communist - often with expletives added. (An historical aside - in the fifties and sixties - anyone who strayed from mainline political or cultural ideas was called a communist. It was an easy way to label someone as a potential enemy.) Instead of listening to God's Word through King's sermons - I heard angry muttering and frustration. I heard Black people mocked - and derided. Again, I want to say that these were good people who did this.

But that song I learned in Sunday School was the "crack where the light got in" for me. It was the beginning of my understanding that God created us all - and that God loves us all. I was far too old when I opened my eyes to the ugliness and sinfulness of racism. I was far too old when I learned the dire things my community, state and nation had done to people of another race. And yet, God's light shone on those things - it shone particularly through the works of Martin Luther King. I devoured his sermons - his writings - his craft. But I also admired and emulated his bravery - his courage - and his fortitude. King never wanted to be great - he simply wanted his people to have the same opportunities that white people did. One sermon, "The Drum Major Instinct" brilliantly describes how all people want to be famous and great - we want to be the drum major! And yet Jesus - calls us not to be first but to be last - to care for the weak and the marginalized. King said that if he had to be a drum major he wanted it to be in "love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world."ⁱⁱⁱ

King's light has brightened up my world - King's light has opened me to God's calling for peace and justice. King's light has led me and countless others to discover the joy of races living together side by side.

Yet, this year - as fall turned to winter - we learned about countless incidents of racial hate across our country and in Kansas. Black School children were told by their peers "to go back to Africa." One person read on her FaceBook page - "I'm going to shoot all the blacks I can find." There are billboards which read, "Make America White Again. The same was written in chalk across the

sidewalks at Bethany College - just down the road from us. I'm often naïve in my hopefulness - but I had hoped that the light we received from King and others helped us learn how to create a new world. These past few months - it seems - we are heading back to the old world.

And so on this day of calling - I lift up God's call to all of us - God calls us to speak up when we see sin such as racism. Imagine how different my life might have been if my Sunday School teacher had taught me the truth of the song she taught me - imagine. We often imagine we have no power to change our lives. We forget we hold God's light in our hands. We forget we have wonderful children and youth at Sunrise and in our town. God calls us to speak to them about sins like racism which society sadly practices. God calls us to tell them the sometimes ugly truths we adults learned only through living. God calls us to lead them - with our lights held high - because God still calls us, as King said, "to make of this old world a new world." Each one of us has the power to help - God calls us - Will you join me as together we lift candles against the wind? Alleluia! Amen.

ⁱ Martin Luther King, "The Power of Nonviolence" in *A Testament of Hope*, p 13.

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, "The Drum Major Instinct: in *A Testament of Hope*, 267.