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 Second Sunday after Epiphany  
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**Being Christian: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

“That isn’t very Christian of you.”  
 In childhood I heard this all the time from my parents and grandparents  
 When my siblings and I were being mean to each other  
 Or otherwise misbehaving.  
 In lots of ways, in my childhood,  
 I heard “being Christian” used as a shorthand for being nice,  
 Or taking up very little space.  
 In my parents’ defence,  
 they were just trying to avoid an ER visit, or some serious house damage  
 (Which now, I can really understand)  
 But this phrase stuck with me.  
 As I grew older,  
 The idea of “Being Christian”  
 Continued to translate into something murky like  
 Being nice to people who love you.  
 Not starting fights.  
 Keeping the peace.  
 How many of us still carry around that idea,  
 that what it means to be a person of faith  
 or a follower of Jesus  
 Is to be nice to everyone and not make a fuss.

Tomorrow, our country celebrates the life, ministry, activism, and martyrdom of mlk jr.  
 It’s a day when I find myself thinking about what “being Christian” means.  
 For me, the most inspirational  
 And condemning quality about MLK jr’s life and legacy  
 Is his clarity of vision.  
 Yes, a vision of justice and restoration  
 For black and african-american people in this country,  
 But also justice for laborers  
 And human rights for those crushed by the values of militarism  
 And the threat of nuclear weapons.  
 He didn’t shrink from drawing clear lines between right and wrong,  
 Between justice and injustice  
 Between love and hatred or apathy.  
 Dr. King accepted the reality that standing FOR justice  
 Would mean that institutions and individuals  
 Would stand AGAINST him, or in opposition to him.  
 He made enemies.

not because he set out to make enemies,  
 but because this was an inevitable consequence  
 Of loving publicly  
 In a world that is beautiful and beloved,  
 But weighed down, burdened by human evil, human failure.  
 Looking at King's remarkable life,  
 My childhood definition of Christian  
 Totally fails.

The Episcopal Church actually honors King on April 4th - the anniversary of his death.

The gospel reading for that day is from Luke 6:  
 Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,  
 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.  
 When we as a church think about what it means to be Christian,  
 When we try and boil it down,  
 These lines often come up.  
 With the focus on loving our enemies.  
 And that's a reasonable thing.  
 Loving our enemies is an impossible cornerstone of following Jesus.  
 But as we honor MLK Jr. Today and tomorrow  
 As we continue to navigate a country  
 Where racism, injustice, and fear of the other  
 keep rearing their ugly heads,  
 Perhaps we should meditate first on *having* enemies in the first place.  
 Maybe we need to sit with the possibility  
 of being hated, cursed, or abused  
 in the name of love.  
 Because the gospel also tells us:  
 "woe to you when they speak well of you,  
 For that is what your ancestors did to the false prophets."  
 And in that i hear  
 Woe to you  
 who avoid conflict and truth telling at all costs.  
 Woe to you  
 who translate Christian as being likable.

Jesus speaks plainly  
 That being his follower means we'll have enemies  
 And in many parts of our culture  
 Having enemies is a taboo thing.  
 It doesn't sound very christian, after all!  
 Having enemies seems at odds with love  
 If you associate love with niceness, politeness,  
 getting along with everyone.  
 I don't know about you,

But I don't associate any of those qualities with Jesus.  
 But powerful love that tells the truth  
 and liberates and heals and welcomes those who have been cast aside  
 That's what I associate with the love of God.

In the Letter from a Birmingham Jail,  
 King famously criticises  
 The white moderate,  
 "who is more devoted to "order" than to justice;  
 who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension  
 to a positive peace which is the presence of justice."  
 The uncomfortable reality is  
 We will face opposition  
 And sometimes make enemies  
 When we follow our conscience and our calling.  
 When we live honestly in truth and love.  
 Because radical love is provocative  
 Love, not niceness  
 Love, not a cheap unity.

King calls out people in the church  
 Specifically white christians  
 For being more cautious than courageous,  
 And for remaining silent behind,  
 "The security of stained glass windows."  
 Avoiding tension, discomfort, and making enemies  
 Should never be the goal of a person of faith.

Of course, we still have the LOVE part  
 Of loving our enemy  
 to contend with  
 Sometimes I'm preoccupied with HOW I am supposed to love my enemies  
 But more often, I've also asked WHY this is so important.  
 In low moments,  
 I think of the WHY as a kind of challenge issued by Jesus,  
 A way to prove our loyalty,  
 to distinguish ourselves as Christians.  
 Not as a practice  
 That will actually bring about change in the world.

In the past few years,  
 The work of the social scientist Brene Brown  
 Has become well known,  
 and has shaped our understanding  
 about belonging and wholeness in groups.

A few years ago, I heard an episode of her podcast on these topics  
 That gave me a different framework  
 For this challenge.  
 Brene argues that real unity -  
 What I imagine this positive peace that is the presence of justice -  
 Requires accountability  
 For people on the individual level  
 and as a culture.  
 In Brene's research,  
 She learned that shame undermines accountability  
 And destroys our ability to empathize.  
 Brene's research demonstrates  
 that when we choose to respond to hatred or opposition  
 With shame or by dehumanizing  
 Instead of with dignity or love  
 We actually set the stage for more violence  
 When we use shame as a tool for justice  
 We only dig ourselves in deeper.  
 So the commandment to love our enemies  
 Might not just be the most spiritual thing to do,  
 It might actually be the most effective, practical tool we have.  
 Dr. King's commitment to nonviolent resistance -  
 Along with many other activists and leaders that he worked with -  
 Embodied this in a way:  
 Insisting on justice, insisting on change,  
 While also refusing to use the same tools of violence or oppression for their own ends.

Tomorrow we'll inaugurate a new president -  
 An administration that  
 Inherits a deeply divided country and an increasingly fractured world.  
 I don't know about you,  
 but I have heard apathy, fear, even disgust  
 At the state of things  
 From people of all walks of life, many faiths, many different politics.  
 We desperately need both spiritual AND practical tools in this moment.  
 Naming, recognizing, and then loving our enemies  
 Is no doubt the harder and longer road.  
 But it is a road that honors the presence of Christ in each of us  
 Even as we reach for the moral and spiritual clarity that is King's legacy.

The sign we heard  
 In the gospel reading today  
 Is an unusual one.  
 The story of Jesus changing water into wine at Cana  
 Has been labeled as a miracle,

but the word used throughout the text is “sign.”  
 I’m coming to believe that  
 We need to be liberated from the word miracle.  
 Miracle - much like saint - suggests something impossible to reach.  
 Something only God can do, something beyond our power or control.  
 Jesus’ signs, reveal his identity, reveal the kingdom of God’s arrival.  
 We all might not be able to perform miracles,  
 But we can follow in Jesus’ footsteps  
 In performing our own signs.  
 Signs that point back towards God, towards God’s love for us,  
 Toward the real peace and unity in the kingdom of God.  
 Martin Luther King Jr.’s life stands as one such sign,  
 Pointing in the right direction as each of us  
 Walks our own walk with God,  
 Our own call to love our enemies  
 and make peace with discomfort in the name of truth.

At the forum today, we’ll reflect on Dr. King’s life and words -  
 Not a perfect life,  
 But a life directed by faith and filled with courage and grace.  
 I encourage all of us to ask ourselves:  
 Whom do I stand **with**? What do I stand **for**?  
 And on the flip side,  
 What do I stand **against**?  
 Because of this what values, philosophies, institutions, and even individuals  
 Might place themselves in opposition to me?  
 How am I going to demonstrate love in the face of it?

As we reflect on these questions specifically as a church  
 I think we would do well to keep these words of his in mind:  
 “I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward.  
 I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings.  
 Over and over I have found myself asking:  
 "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?"

May the God we worship  
 Be the God we meet in the word,  
 in our deepest relationships,  
 And here at the table:  
 Be the God of power, of liberation,  
 of truth telling, and of clarity.  
 Amen.