

The Bias of History

Shared at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ on the Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

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I want to share with you an important image for ministry. Imagine all of creation is tied to a rope and God stands in the future pulling all of creation to God's self. The closer creation gets to its Creator, the more reconciled and healed the creation becomes. This is an image that assumes some things about history and what it means to be in the right relationship with history. It is a guiding image for me and I got very excited when I first read our Covenant, because Shadow Rock UCC is the only congregation I know that has in its founding identity statement, the challenge to be in a right relationship with history. Let us try to understand this better together.

Imagine Martin Luther King sitting in a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama. He has some extra time to think at this time and place. The Civil Rights movement is in full force and there is no turning back. He not only meets resistant to the movement from the obvious adversaries but also from his black brothers and sisters. Some think it is pushing society too far too fast. Some say it is not radical or forceful enough.

He also is challenged by well intentioned white folk. He writes, *"I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. He writes: 'All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost 2000 years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth.'"*

King goes on to respond, *"Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively."*

We look back now and we can say with confidence that working for equality in our society for people of color is standing in the right relationship with history. Before us now are many opportunities to be in right relationship with history again, if we have the courage.

It is this conception of time, time as neutral or biased, that I want to invite us to think about this morning. Our conception of time and our relationship to history is essential to our spirituality. Our relationship to history is key to our orientation toward life and the meaning we give our individual lives and our life together.

To help us think about this I want to offer a little bit of a challenge to Martin Luther King's statement that time is neutral. I appreciate his timeless challenge to us to take responsibility for the creation of a more just and peaceful society. I hope we all agree that we cannot sit around and either wait for a more just society to just appear or sit around in our individual piety and wait for the soul train to come and take us out of this hell hole into the heaven by and by. These are not responsible options.

Let me confess before going further that I am uncomfortable challenging the ideas and mind of Martin Luther King. I am not coming from a place of arrogance or self importance. I use his statement in the letter that time is neutral as an attempt to make a hopeful point. To make the point I shall be blunt, time is not neutral. There is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Time has a bias and that bias is for us and not against us.

To help us think about this I want to substitute the word "time" with the word, "history", but I also need to clarify what I mean by "history", and you can help me. Remember the song, "What a Wonderful World This Would Be?" Sing it with me.

Don't know much about history
Don't know much biology
Don't know much about a science book
Don't know much about the French I took

But I do know that I love you
And I know that if you love me too
What a wonderful world this would be

When we hear the word history our minds may go straight to the idea of history as a school subject matter. This is not what I mean in the use of the term "history" today. (See Side Note!) When I use the word "history" today I am talking about the big picture of the unfolding of days, years, eras, and eons. I am talking about the epic big picture of time. I am using the word "history as that which is not confined by the human recording of events. I am using the word as it is used in our own Covenant; *"We covenant one with another to be that sensitive and responsive part of human society which perceives and responds to God's newest thrust in the midst of history."* I am using the word history in an expansive way that is almost poetic. I am not limiting myself to history as a school subject matter.

So, let me restate: History is not neutral. There is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. History has a bias and that bias is for us and not against us. This is the hopeful message of today's Word About Life and its ancient wisdom.

The scripture for today says,

You have heard it said that you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.

At this point we should ask why should we do such a crazy thing? The answer is...

That you may be children of God, chips off the old God Block; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do so? And if you meet only others like you with kindness and respect what is the big deal about that? That is a given for us in the human family.

Let us take our cues from God and be more. Let us be whole, genuine, complete just as God is whole, genuine, and complete."

I think Jesus does something very cool here. He knows the religious rules about love of neighbor but he is not confined by the rules. Jesus looks around and takes an inventory of life. In his honest observations he notes that good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. This is a common dilemma for us as we try to understand life and it can produce a common crisis of faith as we try to figure out the justice and compassion of God. How can an all knowing, all powerful, and all loving God let suffering happen, especially to innocent people, i.e. children. Jesus comes to a conclusion and a decision.

Jesus concludes that the rain and the sun falls and shines on the good people and bad people impartially. Jesus does not rant and rage against the way life is. Life is what it is. The decision for Jesus is the same decision all of us have to make, that is, what judgment do we make about life given the way it is? Is it good or bad? Is it right or wrong?

In this small passage of scripture from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is saying something profound about the love of God and what it means to be in right relationship with nature and history. The love of God is like the rain and the sunshine. Jesus is so bold as to decide and proclaim that the love of God is so all-encompassing and impartial that no person or group is exempt from it and no person or group can claim it for themselves. The love of God is like the rain and the sunshine. This is no sentimental warm fuzzy metaphor. It is a profound claim about the reality of life. The love of God is like nature itself. The love of God is the foundation and power by which nature exists and presents itself to us. The encouragement to love our enemies is an encouragement to be like the rain and the sunshine that falls on all people. To love our enemies is to love as God loves and to do so is to participate in the natural unfolding of history to an inevitable conclusion.

I have a pastoral concern about this idea of the impartial and all encompassing love of God. I want to lay it before us. To this point I have been talking big picture and borderline esoteric.

The idea that the love of God is like the rain and the sunshine that falls on every person and every group works on days when things are going well. Rhetoric and sound bites about the inclusiveness of God's love is one thing but what does it mean when life is unfair and the stuff of life hits the proverbial fan? What do we do with an all encompassing and impartial love when a jerk lives a long life and a saint's life is cut short? What do we do with such an outrageous claim of inclusive love when terrorist fly planes into buildings and nations go to war and hurricanes hit an already devastated people? Our own sense of fairness demands that a cosmic scale be tipped in our favor, but Jesus says there is no scale. All of it, all of life in its expressions of being and non-being is a gift of deep and ever abiding love. Some poets and mystics write about this reality and all of us are invited to make a choice. Is life a friend or an enemy and will we abide with life and love on its terms or struggle our whole lives to change the terms? All of us will have seasons in our lives when it is best for us to be like an otter in a fast flowing stream. Lay on your back in the fast flowing stream of life and let love hold you up as the stream flows to its destination; the love ocean of its origin.

I began by sharing with you an image which is very important to me and has given me hope and has motivated me to work harder for peace and justice. I got this image from reading Jurgen Moltmann and his Theology of Hope. The image is that all of creation is tied to a rope and God stands in the future pulling all of creation to God's self. The closer creation gets to its Creator, the more reconciled and healed the creation becomes. This image assumes that history is on our side and it is important, needful, joyful and honorable to discern what it means to be on the right side of history as God makes God's newest thrust in the midst of history.

Love is woven into the very structure of reality because God is the ultimate reality and God is love. History is not neutral. The very flow of time is a love that will inevitably cure all ills but love would never have us stand around and wait. Love would never ask an oppressed people to wait for justice. Love would never ask suffering people to wait for comfort. Love would never ask warring empires to postpone making peace. History is biased with the love of God and that bias is for us and not against us and as human beings we are love's greatest expression to each other and to the world. The healing of Creation is happening all around us and we have much to do to catch up.

These are the times!

We are the people!