

Sermon 050116 Human Rights  
Scripture Luke 6: 27-36  
Sermon Title Long Way To Go

Last month, Meg and I took a Civil Rights Pilgrimage with a group that was mostly clergy from Rhode Island. There were 21 of us and the racial mix was roughly split evenly between black and white. We traveled by bus to Birmingham, Selma, and Montgomery in AL and Atlanta in Georgia. If you don't know what I'm talking about when I say 'the Civil Rights Movement' let me explain. It is widely considered to be a 10 year period from 1955 to 1965 where African Americans in the American South conducted a non-violent campaign for equal rights. The effort included an end to segregation of the races, the right to vote, and educational and economic opportunity. The effort was only partially successful. Many white people and Jews were involved in the movement.

On our tour, we visited many of the sites of the movement, met some veterans of the movement and saw documentary films while on the bus rides. We had a fantastic guide who taught us lots about the movement. The whole thing was a powerful experience. It was not a vacation. It was a pilgrimage. It was difficult largely because so much of that story is so ugly.

I'd like to tell you about the trip and some take-a-ways that I have from it, but this sermon will barely scratch the surface of the story. In

January, on MLK's birthday weekend, an African-American gentleman who was on the trip with us will join us. We'll devote the children's sermon, the adult sermon, and an after church session with slides to the trip and the movement.

I have always believed and I still believe that we live in the greatest country in the world. The truth is, it is a long, long way from being perfect. We have always suffered from and still suffer from what is often called America's Original Sin. That is that this country was started as as a white society that committed near genocide of one race and enslaved another.

The American Civil War ended slavery in this country, but the war did not bring equality to the races. I will use three terms to describe the same group of people who trace their heritage back to being enslaved in this country: African Americans, Blacks, and People of Color. In the American South, there were what is known as 'Jim Crow' laws. African-Americans were not allowed to vote and lived segregated lives. White people called it separate but equal but it was anything but. People of color were not allowed to use white bathrooms, drink from white water fountains, or stay in white waiting rooms at bus stations. They were lynched for little or no offences. If you don't know what lynching is, think the crucifixion of Jesus.

Blacks were allowed to use the same buses as whites but had to sit in the back of the bus. In fact, if an 85-year-old black woman were sitting on a crowded bus and an abled bodied white teenager got on and wanted to sit, the old black woman would have to get up and stand the rest of the way.

Then, in 1955, an incredibly brave 41-year-old African-American woman by the name of Mrs. Rosa Parks took a stand. Actually, she took a seat on a Montgomery bus then refused to give it up to a white man. She was arrested. One of the amazing parts of the story is that she was not beaten, which was the order of the day.

That was the first act of protest that started what is now known as the Civil Rights Movement. Goals of the Civil Rights Movement included an end to segregation, the right to vote, equal rights, and educational and economic equality. The movement was centered in African-American Christian churches. Blacks were not allowed to assemble in public. The only places that they were allowed to assemble were churches so that's where they had their mass meetings and strategy sessions. Their leader and spokesman was an eloquent and elegant young pastor and preacher named The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He preached that the only chance of success was nonviolence. He preached that they should love their enemies. In short, he preached the message of Jesus Christ.

One of the things that was amazing about the movement was the discipline exercised by the protestors to the message of nonviolence. Of all the people at lunch counter sit-ins who were having cigarettes snuffed in their hair, having scalding water poured on them, being beaten and kicked, never once did anyone fight back. The same was true of the Freedom Riders who were clubbed and beaten and the marchers who got the same. We visited the 16<sup>th</sup> street Baptist Church in Birmingham, which was bombed and 4 young Black girls killed. It is diagonally across the street from where police sicked guard dogs and fire hosed black men, women, and children. The white leaders and people accused blacks of violence, calling them agitators, but all the violence was white on black. After the voting rights act was signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon Johnson, Dr. King was no longer the Civil Rights Movement's sole leader and more violent groups emerged like the Black Power Movement, Black Panthers, and Black Muslims. It has been argued that that's really what killed Dr. King.

The discipline was amazing. Within five days of Rosa Park's protest, a boycott of Montgomery public busses began. For thirteen months not a single person of color boarded a Montgomery bus. This was at great hardship as many had to walk miles to and from work. It worked. The back of the bus insanity ended.

Because the trip was in the South, it's easy to think of the problem as a southern problem. That is absolutely not the case. People of a certain age will remember the bussing crisis in Boston. School children were bussed from black neighborhoods to white enclaves like South Boston for school and vice versa. The white backlash was vicious.

Also, this must be clear. There was a majority of white people in the south who never were violent toward anyone. Many either supported the Civil Rights movement or were resigned to the fact that things needed to change. Yes, there were the hateful ones and the violent ones but most were quietly and peacefully living out their lives.

On the trip, it was inspirational to be with people who had been in the movement, who adhered to non-violence and love of enemy. The dignity that they carry themselves with today was humbling. It was also hugely disturbing as a white man to see footage of white men and their viciousness. We talk about racial profiling these days. I wonder what people of color think when they look at me. I would not be surprised if they think that I might be dangerous. Frankly, I wouldn't blame them if they did.

That was a major take away from the trip for me. Another one is that the struggle in this country is a long way from over. There are 892 known hate groups in our country today. That number clicked way up

when Barack Obama was elected and inaugurated as the first African-American president.

The current presidential race is charged with hate mongering and fear mongering. My Jewish friend Mona told me of the increase in hate graffiti on synagogues in Brookline and Newton, MA. She has heard people yelling hate talk into phones in her neighborhood. The media is not covering the violence directed at Muslims in Boston and other cities across the country.

As someone who loves my country to the marrow of my bones, and a Christian, I can't tell you the pain I feel for all of this. I have always believed that we are better as a people than that. It appears that we are not. Maybe if I live my life so to oppose such hatred, I will leave this life making our country a little bit kinder and gentler.

As we were finishing our trip, we were challenged with the question of what are we going to do. Well, I'm doing that here. I want to raise this up to our church as a clear and present problem. I think it's easy to say, 'That's not me. I am not prejudice.' That really doesn't work. You discount the problem when you disassociate yourself from it. We are the beneficiaries of white privilege. Many people don't like to hear that and you might be one of them. Let me tell you a little story to illustrate what I'm saying when I say white privilege.

Virtually every parent of a child of color has the following conversation with their kid. “If you are confronted by a police officer, be polite and address them as ‘officer’ or ‘sir.’ Have your hands visible at all times with your hands open, not in a fist. Be completely obedient. If you are told to get on the ground, do it immediately.” A white parent would never think to have that conversation with their kid. Why? White privilege.

I believe we all have prejudices. We tend to be wary of people who are different from us. That in and of itself does not make you bad. It makes you human. It’s what you do with that. If you take a hard look at yourself and identify your prejudices and remember the message of Jesus to love your neighbors and your enemies, then you get in line with the brave men, women, and children of the American Civil Rights Movement.

If you make statements like poor people are poor because they are lazy you just don’t understand the depth and complexity of the problem and you are counting yourself with the white people who beat up the marchers.

I like to quote my favorite character from Harry Potter because he is so wise and correct. Prof. Dumbledore said, “It is not your abilities who make you who you are, Harry, it is your choices.” It is not our

abilities that make us who we are; it is our choices. The choice could not be more clear... love or hate. The choice is yours. AMEN