

Heeding a Voice

Peter JB Carman
Binkley Baptist Church, Chapel Hill NC
Sunday January 15, 2012

Scripture: I Samuel 3:1-10

I.

This weekend we remember the life and witness of one individual who has had a profound impact not only on what life is like in day to day America but also: re-shaping how we think about being followers of Christ; what our approach as people of faith is to social change; how people around the world regard issues of race; and what constitute fundamental human rights.

How vividly I remember one night in India in 1968, shortly after we had learned of the death of Dr. King. The world was stunned—people of every race and nation stopped what they were doing. And that night my father and I went to the church of South India congregation where we normally worshiped. A service was taking place inside—but the church was full, and, like many others, most of them Indian, and I daresay many of them not church folk, we could not get in. So we listened to the service through the open windows of the church, and we grieved, and wondered what would become of us, the little folk of every nation, but particular people of color, oppressed people around the world, who had lost a compassionate, clear and articulate voice in the nonviolent struggle for justice.

More than four decades later, we look back. And we remember. He was not a leader in isolation, but rather part of a great movement, a movement for nonviolent social change, a movement with roots in South Africa and India, with a proud history around the world. Dr. King picked up the Gandhian mantle of nonviolent revolutionary change, heeding the voices of those who had gone before him, listening to the distant beat of a different drum. Who would have thought that in this gun-totin' continent, unarmed masses willing to take blows could accomplish so much?

It is critical that we remember this individual, not as some improbable saint nor as an untarnished hero—but rather as a profound, prophetic and of course imperfect voice of conscience. We need to acknowledge a re-interpreter of Christian faith as it is best understood; an ecumenist and interfaith activist far ahead of his time; and a teacher in what were for us new methods in social change. We remember him not as the only leader but nonetheless the key leader in a movement which inalterably changed the course of American history and church history. You can sling as much mud as you like, but that is who Martin Luther King Junior was.

In a 1967 piece entitled *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Dr. King wrote these words summing up his own pilgrimage: “Occasionally in life one develops a conviction so precious and meaningful that he will stand on it til the end. This is what I have found in nonviolence.”

II.

Thousands of years ago, in the days before there were kings in the land of Israel, the young boy Samuel, foster child and apprentice priest in the household of Eli the priest, heard a voice no one else seemed able to hear. The voice called to him as he lay there next to the container holding the tablets of the covenant between this God and the people.

I love this story of a child so young that he thought it was the old man calling to him, and kept having to be sent back to bed. And the voice kept calling to him in the night. Samuel had his ear to the ground. And he heard a voice. And eventually with some encouragement from his aging mentor, he heeded it.

Who knows what that voice was like? Samuel had his ear to the ground of being, the ground of truth, the ground of justice. Was Samuel having dreams where he put two plus two together from what he had already learned of the sacred covenant that was in that ark next to him, and a sense of disjuncture with what he saw around him? Or was he hearing an audible voice? Or was it something in between? It was so long ago, and all we have are a few written words, copied down with care for millennia. But whether one very young person heard an echo of the basic principles of human rightness as he

had already learned them, whispering to his soul in the night, or heard a voice in his ear, doesn't much matter. One way or another Samuel found himself heeding the voice, letting his guardian Eli know that the abuse of the people by a corrupt power group—Eli's own family-- had come to such a pass that they would soon reap the rewards of their behavior: their power was coming to an end.

When it comes to our callings, few of us hear external voices straight from heaven. Mostly for us the voice of God comes through the voices of others. The truth of what is good and right and just and peaceable is communicated to us by very human others—like Samuel to Eli, like Martin King to a nation. But the **heeding**—the recognition that something is right, that we need to pay attention—that has to come from us.

When it comes to seeing the ways in which a nation has gone wrong, or a people has lost its direction, it is much easier to look the other way, to ignore what is right in front of us. And yet there is in each of us the same gift that Samuel had, long long ago: that is the ability to pay attention to what we see, hear the word that is being spoken in our ear or heart or mind—and be moved to become different people, be moved to take decisive action we would have never guessed we had in us.

The Old Testament reading today describes a time not so different from our own: *The word of God was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.* And yet in that time, the light still hadn't gone out—one young person still had hearing acute enough – or a heart and mind open enough—to hear a call in the night. And one old priest still had faithfulness strong enough say *yes* to a word that spelled his own end.

You and I live in times that require that kind of clarity, that kind of courage and that kind of humility. I don't care if you are seven or seventy—we need your openness to a vision of a world made right. It doesn't matter white or black, Latino, Chin, Jarai, Eritrean or Karen, male, female or sorting it out, gay or straight, we need your attentiveness to that voice that is calling you by name in the night, or whenever you cannot escape it.

III.

I spoke last night with my son in Chicago, teaching in a school located on the site of the former Cabrini Green housing project. I asked him what Martin Luther King Jr. day meant to him. He was soft-spoken in his response. “I told a friend today that I like this holiday, Dad. It is a different kind of day off, a chance to go hear someone talk about concerns around racial justice, or economic concerns. I like to have an excuse to do that.”

We all need to do that. We all need a day that reminds us not only to remember and memorialize, but also to pay attention, to look around, to heed the voice that is whispering in our ear, or the concern kicking around in our guts. Go home today, sisters and brothers, and listen. Go out tomorrow morning, walk somewhere, volunteer somewhere, listen to a speaker if you dare, but listen. What is truth calling you to? What is justice calling you to? What is love calling you to?

If the first time you aren't sure what the voice is about, go back and listen again. If the second time you still aren't sure, go back, and listen again. Go back and listen a third time, or a thirtieth time. One of those times you will hear, and understand, and it will be time then to do the even harder thing. Carry that word in your hand. Carry that justice in your head. Carry that love in your chest. And get back to the pilgrimage at hand, the pilgrimage of nonviolence, the pilgrimage to a promised land where poor children get the same education as the rich, where white and black and Latino people all get the same chances, where women get paid the same, and respected the same, as men. It's time to say a word about the rights of gay and lesbian people, human rights, civil rights. It is time to get back to the march, reclaim the Word, resurrect the promise, so many of us let slip away in grief and numbness, these many long years ago.

Let me conclude with one more quotation from Dr. King.

The beauty of nonviolence is that in its own way and in its own time it seeks to break the chain reaction of evil. With a majestic sense of spiritual power, it seeks to elevate truth, beauty and goodness to the throne. Therefore I will continue to follow this method because I think it is the most practically sound and morally excellent way...to achieve freedom.

~From *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* 1967.