

“Called To Leadership”

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

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In the midst of mourning and fear following a violent, despicable act, we will pause for a moment tomorrow and celebrate the birth of one who sought to inculcate in this society a commitment to justice, peace, and love. It seems almost ironic that we will celebrate the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr., so close to the horrible events of Tucson. As I prepared this sermon, I went back and read King’s famous “I have a dream” speech and realized then that this person we celebrate is not Mr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Senator from Alabama or Mr. Martin Luther King, Jr., political leader of the Selma Republican or Democratic Party. We celebrate the birth and life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and if you read his speeches you will find there sermons which quote Biblical passages and religious hymns. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was first and foremost a minister, a pastor who headed neither an academic institution nor a religious denomination. He didn’t fill the pulpit of a high steeple or mega church. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was the head of the Southern CHRISTIAN Leadership Conference and every speech he gave reminded the listeners that his roots and his hopes were all founded in his faith.

But the Rev. Dr. King was a controversial figure in the black community as well as the general community because his dreams and his goals were faith based. His most famous speech calls upon not only the white community, not only the powerful and the well position to change and live their lives with justice, peace, and love as their basis but also he calls upon the oppressed and the downtrodden to seek freedom and opportunity not with violence and not to dream of attaining those things and then seek vengeance. But here listen to King’s own words.

“But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.”<sup>1</sup>

King called upon those who followed him to maintain the dream, continue the struggle but to know that part of the ends was embedded in the means. And that it was that which each carried within them which would enable them to gain such ends. For King, the soul force was what was required to confront and overcome the violence and degradation of racism, the oppression of poverty, the horror of war. King led a movement which many criticized for its tactics of non-violent protest. AND that criticism came from some who believed in the goals but didn’t understand the means employed. And the movement was not one of great wealth or traditional political power. It was a movement which came out of the fellowship halls and sanctuaries of churches, especially churches people by African Americans. It was a movement led on the whole not by academics or executives but by bus drivers,

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<sup>1</sup> King, Jr., Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, “I have a dream” August 28, 1963; Transcription by Michael E. Eidenmuller on American Rhetoric. Com. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/Martin%20Luther%20King%20-%20I%20Have%20A%20Dream.pdf>

seamstresses, garbage collectors, and school teachers. It was a movement whose genius was that maybe, just maybe it knew and sought to embody the opening lines of Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. It was a movement which said we have the tools; we have the strength but its tools and strength which begin and end in faith in God's presence and God's call.

As we think about Dr. King, I also want us to look at Paul's opening remarks to the churches, the communities of Corinth but before we go further a word about the setting. Corinth was a port city, in fact it was situated between two ports and known as a place where there were entertainment activities to be found for those with money and few morals. One might put it this way. Corinth was more like State Street on Halloween than Covenant Presbyterian Church on Christmas Eve! It was not a place of simple folk or idyllic lifestyles but rather a cosmopolitan hub filled with commerce and energy.

Today, we read that opening to the letter and I hope heard Paul admonish the Corinthians that the letter is to those "sanctified in Christ Jesus". While in the Presbyterian tradition, we don't talk much about sanctification but here Paul is seeking to remind the hearers, the readers that their faith sets them apart, sanctifies them, makes them different from those around them. The full letter will set forth how Paul feels the people need be different as they live out their faith and what it might mean for the community at large.

Paul also reminds the people that they have been given all the gifts they need to do their work, to live out their faith. Remember this is Corinth and living out one's faith required a certain amount of strength of faith and character. Paul is reminding the people they need not wait for some special in breaking or the bestowing of a special ability. The people, because of their faith in God's presence with them, have all the abilities they might need.

And he closes the passage with an assurance that God remains with the people throughout their lives for God is faithful to them. The people are not called to stand in place and simply believe and accept the world as it is but rather they are to continue on their journey and seek to change Corinth if by nothing else than their presence. But as the letter will remind them later they are called to impact the world by this living out of their faith.

Now we don't live in Corinth nor do we live in the first Century of the Common Era so what might we take from this pericope. First, from Paul and Dr. King, we might think about what does it mean to acknowledge that we have all the tools, all the gifts we need to fulfill God's call to us. I don't think this is a call to ignore continuing education or study. One of the gifts of God is our intellect which we should continue to feed and to challenge. It does remind us though that we cannot sit around and bemoan the failure of others nor to decry the situation of the world as though we have no means of addressing it.

One of the truths we need confront with faith is that the world's institutions are human constructs; they are designed, implemented, and controlled by human beings. Now some of those humans may be people of faith and seek to have those institutions reflect their faith and that can be good and bad. BUT if there is one lesson we need remember from King and from Paul it is that God doesn't build institutions. People do. Listen to Paul and his letters. In every one of them, he acknowledges that the institutional church seeks to respond to God's call but sometimes fails because it is a human institution and not a divine one.

Second, it is people who are called to do God's work and to respond to God's presence in the world and through our institutions. God doesn't do the work. God calls us to do it and participates with us as we do it. Paul again talks about how God remains with the people until the end of time, what he calls the coming again of Jesus. Whether we believe in an apocalyptic end time or not, we ought believe in God's continuing presence with us and that that presence enables us to do great things. Now here we need reflect upon Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement of which he speaks. That movement may have been led by some who may have degrees and training in various areas and some had PHD after their names. BUT almost none were trained in how institutions respond to political pressure. There may have been a few sociologists and political science types among them but overall they were common folk doing an uncommon thing. They set out to build a society where children spent time together without regard to skin color, a society where people were to be judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin, and a society which believed in peace.

Today we ordain and install new officers for this congregation. If you look closely at them they are pretty regular, ordinary members of this congregation and I mean that in the best possible way. Their specialness comes from their willingness to serve and to be open to the challenges of leading this congregation at this time. But let me be clear, their gifts are ones which are available to all of us and all of us are called by God to utilize them. As we move ahead, we move ahead as a congregation and need not wait for a minister or ministers to be called to this pulpit. In this denomination, our faith is not in ministers but in God's continuing presence, call and our bringing to the congregation all that is needed to build a community of faith, a worshiping community. A minister is called to serve a worshiping community and to enable it to lead but a minister is not called to be the leader of the community. His or her role is to be a teaching elder and pastor that the community might better understand and live out its faith. We are pretty ordinary folk simply interested enough in theology and confessing that God has called us to do the work of teaching and pastoring to do the academic and faith work of seminary and move through the denominational hoops to be ordained. However, our presence is not necessary for a worshiping community to prosper, to respond to God's call, and grow. In fact, I believe that sometimes we simply get in the way and block people from growing in faith. This community of believers, you all, can and must continue your journey as a worshiping community – doing mission, teaching and learning from each other, and living out your faith. A called minister will be as much shaped by you as you will be shaped by her or him.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth and reminded them that they need not look for nor wait for anyone to enable them to hear the call of God. God's call, God's presence was available to all without regard. Covenant Presbyterian need not wait but like Dr. King's acknowledgement and dream we are capable of changing the world and need look nowhere else for the talents or gifts necessary to accomplish such. We need be aware that our journey cannot be done to seek a victory which we seek to gain for self but rather our journey is one which seeks justice, peace and love for and by all. AMEN.