



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

Are You Listening?

January 20, 2019

Martin Luther King Sunday

Text No. 1: Luke 6: 27-36

‘But I say to you listen. Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you & pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; from anyone who takes your coat, do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you, and if anyone takes your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.’



Sermon:

Luke’s Gospel, in this passage where Jesus is preaching, starts out with an important word and that word is *listen*. How important for us all! The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Junior had a robust and deep prayer life—he *listened*. He listened every morning and every evening. He listened every day—not just so that his own words might reach up and go to heaven, but he listened because what he was facing was so much bigger than any one human being could manage, even with all his gifts. So we start today with the idea of listening.

It’s interesting how the word *listen* came up three or four times as we offered feedback from this morning’s readings. I don’t know if you noticed, but ironically, every single time someone said the word *listen* out loud, it was either while someone else was speaking, or the furnace just happened to come on—it was almost as if there was something in the room that was preventing us from hearing that. Yet, today I think the thing that prevents us from listening for God is the same noise that beckons from our televisions, our radios, and our various devices or from the news in the morning. We wake up listening to everything we need to listen to except the one thing we really need to listen to—the same thing that Martin Luther King Junior listened to—and that is God’s still quiet speaking voice. Listen.

More than that, in this first passage, we hear something critical. It is so easy in today's world to take sides. The past couple of weeks have been nothing short of embarrassing on the national scene. People were digging in deeper and deeper—each person trying to one-up the other to prove who is right. Yet, what this passage says in Luke is that we are to do none of that. Instead our task is to love—to bless those who curse you and to pray for those who abuse you. If you want to look for an example of how the people who lived in exile were supposed to live, the narrative from Hebrew Scripture did not tell you to resist the lands that you were going to and only remain true to your heritage; it was not—stage marches and fight back, and it was also to not give in. Instead what the people were instructed to do was to make their home in the places where they found themselves. Make your home and in fact, be kind to your oppressors.

I once saw a video that tried to bring this idea to life, as it portrayed a woman in those ancient times coming out with a plate of chocolate chip cookies and offering them to the soldier. It was clearly anachronistic and yet the message was—be kind to everyone. Even be kind to those who are oppressing you. Martin Luther King Junior made this powerful statement: “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.” And the word he used was *transforming*—not overcoming, overcoming or proving wrong—but transforming our enemies by loving them. He said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that.”

If you remember the epic trilogy *Lord of the Rings*, there is this ring of power that is capable of doing anything and yet this ring of power is located purely in evil. The message of that great book is that you dare not lose that weapon—even for goodness sake—because in doing so you become the very thing you seek to oppose. We cannot change the world. We cannot change our nation; we cannot change this town by force, unless it is the force of love.



Text No. 2: Ephesians 4: 26-32

So then, putting away falsehood, let us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Now Ephesians turns our attention in a different direction. But first you need to know something about Paul. Paul was a zealot and a fanatic. If there was anything that you could do, he could do it better. Like Martin Luther, Martin Luther King's namesake, he believed in living a life so completely and so perfectly holy that in doing so, they both discovered they could never make it there. Both of them came to understand the power of God and the power of forgiveness that changed them dramatically. But in the conclusion of this letter to the Ephesians, it says that if you're going to lead the life of a person of faith, these are the marks of a good life. First, put away all falsehoods; instead speak truth to one another. Don't look for the edge that will give you that knee up on your adversary by twisting the facts a little bit; don't buy into narratives designed to create fear or to label anyone as evil or other. Instead speak truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Who then is your neighbor? Everyone. Who is your neighbor? Anyone in need. In the middle of this passage is a phrase that I try to live up to every day and I make it till about ten o'clock. Let no evil come out of your mouth. Let nothing come out except that which is designed for up building or to reveal the glory of God. Paul says, "Go ahead; be angry." Be angry, but when you speak, speak only for up building; speak for goodness.

I am sure that at some point in his life the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Junior said something negative toward somebody else, but searching for it, I couldn't find it, and I can't remember it. If anyone else knows of such an instance, please let me know. All I remember is that he spoke about mountaintops and dreams, visions and possibilities, and the truth is that we are all designed to be neighbors. So in this day and age, if we are to honor Doctor Martin Luther King Junior, speak only that which is designed for up building; speak only that which would reveal the glory of God. Here is what he said about the role of violence in our lives:

"Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem; it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Violence is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends up defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers." And so I ask you as you go forth to consider taking up the same pledge I am trying out right now. Maybe you are already good at it, but imagine each morning as you go out into the world try to see how long you can follow this maxim of only speaking to up build or to reveal God's glory. And then I think we will truly live into that vision of Dr. King.



Text No. 3: John 13: 34-35

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Finally, we turn to this idea that John writes about in this new commandment. Jesus gives this commandment to his disciples at his final supper. Jesus has just washed their feet. He has just served them and then knelt down to take care of their feet, humble servant. And he says to them, “If you want to be my follower and you want others to understand who you are, get down on your knees and wash their feet. Love them as I have loved you, even if it comes at the cost of everything you hold dear—even your own life. In another part of John’s Gospel, Jesus will say, “Do not just love your friends, but love your enemies.” In this great time of cultural division, we don’t have enemies here. And if we are short of enemies—how much easier it is to love.

Martin Luther King Junior once said that he gave God thanks that Jesus didn’t issue the command to “like everyone else, because I don’t always do that.” He said, “But we are called to love them, and I try to do that.” That’s my paraphrase of his statement, and I think it’s a wise moniker to think of. Our times are not that different from his. The issues have changed; the complexities are there, and the danger may even be greater, so I invite you to contemplate these three passages.

Tomorrow is the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Junior Day. The reason I think that’s important is the fact that he drew deeply on his faith; he was engaged in this because of his faith, and the “doctor” was because he was smart; he had studied; he knew what he was talking about on any measure, and he is worthy of our admiration and our following. Friends, in this church we find worship at the center of all that we do. I hope it continues to be that way because then that worship will guide us like it did for King, enabling us to put into action what Jesus taught us. So today we remember those three things: love—love everyone; speak only to up build, and love one another as Jesus loved us. With that done, the mountaintop will come to us.

Amen.



The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor