

The Rev. Kerith Harding
Sermon for MLK Weekend
January 20, 2019

I realized something this week that I had never noticed before:
nearly EVERY federal holiday gets me riled up for one reason or
another.

Colombus Day: because of our terrible treatment of indigenous peoples.

Veterans Day: for our terrible treatment of veterans.

Thanksgiving Day: because we continue to allow millions to hungry
while there is plenty of food for all.

Independence Day: because it fails to recognize our utter DE-pendence
on God.

(If it were hyphenated In-dependence I'd be much happier).

Labor Day: because so many people in this world continue to work two
jobs to try and support their families and barely have a living wage.

AND, New Years: because some disrespectful kids are always shooting
off fireworks at crazy hours waking up my children and scaring the poop
out of dogs from miles around.

And then... there's Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. A day that takes all
those social ills I just mentioned (perhaps minus the crying babies and
dogs) and rolls them all up into one.

So, if you aren't riled up, and if you can't get motivated on MLK Day,
you are not paying attention.

There are few people whose lives have responded as famously to the
Gospel as did The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Prior to the
institution of the MLK Jr. holiday in 1983, William Sloane Coffin, the
famous Yale Chaplain and Freedom Rider who marched along Martin
Luther King, Jr. and who later served as Minister of Riverside Church in
New York City, wrote this about the subject. He said:

*“Martin Luther King deserves a national holiday because he rescued the American people from the shallows and miseries where they had chosen to live their lives. He deserves a national holiday because more than any other public figure in this century he asserted his individuality in order to affirm community on the widest possible scale; because better than any other public figure, he understood the nature of compassion, that it did not exclude confrontation. It was Martin’s message that it is not enough to suffer with the poor; we must confront the people and systems that cause poverty. It was Martin’s message that you cannot set the captive free if you are not willing to confront those who hold the keys. **Without confrontation compassion becomes merely commiseration, fruitless and sentimental.**”¹ (repeat)*

In this morning’s Gospel, Jesus’ mother confronts him with an issue not nearly as extreme as those King and his contemporaries faced, but an issue none the less. Seeing the wine has run out in the middle of their 7 day wedding feast, Mary approaches Jesus, presumably out of compassion for the hosts predicament. Jesus’ initial response is rather jarring: “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not come.” While it sounds rude to the modern ear, scholars tell us that it was meant simply to distance himself from the issue. Interestingly however, after trying to distance himself from the issue, we see Mary’s confrontation bears fruit as Jesus moves to solve the problem, turning water into wine.

Now, there are all sort of theological questions here we could struggle with: How did Mary know Jesus could do something about this when he had never before performed a miracle? Why did Jesus try and distance himself from the issue from the beginning? Why did Jesus act if he had just said his hour had not come? And, does this mean that God is prodable even when God doesn’t want to do something? Can we confront God into doing what we want? They are all good and important

¹ Coffin, William Sloane. “Credo.” Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, KY. 2004. P.43.

questions. But for now I want to take you back to Coffin's words about King's message to us all.

Without confrontation compassion becomes merely commiseration, fruitless and sentimental.

What would it have looked like if Mary had not confronted Jesus, who somehow she knew had the power to do something about the problem at hand.

Mary: "Oooh, boy... look at that. The wine ran out on the third day of their seven day celebration. Yikes. That's embarrassing. Ooh, I feel bad for the hosts, the bride and the groom."

OR

Mary: "Oh, hey hosts. Gosh, I'm so sorry about your wine running out. Yeah, that's tough. Brutal. I'll pray for you!"

Compassion without confrontation is merely fruitless commiseration.

What Mary and Martin Luther King Jr. knew well is that confrontation, presenting those in power with reality and truth in love, is the most effective way to create change.

Today in this country we are faced with a prime example. 800,000 federal workers are going without pay. Some, can apply for unemployment to help them get by. Others are forced to work and wait for payment "someday", such as those providing security in our airports, are not eligible. Our newspapers are filled with stories of folks who are late on their rent or forced to choose between food and medicine.

Thousands more government contractors and others, like restaurateurs and food cart operators have lost income they will never get back and are struggling to make ends meet. I've personally spoken to three folks this week who are suffering from the shutdown: one has savings, and is ok for now, but fears permanent detrimental effects to the Haleakala ecosystem. One is scraping together side jobs as she worries there is no

end in sight to the shutdown. And a third, a mom of three young children who's husband is a government contractor, posted on Facebook: "Day 26 of the federal shutdown is not a good day for my dryer to stop working." What she didn't post is that her husband, who has been in remission from pancreatic cancer, learned last week that it has spread to other parts of his body. Talk about adding insult to injury.

In times like this, as Christians we cannot stay silent.

When one member of the body suffers, we all suffer.

And if Jesus thought a wedding banquet was important enough to save, then surely the empty tables of thousands of workers, many of whom survive paycheck to paycheck to provide important services to our country are just as important.

To do nothing;

to simply say, "Gosh, how terrible. I'm sorry you are suffering. I'm sorry your table is empty" is exactly the kind of fruitless commiseration King marched to reject.

You are likely all familiar with Kings words of warning to the Church on this topic, but his words on differing roles of church and government in our society bear repeating. They come from his sermon titled "A knock at midnight."

"The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause men everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will.

But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace. [Men far and

near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travelers at midnight].”²

The Church has a duty to act. And you, my friends, are the church. Like Mary, like our Lord, like Martin Luther King, Jr., and so many saints who went before him, we cannot let compassion be our end goal; it must be our motivation to create change. As Dr. King once said, “True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”³

I am reminded of a friend who was laboring at work under a terrible, manipulative manager in an organization that truly believed itself to be more pious, more compassionate, more loving than most. My friend tried on a number of occasions to talk directly to the misogynistic manager, and to his boss, but none of them did anything about his inappropriate behavior. When she called some more experienced colleagues for support, they offered compassion, they validated her position, but the one thing they didn’t do was the one thing that could have made a difference: they didn’t call the boss to tell him he needed to make a change, that this sort of behavior is not something he should tolerate in his company, and that it was not right for him to expect his employees to endure it.

Compassion without confrontation becomes fruitless commiseration.

² <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/knock-midnight>

³ <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>

So, next time you find yourself commiserating with someone who is suffering and about to return to your own normal life, turn around and ask what you can do.

Offer to do whatever you can.

And if it requires you giving of your time, gifts, or financial resources...

If it requires you to speak truth to power...

know that if it didn't cause you a bit of real sacrifice to do it, you may not have offered enough.

Rarely, have those who consider themselves followers of Christ followed him down a road that was easy. Martin Luther King, Jr. followed him down a road of peaceful confrontation that, like Jesus' own road, would lead to his death.

You might find yourself feeling like Jesus in today's gospel – not ready, unprepared, thinking it best to wait; hold off a bit; see what happens. If that's you, listen for the voice of Mary, who encourages and prods. It IS time. Your time HAS come. Do the hard thing. Amen.