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Lake Street Church

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“Called and Recalled”
Amos 5:21-24 and Micah 6:8

In the last month and a half we have been focused on the birth of Jesus and all the scripture and activity that surrounds that event. Today I'd like to focus on the message of Jesus' ministry which happens to be the same message that is a crucial component of most of the major religions of the world. In its simplest form that message is to take care of those less fortunate than we are.

This was not a new message in Jesus' time. Jewish people of the time, as they do today, followed the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Many people think of Judaism as the religion of cold, harsh laws. This is an unfair characterization of both Judaism and Jewish Law. Love and kindness have been a part of Judaism from the very beginning. When Jesus said, "love thy neighbor as thyself," he was merely quoting Torah, and he was quoting the book that is most commonly dismissed as a source of harsh laws: Leviticus 19:18. A large part of Jewish law is about treating people with kindness. The same body of Jewish law that commands Jews to eat only kosher food and not to turn on lights on Shabbat, also commands Jewish people to love both Jews and strangers, to give tzedakah (charity) to the poor and needy, and not to wrong anyone in speech or in business. In fact, acts of kindness are so much a part of Jewish law that the word "mitzvah" (literally, "commandment") is informally used to mean any good deed.

We tend to neglect the central purpose of Jesus' ministry, preferring a benign messiah who does not expect us to change. But the Divine's kingdom here on earth, into which we are led, is founded on the promise of real liberation for those in captivity to injustice. Good news for the poor can feel like a threat to those who are not poor, but the Divine realigns our relationships for the sake of our new

life together, that we might all live fuller, more joyful lives consistent with the Divine's dream for human community.

Today we celebrate the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This, of course, is a secular holiday but also a holiday that is important to people of faith. If we ignore history, we might fool ourselves into believing that Martin Luther King, Jr. always enjoyed the high esteem we afford him today. Each year at this time (he was born on January 15th), we revisit his most famous words about racial harmony and unity and celebrate his dream of a nation devoid of discrimination. He's become a sort of 20th-century mascot, this endearing and nonthreatening figure, and we readily condemn his historical opponents as bad apples, a small minority hardened by hate. But the truth of King's ministry and martyrdom is more complicated and more troubling than the rosy picture we tend to paint. His march for racial and economic justice was uphill the entire way. In the eyes of many Americans he died not as a civic saint, but as an enemy of the state.

I was a teenager in 1968 when Martin Luther King was assassinated. My family lived in the western suburbs of Chicago. Our suburb was typical of the times. There were lots of rather small homes and earnest church goers. We lived in DuPage County. Back then DuPage County was even more conservative than it is now. As the word spread throughout our neighborhood that King had been shot, I heard one of our neighbors say something like, "It's about time."

We can try to comfort ourselves with the thought that this kind of response was an aberration, that it was only a tiny fraction of the American population that cheered King's murder. Or, we can acknowledge that King and his companions in the struggle for Civil Rights faced tremendous opposition at every turn, including the regular threat of violence. What's more, we can admit that antagonism to the Civil Rights movement manifested not only in the form of overt hate, but also in the idleness on the part of millions of Americans who passively resisted the change

for which King ultimately gave his life. At the time, even our minister in the local Presbyterian church where I grew up, who claimed to support the cause of racial equality, called into question the wisdom and timeliness of King's actions.

Martin Luther King was aware that he was not supported by many Americans. He responded from his cell at Birmingham City Jail in a 1963 letter.* These are his words:

“I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; ...who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom.... The inaction of a quiet majority, in other words, is an even greater obstacle to justice than the viciousness of a vocal minority.”

That's quite an indictment! And to tell you the truth, King's writings certainly nudge at my own conscience. They seem to call my own commitment to justice into question. Although we're not making vulgar, disparaging remarks about Caribbean or African countries, how often do we shrug off the ongoing movement for Civil Rights or immigration rights by questioning the methods of its proponents? How often do we allow the complexity of a social problem to dissuade us from actively engaging it? And, although we hate to admit it, how often do we react defensively to prophetic calls for change for fear that someone else's dignity and empowerment might somehow threaten our own? As people of faith, we don't

have the freedom to disregard the mandate to do justice. We can't be the quiet, hesitant majority.

Many of us here this morning say they are following the practices of Jesus. At the onset of his public ministry, Jesus stood in the midst of his community and drew inspiration from the Prophet Isaiah. Jesus reportedly said, "The Spirit of God is upon me, because I have been anointed to bring good news to the poor. I have been sent to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God's favor."

That is a mission statement, a summary of Jesus' intent to change the world. And, despite the conspicuousness of this passage, it's often overlooked, perhaps because it forces us to acknowledge the world-turning purpose of all of Jesus' work: good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed – in short, new hope for all those we relegate to the margins. It's the key to understanding every healing, every teaching, and every challenge to the status quo. And it's a call to large-scale change.

The problem is that conceptually we prefer a benign God, one like the Martin Luther King of our popular imagination, one who does not expect us to change. We prefer a God who cares for our individual spiritual well-being but does not confront the ways we have arranged our common life to benefit some at the expense of others. We want a gentle shepherd, a caring friend, a personal savior. We'd rather not be exposed to spiritual leaders and prophets who uphold concern for the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed – those whose interests the Divine expects us to prioritize. We'd rather not be exposed to a God who points us, for instance, to the persistent reality of systemic racism in our country today.

Dear people of Lake Street church, good news for the poor can feel like a threat to those who are not poor. But we don't need to be afraid. Yes, the kingdom into which Martin Luther King, Jr. was leading us is founded on the promise of

real liberation for those living in captivity to injustice. Perhaps his leadership was God's doing, realigning our relationships for the sake of our new life together, that we all might live fuller, more joyful lives, consistent with God's dream for humankind. This new life is what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community, a human fellowship in which no one is subject to poverty, or disproportionate incarceration, or serial disadvantages on account of race or any other category of identity. It's life at its best.

Today, we hear the Divine again state our purpose, a purpose that is rooted in our prophetic past, yet which calls us to costly discipleship again in this generation. And so, we walk by faith into the uncertainty of change, all for the sake of the world God envisions for us, the world as it yet can be.

Blessed Be and Amen

* "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," *A Testament of Hope*, 295.