

The World is Our Parish / We Are the World

**A sermon by Rev. Gil Caldwell
Presented on Sunday, January 17, 2010**

Sermon:

Good morning. I was not listening too attentively to the announcements but I believe I heard that in a formation of a choir, I think it was a young peoples choir, it was said you do not have to read music. That brought back some tremors to my soul. Fifty-five years ago when I was in seminary there was a sign posted on the bulletin board that a group called the Seminary Singers was one of the important groups within the church and you could join because you did not have to read music. And so I joined. But then when the choir was getting ready to go on a trip across the nation, the director decided to have quartet singing to see if you could sing. And lo and behold, I was found out. And so while the choir went on its regular national trip, I stayed at home and almost wept.

My announced topic for today was *The World is My Parish / We are the World*, but because of the tragedy in and of Haiti and because this is the Martin Luther King holiday weekend, I searched for words from Dr. King that were appropriate for this day. The words I found I think are appropriate for all of us because our nation is involved in two wars; we are in the midst of an economic crisis; our congress is involved in healthcare reform; and many Americans have seen their investments diminish; some have lost their jobs, while a few Americans continue to have salaries and bonuses that demonstrate the inequities sometimes in our economic system. We have discovered that with all of our American exceptionalism and I agree there are some flaws, that have been revealed in our nation that if corrected I believe all of us would benefit. And this I think is part of the genius of Martin Luther King for what he was about was not simply for one group of people; but rather he was an American patriot who believed that we could be better than we were.

These then are the words of Dr. Martin Luther King that I pray will be understood by all of us, for I quote – he said, “A true revolution will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are

called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will only be an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth." These are from his "Beyond Vietnam" speech that was delivered at Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, just a year before he was assassinated.

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray "Thy kingdom come on Earth as it is in heaven." And in the scripture that Dale read this morning, we find these words "But seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you." Martin Luther King spent his last day in Memphis where he was supporting the rights of garbage workers. He said this on the night before he was assassinated, "It's alright to talk about 'long white robes over yonder,' in all of its symbolism. It's alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preachers must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Memphis, Tennessee."

But this morning I want to talk about a new Haiti, a new USA and new nations on every continent in the world. The tragedy in Haiti can be a much needed wake-up call for the church, for all religious faiths, and for all of humanity. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, spoke these often quoted words, "I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to; and sure I am that His blessing attends it. His servant I am, according to the plain direction of His Word, 'I have the opportunity, doing good unto all men.'"

Doing good and being good are too often been expressed in individual terms. We in the church are good at talking about how less than good some people are, but we don't talk enough about how less than good some of the politics of our nation and other nations. We say in our *United Methodist Church Book of Discipline* the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, a statement

with which I disagree, but we do not say enough times that greed, poverty, war, dictatorship, unfair imprisonment, education of children that is not education, discrimination of healthcare, etc. are incompatible with Christian teaching. This morning I am guided by that first sermon that Jesus preached; the sermon that inspired Martin Luther King. These are those words – you remember them well from the Gospel of Luke, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach the gospel to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to captives, the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

But after reading those words, we read in the passage in the following words, that when the congregation heard these words and Jesus related his words to specific issues, the congregation was filled with anger, some of them stood up, they thought to lead Jesus to a hill where they could push him off. But Jesus was able to walk through the crowd and go to Capernaum, a city of Galilee the scriptures tell us.

I believe that if Martin Luther King were alive today, the crisis in Haiti would cause him to say something like this – First, if Christians believe in the importance of the Bible, then we must stop using it as a book that supports our biases and our prejudices. Years ago an African friend shared with me a fairly common quote, he said that when the missionaries came we had the land and they had the Bible, when they left, we had the Bible and they had the land.

Sadly there are some Christians who believe that Noah’s curse in the book of Genesis means that all persons of African descent are to be servants and second class. And Genesis 9:25 says, “Cursed be Canaan! A servant under his brethren.” This and other verses were used to support slavery and racial segregation. This week TV evangelist Pat Robertson said. “That the earthquake in Haiti was new evidence that Haiti was being punished because it made a pact with the devil to defeat the French and ended slavery.” The Bible has been used to support anti-Semitism, sexism, racism, heterosexualism and militarism. I’m afraid that Pat Robertson, without saying it, believes that Haiti should not of fought and won a war against the French to end slavery and celebrate its independence on January 1st after it had defeated the French armies again who returned to Haiti, in an

effort to re-enslave it. How strange it is that we as a nation that came into being, fighting a war of independence somehow feel that others do not have that same right.

A story that I heard years ago describes what I am attempting to say about the Bible.

There was a speaking contest, an oratorical contest, where each contestant was to repeat the 23rd Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." A young man who was a contestant stood up and he spoke with eloquence and power. It was obvious that he was a trained speaker. The audience cheered him when he was finished. But then an old man got up, probably like me – 76 years old. He got up and started repeating the 23rd Psalm; he stumbled, he forgot a word or two and when he finished the crowd was powerfully silent. After a long pause the young man who got the cheers got up and offered this explanation; he said to the people gathered, "After I spoke you cheered because you were impressed by my skills in speech-making. But when the old man spoke, you were so emotionally moved that you were silent. What is the difference? I know the Psalm, but it was obvious that the old man knows the Shepherd of us all." My sisters and brothers, there are some folk who know the Bible; they know it from cover to cover; they quote it frequently, but they have not internalized, they have not embraced it. They have not embraced the love and commitment that the Bible talks about being present in the life of Jesus.

Secondly I would say Martin Luther King after criticizing the Viet Nam War can see the idea of the Poor People's Campaign. He did not see it to implement it, but can you believe that with Jesus, poverty in the world where there is so much is a blemish upon the signs of the kingdom that come to Earth. Our economic crisis has pulled the covers off of the imbalance of incomes in the USA. The salaries and bonuses of some compared to the salaries of others; the stresses and strains of the middle class in addition to the existence of poverty in this most affluent nation of the world suggests that it is important that we review and maybe retool our economic culture. None of you would work in an industry that did not retool or retune if it wanted to keep up. Why then is anyone afraid in this nation of retuning and retooling this magnificent nation? There is nothing wrong with getting rich legally, but unto whom much is given, much is expected.

One letter writer in yesterday's *New York Times* suggested that we should classify earnings as either creating wealth or gathering wealth. Those who gather wealth would be taxed at a higher level than those who create wealth. After saying that I now of course will say that after in our discussion or maybe even if we have time here, I'd like my Princeton and Wharton educated son, Dale, to share some of his thoughts about the economic meanings of my words.

Third, I want to say my grandmother reminded me that every time I point a finger of blame at someone, I point three fingers at myself. We have seen that in some of the poorest countries of the world, leaders and business people take advantage of people who look like them, who speak their language, who know the history of struggle of the nation, yet they take advantage and gain power and prestige and plenty while those whom they lead suffer.

There is a play called *Fela!* on Broadway, and it's the story of a controversial Nigerian musician who although he made money, he sought to criticize those who made wealth and simply did that alone. This week Grace and I visited a friend in Denver, his name – he's a Nigerian friend, Harold Okosha. And, he told me that one time Fela, who of course obviously had some wealth all because of his singing, he said, sometimes he put firewood on top of his expensive Mercedes to somehow symbolize that how foolish it is when we allow our symbols of wealth to somehow capture us in the midst of poverty. Martin Luther King would say to the leaders in Haiti and every nation in the world who live in luxury at the expense of their people - What does it profit a man who gains the whole world with their wealth and power but lose their soul?

Today as I conclude, I believe Jesus and Martin Luther King, who was of course a follower of Jesus, would look out at you as a congregation and say that you with your international and interracial diversity are a sign or a foretaste of the Kingdom here on Earth. I've said to others that the United Methodist Church in New Brunswick is one of the most gloriously diverse congregations that I have seen. You in your life together, you are learning how you must respect the cultures that are represented in this sanctuary. You know that you must never make the mistake of allowing your culture to become so dominate that others feel left out. Most of us have histories that began in other places and cultures

that reflect that history. I have seen churches that are afraid of the differences in people. They believe that one size fits all, and one size does not fit all. You whose faith is shaped by history and culture different from that of the history and culture of those of us born in USA, you who have had a fairly recent relationship with another country please be patient with those of us who do not have that history, because God is not finished with us yet.

May you become a church that is culturally inclusive that no person will leave this church because they feel that their spiritual needs are not being met. And if a person says or decides that they are on the edge of leaving it, I hope you have an exit interview process so that person can tell you what it is. Is it too European? Is it too African? Is it too Caribbean? Is it too Black? What is there about that church, what is there about the music, what is there about the preaching that does not nourish my soul?

Now my sisters and brothers, you are a wave of the future. You are a sign of God's Kingdom. I hope you do not give up on that. And so as I conclude, when I think of you I remember the song *We are the World*. And I paraphrase it to fit you. You are the world, there comes a time when you must heed a certain call, when you must come together as one. There are people dying, it's time to lend a hand, a time to give love that becomes justice - the greatest gift if all. We are all part of God's great family and the gift that the United Methodist Church of New Brunswick offers me and all of us, is living so that the world will see that because you are family, we can be family too. Because you are family all of us beyond you can be family too. If you feel so moved, will you say Amen. Amen.

Dale Caldwell for his father:

My father has insisted that I say something largely because he knows that a good sermon has a powerful beginning and a powerful ending, and little time between the two. And if the sermon goes too long they blame me. But he wanted because I'm working with Pieces to Share, some of the statistics about some of the challenges we face as Christians. And so, sadly people don't realize that:

- 40% of the world's population accounts for 5% of global income, while 20% of the population accounts for 75% of the world's income.
- 80% of the world lives on less than \$10.00 a day. Of the 6.8 billion people in the world, 2.6% live on less than \$2.00 a day.
- One third of the world is well fed, 1/3 is underfed, and 1/3 is starving.
- Every year 15 million children die of hunger.
- Even in the US 46% of African children, 40% of Latino children and 16% of white children are chronically hungry.
- Every 3.6 seconds someone in the world dies from hunger.

And sadly, as children of God, we're not really taking the kind of care of our family that we should. And so, ending with Numbers 6:22-26 which reads: The Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."

Let us all do what we can to give the world peace.