

Sermon for Sunday, January 27, 2019

TODAY IS HOLY

Neh. 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 / Lk. 4:14-21

Last Monday, we once again commemorated Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday. It’s been on my mind and heart all week, and when I read today’s texts, one of Dr. King’s many quotes came to me: “Every person lives in two realms: the internal and the external. The internal is that realm of spiritual ends expressed in art, literature, morals, and religion. The external is that complex of devices, techniques, mechanisms, and instrumentalities by means of which we live.” I think the quote resonated with me because I am often torn between these two worlds: I would love to spend all day in the internal realm—hang out at the *St. Louis Art Museum* looking at the stunning Kehinde Wiley exhibit, read, listen to music, and practice contemplative prayer. But there are also things in the external world which I cannot neglect. I have work to do, an ailing mother to tend to, a broken shower head that needs fixing, puppies that can’t seem to get the meaning of “housebroken”—the list goes on. And if all that were not enough, I struggle reconciling what I believe in my heart with the way the world works and presents itself.

This tug-and-pull of my internal and external person is personified in our story from the Hebrew Bible by two towering figures. The internal person is represented by Ezra, the scribe and priest. He is tasked with restoring worship, re-familiarizing the Israelites returning from exile with Scripture, and maintaining the public reading of Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. The external person is represented by Nehemiah who came to Jerusalem after holding a high position at the Persian court. He was a political leader tasked with security issues, such as rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and confronting armed enemies. What brought these two leaders together, what enabled them to compromise their sometimes diametrically opposed interests, was one concern: the concern for a people who had lived without a home and under oppression from a foreign king for a very long time.

And so, working together, Ezra and Nehemiah proclaimed a message of hope. “And they read from the book, from the Book of God’s Teaching, expounding and giving reasons, and they explained what was read. And Nehemiah, who was governor, Ezra the priest and the Levites, said to all the people, ‘Today is holy for you to the LORD your God. Do not mourn and do not weep.’” Somehow, the interests of the internal person—Ezra the priest—and the interests of the external person—Nehemiah, the governor—came together around their common concern for the people of God. And the context in which it was possible for the two to bridge their sometimes conflicting interests was worship.

Centuries later, when Jesus walked on the Sabbath into the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown, as he apparently did on a regular basis, he also faced the struggle between the internal and the external person. It should not surprise us that Jesus attended worship regularly. It might surprise us that he started reading from the Isaiah scroll, since the literacy rate was not very high at the time and workers—he was a carpenter—were usually not educated and were illiterate. But it might

surprise us even more that Jesus, too, experienced the struggle between the internal and the external person.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me,” he reads, “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. ... Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus apparently claimed the ancient prophecy that he was anointed by God’s spirit. But at the same time, as he accepts his calling, he knows that his *internal* person, his relationship with God, must be expressed *externally* in service to the poor, the oppressed, the sick, and the disenfranchised. And Jesus, like Ezra and Nehemiah before him, realizes his dilemma in the synagogue during worship and chooses to focus *not* inward, but *outward* toward God’s people.

I started my sermon today with Dr. King not because it’s the culturally appropriate and politically correct thing to do. Rather, I did so because who he was and what he said and did is in keeping with our faith tradition reaching back millennia. Dr. King’s message was powerful because he was not just another activist in a long line of forgettable activists. We remember him and still talk about him—whether we agree with him or not—because he, too, was able to bridge the internal and the external person. He advocated for the poor, the disenfranchised and the outcast, not only for African-Americans but for all God’s people. But he did it not as a political figure. He did it as a pastor. And more often than not, he did it in the context of worship.

Ezra’s, Nehemiah’s, Jesus’, Dr. King’s message—their messages—were all powerful because they had a spiritual foundation. And because of that foundation, they were able to address both the spiritual and the physical needs of the people they served. All of them were clear about the source of their strength: worship, worship, worship. And they were united in their focus and clarity of their calling: they were not to serve themselves—their mission was to serve God’s people, which means *all* people.

What Ezra, Nehemiah, Jesus and Dr. King teach us is that our worship is impoverished if it does not have concrete consequences in the world. It also teaches us that our work in the world is impoverished if it isn’t grounded in worship. This is the compromise to which God has called God’s people from time immemorial. If we can live this compromise as God’s people in this place we call Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church, what a powerful witness we can provide to this divisive world and the troubled times we live in.

So, together with Ezra and Nehemiah we remember that today is holy for us to the Lord our God. As our middle hymn proclaimed, at God’s word, at Jesus’ word, we are gathered as God’s people in this place so that our hearts and souls will be stirred to seek and be in awe of God, and to express our love and devotion to God. And as we leave this place, our final hymn sends us into the world reminding us that God calls us to join together in service to others as we live into the hope of captives freed, with insight and with clarity, proclaiming liberty to all, the right to speak, the right to be, proclaiming our full release, to faith, and hope, and joy, and peace.

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