

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

April 8, 2018 – Second Sunday of Easter

Easter Stories: Celebrating Dr. King

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. – Luke 6:27-36

During this season of Easter, the set of Scripture readings assigned by the lectionary focuses on the book of The Acts of the Apostles, which tells the stories of how the first disciples continued his ministry of healing and teaching. It is, I think, a way of pointing out that the best evidence of the resurrection is in the stories of those who lived it out in Jesus' successors. So, this morning, I would like to tell you a similar story of how Jesus continues to live on in his followers.



It was late in the afternoon on Thursday, the first day of December 1955 when a seamstress named Rosa Parks (slide) boarded a bus in Montgomery Alabama. She paid her fare, went back out the front door, and got back on to the bus by the back door. You see, Rosa Parks was African American. In Montgomery and much of the Southern U.S., whether your skin was light or dark was considered more important than pretty much anything else about you. Segregation was legally enforced, and one of the things that it determined was where

you could sit on the bus – (slide) negroes at the back, Caucasians at the front – and which door you had to use. The black seating section at the back of the bus was crowded that day, so Ms. Parks sat in the “swing section,” which could be used by blacks so long as no white people wanted to sit there. She was tired, and it had been a long day. So, when a white person boarded the bus and demanded that the four blacks sitting in that section stand up so that he could sit down, she decided that she was going to stay sitting. The white passenger complained to the bus driver, who stopped the bus, tried to get Rosa Parks to move, and then called the police.



(slide) She was arrested for infringing the segregation laws. She was taken to the police station, fingerprinted and booked. But Rosa Parks was the wrong person to arrest. Honest, smart, with a reputation for moral integrity, she was a former secretary of the local National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. She was well-known and highly respected in the black community, and when word got around that she had been arrested, things started to happen.



The bus system had been a major source of complaint among blacks for years. Even though 70% of the riders were black, there were no black drivers, not even one, and black passengers were often the butt of cruel remarks and pranks played by the drivers. Even if the white section was empty and the black section was full, black riders couldn't sit in the front of the bus. Black leaders had been looking for an opportunity to test the segregation laws in the courts on Constitutional grounds. Now they had their case. But that would be a slow and costly process and so it was decided that in the meantime there would also be a boycott of the bus system.



(slide) The boycott was to begin on Monday, Dec. 5. Leaflets were printed up urging blacks to stay off the buses. Every black pastor in the city was asked to announce the boycott from the pulpit on Sunday morning. Black taxi companies were enlisted to carry passengers for ten cents each, the normal cost of the bus ride. The word began to



spread. Organizers hoped for a sixty percent co-operation with the boycott, but when the first buses began to roll there were no blacks riding. (slide) The support for the boycott was very close to 100% The excitement started to build. That Monday afternoon, a meeting of prominent black church and civic leaders formed the Montgomery Improvement Association to organize the boycott. An obscure black preacher was elected as its president. His name was Martin Luther King Jr. (slide)

There are several suggestions as to why King was elected. Partly it was because he was interested and had helped organize the boycott. Partly it was that he was only twenty-six years old and the older leaders weren't willing to take the blame if the boycott failed. Partly it was that he had only been in town one year and didn't belong to any of the factions in the black community in Montgomery. So he was a politically



neutral choice. He was clearly a brilliant man, with a Ph. D. from Boston University. Whatever the reasons, it soon became apparent that he was an inspired choice.



Immediately after being elected, King addressed the first mass meeting of the boycotters. (slide) He had only fifteen minutes to prepare his speech, but in sixteen minutes of dazzling oratory, he united that diverse group of angry, frustrated blacks into a single unit that would hold together for nearly a year. He said many things, but among them were these words.

But there comes a time when people get tired. We are here this evening to say to those who have mistreated us for so long that we are tired - tired of being segregated and humiliated; tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression. We have no alternative but to protest. For many years we have shown amazing patience. We have sometimes given our white brothers the impression that we liked the way we were being treated. But we come here tonight to be saved, to be saved from patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice. In our protest there will be no cross burnings. No white person will be taken from his home by a hooded Negro mob and brutally murdered. There will be no threats and intimidation. We will be guided by the highest principles of law and order. . . . our actions must be guided by the deepest principles of our Christian faith. Love must be our regulating ideal.

With that speech King was thrust into the national spotlight. He went from a young preacher in one of the most segregated cities in the South, to a national leader. He articulated a philosophy of non-violence direct action that was to provide a positive outlet to the anger and rage of black people across the States.

The organizers of the boycott set forth three specific demands which they wanted met before they would agree to encourage people to ride the buses again. First, they wanted a guarantee that drivers would treat blacks with courtesy. Second, they wanted seating on a first come, first serve basis, with blacks sitting from the back forward, and whites from the front backward. Third, they wanted black drivers to be hired immediately to service the predominantly black routes. At first they thought that the economic pressure would force the city officials to comply to such reasonable demands quickly, but it soon become apparent that the only thing the officials were interested in was breaking the boycott by whatever means necessary. There were numerous attempts to divide the black leadership, but partly by luck and partly by pluck these efforts were resisted.

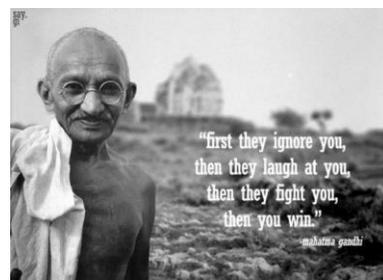


(slide) And right from the beginning, the black support for the boycott was almost total. Martin Luther King didn't make himself famous. He became the leader of a successful movement because thousands of black people in all stages of life underwent tremendous hardship to make it work. When the boycott started some people had to walk as much as twelve miles to get to work.

But they did. Often, they had to walk in pouring rain, but they did. Often, they had to brave verbal and physical abuse by angry whites, but they did. A week or so into the campaign, a car pool system was put into effect, organized with military precision, in order to help people, get to work. But some people wouldn't ride in the cars. One older woman obviously walking in some discomfort was invited to get into one of these cars. She waved them on: "I'm not walking for myself, I'm walking for my children and my grandchildren." King tried to convince an older woman he called Old Mother Pollard that it would be no betrayal for her to ride the buses. But she replied: "I'M going to walk just as long as anybody else is walking. I'm going to walk until its all over. My feet are tired, but my soul is rested."

There were white supporters too. When a Negro domestic tired of the boycott and started riding the buses, her white employer fired her, saying: "If you have no race pride - if your own people can't trust you - then I can't trust you in my house."

Many white people, even in prominent Southern families, made financial contributions to the effort. (slide) It was also a white person who, in a letter of support to the editor of the local newspaper pointed out the connection between what the Montgomery blacks were doing and what Gandhi had done in India. That connection was to provide additional support for a developing philosophy of non-violence.



Years later, in his most famous writing "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", which he wrote in response to criticisms from white clergy called he articulated some of that philosophy.

Nonviolent direct action (sit-ins, marches, etc.) seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive non-violent tension

which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so we must see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society which will help [people] rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

(slide) In twice weekly mass meetings, King would hold his listeners spell-bound while he encouraged them to remain firm and non-violent and drew on religious and philosophical support for the cause they were pursuing and the methods they were following. It seemed that this was King's great gift, to be able to draw together the intellectual resources of the Christian tradition, the principles of American democracy, and the great philosophical traditions of Europe, and to articulate that in the sing-song cadence of a African-American preaching style that could galvanize an entire mass of people into a singing, shouting, totally united group of people.



The bus boycott in Montgomery went on for almost a year. There were court challenges, harassment, arrests. There were long periods of doubt and despair. There were attempts to divide the leadership and bring an end to the boycott by

trickery, but in the end, it was Rosa Parks (slide) who proved the key to a successful resolution. It was the court challenge to her conviction under the segregation law which eventually ended up in the Supreme Court of the United States. On November 12, 1956 the Court ruled that Alabama's bus segregation laws were unconstitutional. (slide) On December 20, when that decision was to take effect, King and a white



minister got on a bus and sat down together in the same seat. For the first time, black and white were able to sit together legally. But it was not over yet. There was to be more violence and bloodshed in the coming days, but this victory was won, and nothing could take it away from them.





(slide) Over the next years King participated in non-violent campaigns all over the States. With his colleagues in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he organized and supported a prayer pilgrimage to Washington, lunch counter sit-ins in North Carolina and Georgia, Freedom Rides, voting rights drives, demonstrations and marches all over the South

and in Chicago. Over the years, his concerns grew broader. He spoke out against the war in Vietnam, and about the linkages between race, poverty and militarism. He came to be admired around the world. In 1964 he was named Time magazine's Man of the Year, and he won the Nobel Peace Prize. But there were many struggles along the way and constant danger as well.

(slide) He was stabbed, arrested and beaten, arrested and arrested again. His house was bombed. The FBI, under J. Edgar Hoover, mounted a campaign of surveillance and disinformation about him. He suffered intense bouts of depression and self-doubt, crippling divisions within the black leadership over his positions on non-violence and Vietnam, and the constant mental stress of physical and spiritual danger. It wasn't just him. Participants in the civil rights campaigns were beaten, attacked by police dogs, hosed, bombed and murdered. But slowly, black voters were registered,



national civil rights legislation was enacted, and segregation laws were struck down. In early April of 1968, he was in Memphis, Tennessee, helping organize a strike of Garbage Collectors. (slide) While he was standing on the balcony outside his hotel room a sniper's bullet hit him in the neck, killing him. It was fifty years ago this past Wednesday. He was thirty-nine years old.



It simply isn't possible to do justice to someone's life in the short time I have available. But let me conclude by saying a few things about what King's life means to me.

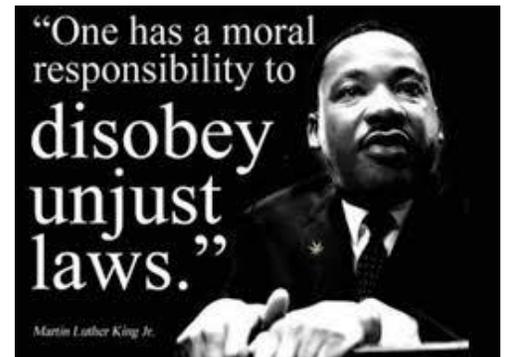
First, it would be too easy to admire King's life from fifty years on and my comfortable position on the other side of the 49th parallel and forget that his message should create a little tension in us as well, because Canada has its own forms of racism and prejudice. As the letter of first John says, "if we say there is no sin in us, we are deceiving ourselves." There is a little racism, maybe a lot of

racism in all of us, and I say that because I acknowledge that I am far from being the least of offenders in this area. Canadian statistics reveal that black people and Jews are the most common victims of hate crimes in this country in urban areas, and indigenous people are the most common victims in rural areas. I suspect if Martin Luther King was a Canadian he would be working closely with native people to achieve self-determination. King was not just concerned about racism against blacks. He was concerned with any form of injustice, and the passion and commitment with which he struggled for justice should serve as a model for us of what true Christianity is all about.

The second thing that I learn from King is the power of deeply committed and loving people. (slide) King showed the world that when we decide not to just fit in, we have enormous power. In a sermon I love, he says that Christians are supposed to be thermostats rather than thermometers. Thermometers simply adapt to the temperature of the room, but thermostats turn the furnace on, and that changes the temperature. His method of non-violent direct action for making change has become an important method by which ordinary people all over the world seek to oppose injustice and create change for a more just society.

In that respect, King was only the pioneer of something we can all do. But it only becomes something we can all do if we realize that he was not so different from us.

King was a very ordinary person in many ways. He wrestled with agonizing doubts, self-questioning and temptation throughout his life. He was not perfect, and his enemies were quick to seize on his imperfections. And although he was the most visible leader of a movement, he was only one of the leaders. But his life does teach us that there is a tremendous power in standing firm, with an



unrelenting love, saying "we are not going to co-operate with evil anymore." Because when we purify ourselves, when we search down deep and seek to rid ourselves of all the darkness in us, when we let the light of Christ illumine everything we do and drive out all the darkness in us, we realize that the real strength is not

in the hands of the powerful of this world, the real power is not in the hands of governments or business or labour leaders, the real power is within each one of us, as



we work together for justice and peace. Amen.