

“Many Gifts” - Stephanie Wing, 1.17.10

As I contemplated this past week the Scriptures we have just heard, my thoughts and prayers were full of images of a nation living in poverty greater than most of us can comprehend, struggling in the aftermath of an earthquake more devastating than our minds can grasp. I thought about challenging times, and how so many of us ask, “What can we do?” or “What do I possibly have to give?”

I found myself thinking about the ministry of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life we celebrate tomorrow. I thought about other names that we remember, or have been taught about, from the Civil Rights movement, and the countless others who worked hard, and sacrificed much, knowing that they might not have much, but what they had, they were called to give for the common good.

Last year I mentioned Dr. King’s final speech, given in Memphis on the evening of April 3rd, 1968, the day before he was killed, and last week I found myself returning to it. Today I’d like to do something just a little bit different. I’d like to share with you large portions of this speech. I don’t have the voice or charisma of Dr. King, so I invite you to do what you need to do to forget about me up here, and hear the words that were prophetic then and are still prophetic now.

“I'm delighted to see each of you here tonight in spite of a storm warning. You reveal that you are determined to go on anyhow. Something is happening in Memphis, something is happening in our world.

As you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of general and panoramic view of the whole human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" ...Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy." Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding — something is happening in our world.

...We've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's

court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity...

...Now we're going to march again, and we've got to march again, in order to put the issue where it is supposed to be. And force everybody to see that there are thirteen hundred of God's children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights wondering how this thing is going to come out. That's the issue. And we've got to say to the nation: we know it's coming out. For when people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory...

...I remember in Birmingham, Alabama, when we were in that majestic struggle there we would move out of the 16th Street Baptist Church day after day; by the hundreds we would move out. And Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth and they did come; but we just went before the dogs singing, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round." Bull Connor next would say, "Turn the fire hoses on." And as I said to you the other night, Bull Connor didn't know history. He knew a kind of physics that somehow didn't relate to the transphysics that we knew about. And that was the fact that there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out. And we went before the fire hoses; we had known water. If we were

Baptist or some other denomination, we had been immersed. If we were Methodist, and some others, we had been sprinkled, but we knew water...

...It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preachers must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do...

...Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness. One day a man came to Jesus; and he wanted to raise some questions about some vital matters in life. At points, he wanted to trick Jesus...But Jesus immediately pulled that question from mid-air, and placed it on a dangerous curve between Jerusalem and Jericho. And he talked about a certain man, who fell among thieves. You remember that a Levite and a priest passed by on the other side. They didn't stop to help him. And finally a man of another race came by. He got down from his beast, ...helped the man in need. Jesus ended up saying, this was the good man, this was the great man, because he had the capacity to project the "I" into the "thou," and to be concerned

about his brother. Now you know, we use our imagination a great deal to try to determine why the priest and the Levite didn't stop. At times we say they were busy going to church meetings—an ecclesiastical gathering—and they had to get on down...so they wouldn't be late for their meeting...And every now and then we begin to wonder whether maybe they were not going down...to organize a "Jericho Road Improvement Association." That's a possibility. Maybe they felt that it was better to deal with the problem from the causal root, rather than to get bogged down with an individual effort.

But I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It's possible that these men were afraid. You see, the Jericho road is a dangerous road. I remember when Mrs. King and I were first in Jerusalem. We rented a car and drove from Jerusalem down to Jericho. And as soon as we got on that road, I said to my wife, "I can see why Jesus used this as a setting for his parable." It's a winding, meandering road. It's really conducive for ambushing. You start out in Jerusalem, which is about ...1200 feet above sea level. And by the time you get down to Jericho, fifteen or twenty minutes later, you're about 2200 feet below sea level. That's a dangerous road. In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the "Bloody Pass." And you know, it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking. And he was acting like

he had been robbed and hurt, in order to seize them over there...And so the first question...asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"...

...Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

There were many gifted leaders of the Civil Rights movement, but among those, Dr. King was one of the most gifted speakers. He indeed had the gift of prophecy. Others had the gift of discernment, or interpretation, or administration. Some were born organizers, and others prepared the meals to feed the workers who would not be finding any friendly lunch counters on their journey. Some raised

funds to help the campaigns, and others taught and raised awareness. But each had gifts, gifts given by the Spirit for the common good.

Today our denomination and our country stand alongside individuals, groups, and nations from across the globe, in support of the Haitian people. The best that most of us can do right now is to give our dollars so that agencies of aid can do the work of rebuilding. But there are other tasks to which we are called, other mission fields in our own backyard. There are many needs in our community, and even in our church.

It can be easy to become overwhelmed by the needs, and to think that we have nothing to offer. But we do. Each of us has been given gifts, manifestations of the Holy Spirit to be used for the common good. Our daily task is to identify our gifts and see how they can be used for the common good, for ministry in this world. Frederick Beuchner, a Presbyterian pastor and author, defines calling as the place where your greatest joy meets the world's greatest need. What is that place?

Isn't it amazing to think that God has given us each something special, something to be used "for such a time as this?" There are many different gifts, many different kinds of service, but all of them are important, and all of them are given by God, and activated through the power of the Holy Spirit. So the question to us today is, how will we use them? As we come to this table of the Lord, let us

be fed and strengthened for our journey. Here, at this table, let us be reminded of the unity that we share in the body of Christ, and with believers in every time and every place. This is a meal of Thanksgiving, and so let us give thanks to God for all of the gifts that we have been given, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.