

**SERMON, JANUARY 17, 2016,
LORRAINE AVENUE MENNONITE CHURCH
WICHITA, KANSAS**

Isaiah 62:1-5

John 2:1-11

“I WILL NOT KEEP SILENT”

PRAYER: Our God, you have slipped into all the places of our lives that we have attempted to guard for ourselves. In spite of our own efforts, you have erased the boundaries between the “sacred” and the “secular,” the lost and the found. We thank you for your gracious persistence and the way you show up when we least expect you. We run away from your call to work harder for justice and equality, yet you are steadfast in your insistence that we cause a mighty disturbance, that each of us is a prophet called to bring the oppressor into your court. And you are faithful to us even as we recognize so clearly in this true epiphany, our own struggles to be ‘good people,’ and how often we stumble, at the same time, in our efforts to reign supreme. For the revealing of yourself to us, and us to ourselves, we give you thanks and praise. Amen.

What ARE we doing? With God’s message through the prophet, Isaiah, “I will not keep silent, ...I will not rest.” What ARE we doing? With God’s extravagant first sign, through Jesus in John’s Gospel, turning standard Wichita water to delicious wine, the finest wine; this radical change that was a step not even Jesus wanted to take, his mother was the force in this great Epiphany story. What ARE we doing with it? Do we listen carefully enough to hear God’s gospel message to make a mighty disturbance? Do we listen carefully enough to hear God saying, “Look beyond the cries for justice and jobs and be illuminated by the light of the truth that causes such desperation.” I WILL NOT KEEP SILENT!! YOU WILL TURN THAT WATER INTO FINE WINE!!

This is the short weekend when we honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I say short because in his brief 39 years on this earth, which ended in April of 1968, we attribute to him such a huge array of oratorical and substantial good works that we should be celebrating him every day of the week. We barely have one discussion of racism or poverty or peace when his name is not invoked. But he wouldn’t like that, it’s not why he was on this planet doing the work he was called by God to do. In fact, considering what a poor job we have done in carrying on his legacy, even this short weekend of honor has, in my opinion, and in my own laziness, the bitter taste of a lie. Those of us, especially but not limited to clergy, who are white and liberal, LOVE to quote the Rev. Dr. King. We love to say that, even though he was a Baptist, he got his doctorate in systematic theology from Boston University. We love to remind each other that he was admitted to Morehouse College when he was just 15 years old. What a mind!! (Especially, for a Negro...) He was even awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 although one year to the day from the occasion of his famous 1967 speech against the Vietnam War, an effort to be a peace-maker, that fine mind of his was torn to pieces by a rifle bullet that killed him on the balcony of a Memphis motel. And do you remember the name of that motel? Lorraine. I suppose I could just end the sermon right here and we could talk about all we’ve heard so far....But, I won’t. There’s a little more I’d like to say: “I WILL NOT KEEP SILENT!!” O, Isaiah, Isaiah!

If I could require everyone, especially white people, to read something from Dr. King, it would be his, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Whenever I read it I discover parts of it that I had conveniently forgotten since I last read the "Letter." And, as a friend of mine shared recently, much of what King wrote could have been written last week to address the current state of unrest as this nation struggles with racism and white privilege. You might remember that King's "Letter" is addressed to "My Dear Fellow Clergymen." It's a response to a letter in a Birmingham newspaper, signed by a handful of white clergy, upset by the so-called disturbances they see as caused in large part by King's presence in Birmingham, as an outsider, and by his non-violent strategy leading to a very violent response from Bull Connor and his police department. King writes:

"You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with the underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative."

This is still a nation and city steeped in segregation, just look around in this sanctuary today. I would guess that there is more white rage now than at any time in our history. Racism is in our DNA as a country. Our Constitution was written by white men who were slave owners. And King knew, as we know today, that those protesting the injustice and inequality are accused of being the creators of the very tensions that they rightly oppose.

King also wrote of his deep disappointment with both white moderates AND the white church and its leadership. He continues:

"I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; ...others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows....So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent – and often even vocal – sanction of things as they are."

Please understand that I am not here today, in this pulpit, to promote consensus or comfort. On this second Sunday of Epiphany, hear these words from the writer, Madeline L'Engle: "This is the irrational season when love blooms bright and wild. Had Mary been filled with reason there'd have been no room for the child." It is not "Sweet Lorraine" that we sing today, but "Let Justice Roll Down Like a Mighty Stream."

A few minutes ago I mentioned the Rev. King's speech against the Vietnam War that he gave at Riverside Church in New York City. That speech was entitled: "Beyond Vietnam" and may have had much more significance for his life and this country than the more famous 1963 "I Have A Dream" speech in Washington, D.C. "Beyond Vietnam" showed that, as Dr. Robert Weems writes, though **"Dr. King was still a 'dreamer,' (he) was simultaneously a fully awake outspoken critic of how the poor were treated in the richest country in the world....(and) gave ammunition to his critics, such as the FBI, who believed that Dr. King was a dangerous Communist sympathizer."** And, the "Beyond Vietnam" speech, given on

April 4, 1967, signaled the final year of the Rev. King's life. It seems that Dr. King's enemies did not like his words echoing from the Riverside Church pulpit, such as:

“It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor – both black and white – through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated, as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war.”

The Rev. Andrew Young, a man who would become a United Church of Christ minister, Mayor of Atlanta, and the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, was first a chief aide to Dr. King. His assessment of the “Beyond Vietnam” speech is summarized this way:

“Martin gave a brilliant rationale for his position on the War in Vietnam. And as a Nobel Peace Prize winner, we expected people to take it seriously and not to agree with it but to disagree with certain specifics. We didn't get that. We got instead, an emotional outburst attacking his right to have an opinion. It was almost, you, “Nigger, you ought to stay in your place.”

What ARE we doing with Isaiah's proclamation, “I will not keep silent,...I will not rest.?” What ARE we doing with that tap water in the sink turned into the finest wine? King was amazed that there would be such an outcry when he preached against war and the financing of such a bloody death machine. It was his commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ that brought him to the Riverside Church pulpit and he said:

“Can it be that they do not know that the good news was meant for all men – for Communist and capitalist, their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative?”

And he paid a high price for his preaching, for his commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. We so often kill our prophets. We might pay our priests, but we assassinate our prophets. And, in the years since King's death in 1968, we have done a good job of emasculating Dr. King, of turning him into our personal mascot for whatever might be our particular cause. Many of us who are white and liberal, and even some us who are clergy, have used the “I Have A Dream” speech, to lull ourselves into a deep but disturbing sleep, from which the supreme effort on behalf of social and economic justice can be accomplished with an anonymous click on a cellphone app. And we have such a difficult time waking up, even to the loud truth of Isaiah or the beautiful sign in John's gospel that things...they are a changin' Wake up! This is the irrational season. And the Rev. King, said: **“In the End, we will not remember the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends.”** Amen.

Parts of this sermon came either directly or by suggestion from:

- 1) Rev. Nancy Eggan on MLK Day, Rev. Nancy Eggan, Co-coordinator of the Kansas-Oklahoma Racial Justice Initiative, 2016.
- 2) A Man of Principles: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., April 1, 1967 – April 4, 1968, Dr. Robert E. Weems, Jr, 2016