

A NEW WAY OF ACTING

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Last Sunday's sermon ended with words preached by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in November 1954 at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

Today's sermon begins with Dr. King's concluding words from his June 4, 1957 speech/sermon called "The Power of Non-Violence," in which he talks about the need to be "maladjusted."

After laying out the principles of the non-violent resistance movement underlying the Montgomery bus boycott, Dr. King said, "Modern psychology has a word that is probably used more than any other word. It is the word 'maladjusted.' Now we all should seek to live a well-adjusted life . . . But there are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I call upon you to be maladjusted to such things. I call upon you to be as maladjusted to such things. I call upon you to be as maladjusted as Amos who in the midst of the injustices of his day cried out in words that echo across the generations, 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.' As maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln who had the vision to see that this nation could not exist half slave and half free. As maladjusted as Jefferson, who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery could cry out, 'All men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth who dreamed a dream of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. God grant that we will be so maladjusted that we will be able to go out and change our world and our civilization. And then we will be able to move from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice."¹

In light of Dr. King's call to be "maladjusted," perhaps we can rephrase Paul's challenge from last week's scripture lesson: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be maladjusted by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2)

Remember, Paul's letters to his fellow believers can helpfully be divided pretty much in half, theology/doctrine and ethics/practice. Paul **never** says anything like, "Good luck, you're on your own," or "Just try harder next time," or "Learn from your mistakes," or "Hope for the best, prepare for the worst" when he gives his ethical instructions about a new way of acting in Jesus Christ. Instead, Paul's instructions about "the new life in Christ" are always grounded in the good news of what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. As someone has said, Paul's ethical instructions are not contrary to God's grace – in other words, he doesn't say, "Live like this so that God

will love you.” Just the opposite is true. Paul says, “God loves you. In fact, God loves you so much, he sent his only Son to die for you, so that you might live for God.” Paul’s ethical admonitions are a response to God’s grace already given. Paul’s call and the claim of the gospel is to take God’s grace seriously enough to shape how we live accordingly.

So, after Paul talks about “a new way of thinking” because of the renewing of our minds through God’s grace, he gets down to the nitty-gritty of what that “new way of thinking” looks like when it is acted out. That’s when we hear exhortations such as “let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor; do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord; rejoice in hope; be patient in suffering; persevere in prayer; contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers; bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them; rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep; live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are; do not repay anyone evil with evil; take thought for what is noble in the sight of all; if possible, live peaceably with all; never avenge yourselves; if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Is your tongue hanging out? Do you need to take a deep breath? Are you rolling your eyes? Are you shaking your head in disbelief? Are you thinking to yourself, “Yeah, right!”? From the viewpoint of being conformed to this world, Paul’s ethical admonitions are unrealistic, if not downright laughable and impossible. But, from the viewpoint of people who are “maladjusted” to the way this world is, through the renewal of minds by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, Paul’s ethical admonitions make sense. Paul almost sounds like he is paraphrasing Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of God. Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:38-29, 43-45, 48)

The underlying foundation of Jesus’s teachings on the mountain, Paul’s ethical admonitions to his fellow believers, and the non-violent resistance philosophy in the Civil Rights Movement is love. As one of our seminary professors used to say, this love is not the squishy, warm feeling you get inside when someone special sits down next to you. No, the kind of love Jesus, Paul, the gospels, and the non-violent resistance movement talk about is what we call **agape**. That’s the kind of love God loved the world so much with – so much **agape** that he did something about it; he sent his only Son. That’s the kind of love Jesus loved his disciples with – so much **agape** that he wrapped a towel around his waist, got down on his knees, and washed their dusty, cracked, smelly feet. That’s the kind of love Jesus loved all of us with – so much **agape** that he went to the cross and died for our sins. That’s the kind of love that calls forth love – love that is genuine; love that holds fast to what is good; love that blesses those who persecute; etc., etc., etc.

U.S. Representative John Lewis from Georgia was a young leader in the march at Selma. His head was cracked open on “Bloody Sunday.” He suffered much, along with many others who marched in the face of hatred and violence. He has said, “Before we went on any protest, whether it was sit-ins or the freedom rides or any march, we prepared ourselves, and we were disciplined. We were committed to the way of peace – the way of nonviolence – the way of love – the way of life as the way of living.” That last phrase – “the way of love – the way of life as the way of living” is a good summary of Paul’s description of “a new way of acting.” It seems counter-intuitive. It seems unrealistic. It seems like asking for trouble. It seems absurd at face value. But it’s the way of life that Jesus taught – and, not only did he teach it, he lived it, he did it, and he died for it, that we might have life.

In his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, Dr. King outlined six principles of his philosophy of nonviolence. As you listen to them, hear the similarities to what Jesus taught in his sermon and what Paul encourages in his letter.

Principle One: Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people. It is active nonviolent resistance to evil.

Principle Two: Nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding. The end result is redemption and reconciliation.

Principle Three: Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice not people. It seeks to attack the evil system rather than the individuals caught up in it.

Principle Four: Nonviolence holds that suffering can educate and transform. It accepts suffering without retaliation.

Principle Five: Nonviolence chooses love instead of hate. It resists violence of the spirit as well as the body.

Principle Six: Nonviolence believes the universe is on the side of justice. It believes that God is a God of justice.²

Dr. King summarized his principles in a speech in Washington, D.C. just two months before his death, when he said, “Cowardice asks the question – is it safe? Expediency asks the question – is it politic? Vanity asks the question – is it popular? But conscience asks the question – is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular; but one must take it because it is right.”³

In my preaching, I try hard to avoid words such as “should,” and “ought,” and “must,” and even “let us.” They can come across as easy to say moralisms, sort of like verbally wagging my finger at you, when I’m really in the business of proclaiming the good news that in Christ we “get to” live in this new way that Paul describes, rather than we’ve “got to” do this or that to earn God’s love.

But, you know, sometimes I just can’t help using those words, because our Lord himself, and his apostle Paul also, use that kind of language. A few weeks ago I preached about the “imperative of prayer” and talked about how the petitions in the Lord’s Prayer are imperatives – as if we are ordering God what to do. You may remember, that kind of imperative is really an expression of trust in God’s ability and desire to do what we ask – Give us, forgive us, lead us not, deliver us . . .

Last week we heard Curt read the Great Commandment from Mark 12. This morning we heard Ann read the same gospel lesson. When Cheryl was working on today's bulletin, she buzzed me on my phone and said, "Phil, do you realize the gospel lesson is the same as last Sunday?" I said, "Yes, it's for a reason." And the reason is simple – as Jesus says, the Great Commandment (Love God. Love neighbor.) is the summary of the whole law. We might say it is the essence of what it means to be maladjusted to this world, to be renewed in our minds so that we may discern what is the will of God.

And guess what! Jesus' words are imperatives. Actually, in the Greek they are in the future indicative ("You shall or will love God. You shall or will love your neighbor."), but in this instance Jesus's words are what we call a "categorical imperative." You might remember studying that in an Intro to Philosophy class somewhere along the line, or you may associate that idea with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. The definition of a "categorical imperative" is "an unconditional moral obligation that is binding in all circumstances and is not dependent on a person's inclination or purpose." From a gospel point of view, love/**agape** is a categorical imperative – it is absolutely essential and indispensable to the maladjusted, transformed way of life as the way of living.

So, when Jesus says "You will love God. You will love your neighbor," and Paul writes, "You let love be genuine; you hate what is evil, you hold fast to what is good," they are saying "should, must, got to, let us . . ." And their imperatives are in the plural or, as we say around here, "All y'all let love be genuine . . . All y'all will love God. All y'all will love your neighbor." It's not just a matter of how you and I will live and act individually. It's a matter of what kind of community life we will seek to have beyond our own personal concerns.

I preach this sermon today well aware that it could come across as incredibly naïve or short on concrete suggestions about how to live as Jesus teaches and Paul encourages. To the first – about being incredibly naïve – I can only say, listen to what Jesus says life in the Kingdom of God is like and to how Paul challenges us to live as followers of Jesus Christ. To the second – about concrete suggestions about how to live this way – I will say, it's kind of like the time when the lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" The story suggests that the lawyer hoped Jesus would give him a nice, neat list of the people he had to love. Instead, Jesus told him a story about a man who fell among robbers, only to be helped by his mortal enemy. When the lawyer begrudgingly agreed that the man who showed mercy was the neighbor, Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." The lawyer had to figure it out and do likewise.

And so do we . . . but we're not left on our own. As someone has written, "only the cross of Jesus helps us bear to hear the great commandment because none of us measures up to the demand. But the cross reinforces the command – love calls forth love."

It is critical to hear Jesus's great commandment and Paul's ethical instructions, because we are being torn apart in our country by fear and hatred and cries for revenge. As Christians, we are people who have been given a whole new way of thinking (not conformed to this world, but transformed) that can lead to a whole new way of acting

(Love God. Love neighbor. Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.).

As the preacher at the Montreat Youth Conference told us every night as he finished his sermon on the very difficult troubles facing us today, and then charged us to live as Jesus and Paul call and encourage and command us to live, “It’s all that easy and it’s all that hard.”

Thanks be to God for his amazing grace in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who tells us “Y’all will love God. Y’all will love your neighbor.”

Let us pray: Lord, you call us to love you with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Lord, let this be. Show us how. Lord, you call us to love our neighbor as ourself. Lord, let this be. Take us where we need to go. Lord, fill us with your love. Amen.

NOTES

¹Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Power of Non-violence,” June 4, 1957 at www.teachingamericanhistory.org.

² “The King Philosophy: Six Principles of Nonviolence,” at www.thekingcenter.org.

³Martin Luther King, Jr. “A Proper Sense of Priorities,” February 6, 1968, Washington, D.C. at www.patheos.com.