**The Gift of Moral Courage**

A homily for The Second Sunday after Epiphany

Martin Luther King Weekend, January 15, 2023

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In his book, “Stride Towards Freedom,” Martin Luther King Jr. recounts a defining moment from his life. It took place on January 27, 1956. The Montgomery bus boycotts, which Dr. King and others assumed would last just a few days, had stretched into months. Things were tense. The white leadership of Montgomery both feared the economic consequences of a longer boycott, and remained unwilling to end their policies of segregation on the buses that required black people to give up their seats to white people.

Late on that January evening, Dr. King’s phone rang, and it was a threat that if he didn’t leave Montgomery alone, he would be killed. This wasn’t the first threat, but for some reason, it struck him more deeply than any other. He writes in his book of what happened next:

*I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.  
  
The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."  
  
At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."*

And of course, Dr. King did just that with the rest of his life. He lived another twelve years, each one dedicated to the struggle for racial equity and justice in our country. As a country, we rightly unite to celebrate his legacy this weekend each year. We do this to both to honor the sacrifices made by an extraordinary leader, and also to commit ourselves to his vision of a country united across racial lines. His was a vision of hope, a positive vision for healing, for a reconciled future notwithstanding a fractured present and the long shadows of a grievous past. His hopeful and positive vision was not naïve. It was rooted in two truths that seem to be oppositional but that, when viewed through the eyes of faith, can in fact coexist.

The first truth he spoke of was an ugly truth – not just because it reflected badly on our nation, but because it was an honest assessment of reality. It was a truth about the perniciousness of segregation, disenfranchisement, and discrimination. It was a truth about prevalence of lynching, both literal and figurative. It was a truth about the interconnectedness of war and racism and economic discrimination. It was a truth about stubbornness in the hearts of many good people to recognize the suffering of others and do something about it. It was a truth about the pain that racism was causing both to black folks and to white folks.

He was not shy about speaking these truths. But they were not the whole truth. Because for Dr. King, the whole truth included the belief that we can and would and must be better than this. The second truth he held was that God’s promise for liberation, freedom, and equity among all people was happening. Not that it might happen at some point, but that it was already happening. That the process of its coming into being was already underway. That’s what he meant when said that famous line, “I have been to the mountaintop, and I have seen the promised land.” Because the promised land wasn’t a place. It wasn’t a particular advocacy goal. It wasn’t getting this rule changed or that policy reversed. Those things mattered, but that course would be a nearly endless journey. One bus boycott in Alabama would lead to the next lunch counter sit-in. One racist law falling would simply make it possible to move on to the next one. The promised land was not a perfected society. The promised land was a people who had found for themselves what Dr. King found in prayer that night at the kitchen table. Not just vision, but courage. Moral courage. To stand up for what we know is true and right and good, even when we’re scared. Even when we don’t fully understand. Even when we’re not sure what the consequences will be.

It’s no surprise to me, that the person who articulated this truth was a Christian preacher. Because moral courage isn’t just a secular value. Moral courage is a Christian virtue. It’s a fundamental aspect of our discipleship – by which I mean it is both a duty and a gift from God.

Moral courage is a duty because it is part of our obedience to an authority higher than ourselves. We are all flawed people. None us alone has the spiritual authority or vision to see the fullness of God’s truth, of God’s hope for us. But together, in community that spans both space and time, we can discern something of the universal vision God is offering us. And again and again and again, whatever the language, whatever the culture, whatever the time and place, that vision has something to do with Love. With self-giving for the sake of another. With dignity and respect. The universality of Love as God’s ordering principle of reality, compels our obedience – even when standing up for Love might get us pushed down. Moral courage, gives our lives a sense of meaning and worth. It lifts our eyes, and focuses us around a project for our lives that is far more valuable than the ones to which we are so often chained.

But moral courage is not just a duty we owe to God; it is also a gift from God. By that, I mean, that God gives us the strength we need to be morally courageous…if we ask. You know, when I was reading about Dr. King’s writings this week, one commentator noted that he didn’t often write about the content of his prayers. But he did share what he said to God at that kitchen table at midnight. He told God the truth – that he was on empty and needed help. The intensity was getting too much. His fear and disgust was overwhelming his convictions. He didn’t know how to keep going in such a crazy world. And in response, his Precious Lord, took his hand. God gave him what he needed to keep going. God gave him enough hope, enough strength, enough commitment not to sneak out the side door of life. What a gift…and thank God for it.

Moral courage, like that sought by and given to Dr. King, may well be a hallmark of our discipleship as Christians. But it doesn’t always start that way. Both this Sunday and next, we hear in the Gospel stories of how Jesus’ first followers were called. They’re a little different in detail, but in both cases, the main idea is the same. Humble people, ordinary folk, are curious about something new. They may be confused. They may not know why. But something about Jesus was compelling to them, pulled on the strings of the heart with enough strength to motivate change. John’s disciples leave him behind and follow Jesus. Fisherfolk abandon their nets to draw near to the wandering rabbi. Old ways are left behind. New adventures await. This is the beginning of a movement.

At this early moment, these new friends of Jesus are still immature in their discipleship. The energy and hopefulness and curiosity is present. But they lack moral courage. They have not been tested and tried. They have not had to face the fear of loss for their quest. They have not yet given of themselves for something larger, truer, more universal, than the stories they tell themselves of their own lives.

But they will. And Jesus knows it, the same way Dr. King knew it about his movement. That they would find the moral courage they needed to meet the moment. Again, and again, and again. If they pray. If they ask God for the gift of courage, of assurance, of commitment.

And so too for us. As we seek to mature in our own discipleship, to grow in moral courage so that we can meet the moments of our lives, we must ask God for help. We must admit when we don’t understand; when it all seems too much; when we’re at the end of our rope and are about to give up. Whether it’s at the kitchen table, in a pew in this room, or on a long walk through the woods, we must reach out to take God’s hand. To let God lead us on. And help us stand. Because, my friends, summoning our moral courage to hold the ugly truths of this world alongside the beautiful ones, is the way, perhaps the only way, God will lead us home. Amen.