

Exodus 23: 9

Woodridge

1/17/2016

MLK sermon

“Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Long, long ago – some religious students went to their religious teacher with a question that they could not figure out.

They wanted to know – how can you tell when the night has ended and the day has begun?

Is it – when you can tell the difference between a certain kind of tree?

No – answered the teacher.

Is it – when you can tell the difference between a certain kind of animal?

No – answered the teacher.

Finally after several other questions like this – and after receiving the same no for an answer.

- The students asked – then how?

After a long phase – the teacher said:

It's when you can see into the face of another and see them as your brother and sister.

For until then – you will know that the darkness of night is still upon you – and a new day has not yet begun.

There is much of MLK's legacy to celebrate today and with his birthday tomorrow.

But this morning – I would invite you to consider this part of Dr King's legacy:

- His deep commitment to the inter-connectedness of all of humanity
- Specifically – that oppression hurts not only the oppressed but also the oppressor
- And that neither can be truly free/ truly who God created them to be/ until both have seen their inter-connectedness

At the end of the 19th chapter of the book of Exodus

- Moses goes up Mount Sinai to receive the laws
- by which the people of Israel will live in covenant relationship with God.

And then beginning in chapter 20 – God begins to speak.

God gives them the 10 commandments.

And then laws concerning worship

- Laws concerning property
- Laws concerning social relations

And then in the midst of God's law-giving – comes this verse:

“Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

To build all those pyramids

- That you are still able to see today in Egypt

Took a lot of back-breaking work from a lot of slaves working under years of inhuman conditions and severe oppression.

These were people who knew oppression

- And knew what it felt like to be “strangers” in a land that wasn’t your home

God then chose Moses to lead them out of bondage and slavery and oppression and the feeling of being strangers

- And to head for the promised land.

And as they trek across the wilderness to get to their new home

- God begins to give them laws by which to live in that new land

Through Moses – God tells the people who had fled oppression and had been strangers in a strange land

- That when you get to the promised land/ when you are truly free
- Don’t oppress others – because you know what it is like to be oppressed/ to be a stranger

“Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Remembering and honoring the legacy of MLK can be a bit challenging.

It is challenging because it is hard to know where to start with a man who in just 39 years accomplished so much.

Therefore – it might help to think of what it is like to look at a diamond.

There are numerous faces and angles by which we can study a diamond

- And depending on which angle you are looking at
- You could get a completely different view of the diamond
- Different than if you chose a different angle/ a different face of the diamond

When considering the legacy of MLK – there are many angles or faces to choose from.

- Educational accomplishments – doctorate at 26 (**his education**)
- 2 successful pastorates
- His writings- 4 books
- His Nobel Peace prize in 1964
- His speeches and sermons – “I Have a Dream”
- His leadership in Montgomery – and later nationally as the primary leader of SCLC and the civil rights movement

But the angle I would invite all of us to consider this morning

- Is the effectiveness and powerfulness of MLK's ability to speak to a deep and devastating oppression of the spirit
- That is found both in the oppressed and the oppressor

This is not to say that other forms of oppression did not need to be attacked with all the strength and courage that MLK and others displayed.

Forms of oppression such as:

- The Jim Crow laws
- The constitutional right to vote
- The rule of law as understood in our country
- The violence of the KKK and the lynching tree

All this had to go.

It simply couldn't continue.

But I have come to believe that the real power of MLK's legacy

- Was that he spoke to the deep and devastating "oppression of the spirit"

An oppression that leads to an acceptance of the "way things are"

- By both the oppressor and the oppressed

An oppression of the spirit that can drive out any hope for the future

- Any vision that life could be different
- Any vision that long-term justice was possible

It is obvious that MLK was challenging white America to change

- To end this terrible oppression

But MLK also challenged his own people

- Black Americans
- And all of America at the time
- And even us today - to also change

For all to overcome the "oppression of the spirit."

We see this in the mission statement of the SCLC

- which MLK and others started
- and he headed

To redeem the soul of America.

We see it again in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

- in which he used scraps of paper and the margins of newspapers
- to write a letter in response to criticism from white clergy

In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an escapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.

And then in his best known words – perhaps one of the best known speeches in all of American history – he said this:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Free of the "oppression of the spirit"

- that oppresses both the oppressed and the oppressor

“Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

How do we share in the legacy of MLK?

We share in his legacy by hearing his words

- which echo the words of God in the Exodus passage

That oppression destroys the spirit of the oppressor and the oppressed

- and that neither can be truly free
- until both have seen their connectedness
- until we realize that one person cannot be truly who God intends them to be if another person cannot be who God truly intended for them also to be

I believe this was an important and essential message in the 1960's

- and equally important and powerful message for us today.

Let us pray

