

“A Letter from Birmingham Jail”

Jeremiah 9:23-24; Amos 5:21-24; Acts 16:6-15;  
Romans 12:1-3; John 11:45-53, 13:31-35

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Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. All right, that’s probably one of the most famous opening lines in literature. It comes from *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. And yet, it sometimes feels that you can describe a number of situations that way.

The situation I’m thinking of is the United States in the late 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s. It was a time when the war was over and there was a surge in the United States, a change. People were beginning to experience a certain level of prosperity. For those folks who were able to experience that, it was the best of times in many ways.

But not everybody got to go along on that journey. For them, in some ways, it could have felt like the worst of times. It was in that age of segregation in the ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s that the people began to recognize the struggle and the limitations on a segment of the population among us. It was a time when racism began to be seen clearly. That was in part due to people who took a stand in the midst of the segregation of the day.

The person that became the face of the whole Civil Rights Movement was Martin Luther King. We’ve heard of the things he did—the way he went to Montgomery with Rosa Parks as she refused to go to the back of the bus, and helped to bring that to the national spotlight. In doing so, he became a spokesman for the whole movement. We know very many of his speeches. We’ve heard a lot of them come around every year on Martin Luther King Day, if nothing else. We’ve heard of the dream he had for America.

It was a difficult time. While there was one segment of the population that was talking about peace and love, there was another segment of the population saying, “Yeah, we’d like some of that, but what we experience is not that.” They had a spokesman in Martin Luther King.

I can’t give you the whole history of the Civil Rights Movement in a short moment, and yet we see Martin Luther King leading and bringing to the attention of the American people that a certain segment of the population was not able to experience the very things our nation said we were about: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He became that lightning rod for the whole movement. Towards the end of his life, it felt like he knew he didn’t have much more time with us. In fact, it wasn’t long after he gave the following quote that he was assassinated in 1968.

What he said he wanted to be remembered for is useful to think about.

*I want you to say that day [at his funeral, basically] that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I tried to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life*

*to visit those where were in prison. And I want you to say on that day I tried to love and serve humanity.*

He said, basically, I don't want you to remember all the awards I got. I may not have a lot of money to pass on. But if I did that, if I responded in the way Jesus talked about in Matthew 25, if you can say that I did that, that's who I want you to remember me to be.

So there's a bunch of civil rights history. The particular moment in that arc that this particular letter comes out of was a moment in Birmingham. Birmingham was one of the most segregated cities in the South. Martin Luther King had come at the request of the people in that community to help raise that issue to national consciousness. In order to do that, they did sit-ins, went to places they weren't supposed to go, and gathered in ways they weren't supposed to gather, all in a non-violent demonstration to raise the issue and to bring the tension up so that something might be addressed. King got put in jail.

The issue didn't really hit the news until the police set attack dogs on the demonstrators. It was in that moment where a bunch of clergy from Birmingham wrote an open letter to Martin Luther King and published it in the paper. They said they didn't think it was necessary. They said, "If you just let things go, it will get better." It was from jail King wrote a response. In a general way, he said, "Why do you expect us to wait?"

In our country's history there has been a lot of mob violence and deaths caused by mobs to African-Americans and other ethnic groups. This is the background on which he wrote, "How can I not speak out? We live in a place of violence, suppression, oppression, a segregation that limits our liberty, devalues us as human beings, and doesn't enable the vision God has for people in general to live as one people of God."

There's a lot in this letter that we could talk about, but what I'd like to do is say that this letter has been recognized as an incredibly poignant way of describing the situation, and the need, and a call to action.

The PC(USA) General Assembly this summer has said that "A Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is something we want to put in our Book of Confessions. So as I end this series on the Book of Confessions, this is the most recent proposed piece to be added to the Book of Confessions. If enough of the Presbyteries agree, it will go back to the next General Assembly for confirmation. Why did they think that this should go into the Book of Confessions? One of the people who spoke for it suggested that this piece is prophetic. That is, it feels like it gives us insight into God's word to us. That's really what prophetic is about. This person said, "It's the word of God to us in that it inspires us, challenges us, educates us," and I'm going to add a final one—it impacts our imagination.

It inspires us because from jail he's talking about the very vision that Jeremiah is talking about; that God is full of steadfast love, justice, and righteousness and that's what God wants for all people. Such a passage inspires us to remember the goodness and grace of God, the direction of God, the thing God really cares about and loves, and the call on us as followers of Christ. So it inspires us to remember what God wants of us. This seems to be the line of thought in which Martin Luther King writes this letter.

The letter challenges us. It challenges us to recognize the struggle itself. It's a struggle that we can't simply mollify and diffuse, but it's something we have to pay attention to. We have to allow that tension to rise so we can address it. The letter challenges us to recognize our own parts in segregation. It challenges us to recognize how our systems—culture, social networks, the way we've learned to live—may have had injustice and racism seep into who we are.

Martin Luther King's prophetic letter educates us. It shows us ways that we make mistakes. For example, the clergy were saying, "We don't need an outside agitator coming in." Well, what did Paul do when he went to Macedonia? Was he an outside agitator? What did Jesus do when he went throughout the country? Was he an outside agitator? They called Martin Luther King an extremist. Well, maybe there's a reason to be an extremist. It's just what you're an extremist *for* that matters. Why was Jesus crucified? Was he an extremist for love, and justice, and grace? He brought somebody back to life, and they wanted to kill him. What it shows us is how easy it is to blame the agitator for a problem that we don't want to face ourselves. So it educates us.

Finally, I think his prophetic letter opens up our imagination. I think that's what the prophetic word does. It helps us imagine the future. Oftentimes what prophets do is invite us to imagine two futures—one where we pay attention to the will of God, and one where we don't. That's what Jeremiah was doing with the people of Israel. He was saying, "You need to pay attention to what God is doing with you because if you don't it's not going to go well for you." It's imagining two futures. What kind of future are we going to live into?

Martin Luther King suggested it for the church in particular. What kind of future are we going to live into? He said the early church wasn't simply a thermometer of what was going on in the world around it. It was more like a thermostat. What he was saying is that it influenced the society; it didn't simply accept the society the way it was and try to go along with it. He's suggesting that we need to understand our own way of being a thermostat, of being a people who don't simply tell the temperature of the world around us, but are different.

One of the passages we read today said we are not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. It's that continual way we look to Christ to see how we can be changed, not by the way the world is doing things, but by the way Christ is leading us. So Martin Luther King gives us that ability to imagine a future—a future where we can be authentically the faithful followers of Jesus who recognize that race or any way we "other" people and devalue them is not following Christ. But when we figure out how to love one another as he has loved us, then we begin to shape a new world, a new community.

The interesting thing is that last week we talked about this happening in South Africa. It was easy in some ways to say they really made a mistake. They had a 300 year history when they could have changed. Instead it got worse. In some ways it feels like when we hear this letter from a Birmingham jail, it brings it home. It helps me recognize, as I read through it, that I had some of those visions of how things might work. Let's just let time take care of it. Time will make everything better. If we look at South Africa, it actually made it worse. There is change over time, but it's not going to be good change unless

people make it good. It's an invitation to recognize that it is us that can do the right or the wrong.

Sometimes we don't even recognize how it has seeped into our lives and become part of us. The ways that aren't helpful, the ways that we may be racist or prejudiced, the ways that we "other" just become part of the natural way things are. In 2009, there was a study that showed that most people who were not African-American felt that we were becoming a raceless society. But at the same time, the same survey of African-Americans said that 74% of African-American respondents felt like they had some kind of prejudice against them. They would go into a store and oftentimes felt like they shouldn't be there. Forty percent said they had been racially profiled and stopped by police. At the same time, the dominant group said any problem of the minority is their problem. It's their fault. That in itself is a way of being racist because it's denying that there's any problem.

As a privileged person, it's so easy to hold onto my privilege and deny that privilege to somebody else without even knowing I'm doing it sometimes. That's why this is so hard. It begins to ask me to look at myself and how I see the world, how I see other people. Do I see them as "other," really not quite fully human, a resource, a competitor, or can I look and see them as a child of God, fully valued by the God that loves me and them? How do I do that?

It reminds me that coming and following Jesus is a continual act of transformation. As the children came to Vacation Bible School this week, we taught them that God's love is a gift and that God's love changes us, and saves us, and is something we can share. Those simple words are incredibly hard to live out. Sometimes I think I shy away from it because it does feel hard. It feels like in some way it will change my life in a way that I can't be who I want to be.

This call that Martin Luther King is giving us, this call that the Gospel is giving us is not to have a worse life. It really is to have a better life. It is a change for the better, even when it feels sometimes like the change is hard. Because when we get trapped in something like racism and prejudice and "othering," we get trapped in hate and anxiety and fear. I'm assuming we're on the privileged side of that. The non-privileged side gets trapped in a way that they can't fully live their lives. They are restricted from life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Jesus calls us to life and to life abundantly in him. He doesn't say it's for a few. It's for all of us. I have to recognize my own complicity in the way that I don't allow that to happen. I have to open myself again to the love of God and see how God can change me so that I am not conformed to the world, but transformed by the renewal of my mind through the love of Jesus Christ because Jesus invites us to bring God's will on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.