

The Beloved Community  
Isaiah 62: 1-5; I Corinthians 12: 1-11  
Margot Trusty Pickett  
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I've told a few people this week that I have ambivalent feelings about MLK day. It has nothing to do with my immense respect and admiration for him and the profound impact he had on this country. I think he deserves more than almost anyone in history to be recognized and honored. But it seems to me that what happens when we decide to honor someone by turning their birthday into a national holiday is that we just end up trivializing and domesticating them, kind of like what's happened with Jesus' birthday celebrations. I'm sorry to rail against the most popular holiday in the history of the world, but really, where is Jesus in the midst of all the over-eating and over-drinking and over-spending that happens every December? We've heard from economists that we need all the Christmas shopping or our economy would be in the dumps. And this is the holiday that purports to celebrate a man who preached things like, "Blessed are the poor" and "life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

And now for the past 30 years or so, the third Monday in January has become yet another holiday for stores to hold sales and for people to stop for 5 minutes and think about loving their neighbors, i.e., be nice to other people. In other cities where I've lived MLK day has been trumpeted as a day to volunteer at a foodbank or pick up trash off the highway. Those are really good things to do, but we should be doing them regularly anyway, and—here's my real complaint—such ideas really miss the point of what Martin Luther King, Jr. was all about. Both he and Jesus weren't just preachers who told people to be nice and to do charitable things. They were prophets; they were revolutionaries. And what they called for in their preaching was an overthrow—or at least a total restructuring—of society. They weren't talking about volunteering for a few hours every year, or not yelling at someone when they cut you off in traffic, or giving 10% of your income away. Again, all great things to do. But neither man was calling us to be polite or nice or altruistic. Neither of them was killed because they were so nice or so sympathetic or so generous. They may have been those things, but they were killed because they were seen as subversives, threats to the status quo, the existing order.

But what sets Jesus and Dr. King apart from other subversives or revolutionaries is that they talked about radical change in the context of love. They spoke to our hearts and minds about loving our neighbors—which includes friends *and* enemies, not just people you like or who are like you—and about creating a beloved community, which isn't some utopian commune of like-minded people who separate themselves from society...but includes everyone in our society and means so much more than just *including* everyone. It means truly seeing and treating everyone as an equal, as a brother or sister, as a fellow beloved child of God. And my worry is that we don't really understand or begin to embody what these two men meant by *loving* people and that we tend to replace the demanding call to become the beloved community with easy answers like marching downtown once a year or writing a letter to our elected leaders or singing "We Shall Overcome." All good things to do but not nearly what King or Jesus were calling us to do.

I felt some self-satisfaction and self-justification about my feelings about MLK day this week when I read that Grace Lee Boggs, who is known as “an elder stateswoman of the Black Power Movement,” said that she didn’t support the campaign to make MLK’s birthday a national holiday. She even admitted that back in the 1960s she pretty much dismissed Dr. King while she worked to improve the lives of people in downtown Detroit because, “Like most Black Power activists, I viewed King's notions of nonviolence and beloved community as somewhat naïve and sentimental.” But in 2004 she wondered out loud what might have happened if those who embraced Black Power, in the style of Malcolm X, would have adopted King’s vision of the Beloved Community. She wrote: “Viewing Martin Luther King, Jr., as a revolutionary is in sharp contrast to the official view of him as simply an advocate for the rights of African Americans within the current system. In the last two years of his life, confronted with problems that required more complex solutions than visions of Black and White children marching hand in hand, King began to explore a new kind of revolution, one that would challenge all the values and institutions of our society and combine the struggle against racism with a struggle against poverty, militarism, and materialism.

“The black revolution,” [King] insisted, “is much more than a struggle for rights for Negroes. It is exposing evils that are deeply rooted in the whole structure of our society.”<sup>i</sup>

Exposing the evils that are deeply rooted in the structure of society may well be what a Revolutionary does; it is also what a Prophet, in the biblical sense of that word, does.

“Prophets often stand in a place of tension, a tension between “what is” and “what ought to be,”” writes Rev. Brooks Berndt.<sup>ii</sup> In this passage from Isaiah 62, the prophet finds himself in just such a place of tension. In the previous chapter, he had painted a picture for Jews who are returning to Jerusalem after decades of warfare and exile to a new city restored from devastation and filled with justice, righteousness and abundant life. But that picture of a promised future looked nothing like the reality that we see hinted at in Chapter 62. The reality was that Jerusalem was still in ruins, filled with poor, hungry, desolate refugees.

When one see the stark difference between what is and what ought to be, there are a couple of things you might do. The first is to remain silent, to let one's heartache be a private lament. The other option is the one that prophets choose: to expose the contrast between the way things are and the ways things must be, if God's will is to be done. At the beginning of chapter 62 Isaiah says he cannot keep silent for Jerusalem’s own sake. He must speak so that things might change. Likewise, MLK felt he could not keep silent in the last few years of his life about impact that the Viet Nam war and economic inequality were having on the whole of American society.

In a speech King delivered in 1967 to the Southern Christian Leadership Convention entitled “Where do we go from here: Community or Chaos?” he reaffirmed his commitment to justice and non-violence as the ways to move forward, and then said, “I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. (Yes) And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today. (No) And I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a

strong, demanding love. (Yes) For I have seen too much hate.” He noted what hatred does not only to the target of hatred, but to the haters themselves and it isn’t godly in any sense.

Then he said, “I want to say to you as I move to my conclusion, as we talk about “Where do we go from here?” that we must honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. (Yes) There are forty million poor people here, and one day we must ask the question, “Why are there forty million poor people in America?” And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. (Yes) And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life's marketplace. (Yes) But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. (*All right*) It means that questions must be raised. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, “Who owns the oil?” (Yes) You begin to ask the question, “Who owns the iron ore?” (Yes) You begin to ask the question, “Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?” (*All right*) These are words that must be said. (*All right*)”<sup>iii</sup>

Those are questions that must still be asked, questions about economic injustice that stems from systemic racism and sexism and militarism and materialism. Questions that must be asked and answered honestly if we are serious about building the Beloved Community.

King asked, “Where do we go from here?” but we might want to know where do we start? I’m going to make a modest suggestion based on our reading this morning from Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth. In my opinion, Paul also was a prophet and a kind of revolutionary who saw the need for restructuring society. For example, the church at Corinth was as diverse a congregation as you can imagine, with Jews and Greeks, men and women, rich and poor, enslaved and free people, and they needed some organizational and leadership advice to move through and beyond some deep controversies. But Paul doesn’t say to them, “Well you need to elect a president of the church and that should be the person with the gift of wisdom.” Instead he says, *everyone* has gifts and no one’s gift is better than anyone else’s. In other words, contrary to cultural understandings, all of us are gifted and talented! And we need everyone’s gifts to get things right, not just a few people at the top of the organizational chart. I believe that’s true not only in church but also in society in general. So my modest proposal is for us to approach each person we meet not as superior or inferiors, not looking at the color of their skin or their socio-economic status, not anticipating their deficits or disadvantages but looking at and for their gifts and talents. In that way we might approach each other more as equals, more as beloved children in the same family of God, more as essential participants and co-creators in the building of the Beloved Community.

Some 50 years ago Martin Luther King took stock of the ongoing poverty and violence and despair of the inner cities of our country, and he recommitted himself to justice and non-violence, but above all to love. “For I know,” he said, that love is ultimately the only answer to [hu]mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go.... I'm not talking about

emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love." Love doesn't sound revolutionary. But the kind of love Jesus and Dr. King were talking about can get you killed.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/a-conspiracy-of-hope/the-beloved-community-of-martin-luther-king>

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_january\\_17\\_2016](http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_january_17_2016)

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www-personal.umich.edu/~gmarkus/MLK\\_WhereDoWeGo.pdf](http://www-personal.umich.edu/~gmarkus/MLK_WhereDoWeGo.pdf)