

Take the First Step

Text: Amos 5:24; Luke 13: 18-21

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As Pam can surely attest, a preacher's mind does not switch off when it's time for vacation! Plain and simple, the wheels and ways of sermons keep turning wherever we seem to go. Sparks and ideas inspire and ignite and incite in the most unlikely of places, and also in moments quite unplanned.

It's absolutely true, just as John's Gospel tells us, the Spirit moves as she will and we know not when or where. And all it seems to take is the hem of a thought, say; or the anniversary of a dream; or a butler in the White House; or something like a staircase. These very thoughts have all had their way with me these recent weeks.

Let me start with the dream. And surely it should come as no surprise that I would mention a dream today! What with the fiftieth anniversary of the march on Washington this coming Wednesday, and the memory of a preacher who gave cadence and oratory to a vision that still challenges the world.

That very same preacher once said¹ "lightning makes no sound until it strikes" and on that day in 1963, lightning surely struck. But honestly, that's what it took - a bolt from on high that was bright and powerful and different enough to expose a simmering rage of injustice in our land.

I was only ten at the time but my dad's urgency about the civil rights movement affected me deeply. I was on the cusp of adolescence and quite impressionable. As I came of age, I became enthralled with the courageous faith of Dr. King. At first, I looked up to him because my father did. But it didn't take long at all before he became a personal hero to me, joining the likes of one of his heroes, too, Abraham Lincoln. I have held those two side by side ever since.

And here's what astonished me most. Martin Luther King accomplished great strides, not by the love of power (though he could have easily had that), but by the power of love. He understood the heart of Jesus and had a profound grasp of the Gospel's imperative for truth and justice, and he knew well that the power of faith could transform human beings.

Among his many words: "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate." The sheer kindling effect of such thoughts, as I grew into my teen years, was spell-binding and absolutely captivating to me. Dr. King also said: "The difference between a dreamer and a visionary is that a dreamer has his eyes closed and a visionary has his eyes open."

So, please, today if nothing more, I want to thank God for the vision of Martin (he has always felt like a friend) and the power of his love and the indelible mark he left on the world - no less, my young and growing heart.

And then consider with me the story of a butler. His name is little known, if at all, Eugene Allen, and history leaves barely a trace. Even more, given his role, his life was mostly invisible in the ways we usually measure such things. He was but one soul in the line of domestic service, as it is called; a butler of color who served seven of our Presidents (from Eisenhower to Reagan) ó near enough to bring coffee to the Oval Office!

It's a fascinating story and was reported by *The Hartford Courant*² as "mostly true-esque about a White House butler who served before, during and after the Civil Rights movement."

Actor Forest Whitaker took on the name of Cecil Gaines as he played the part ó and exquisitely. The storyline is in large measure about how one person made a difference ó first, in establishing an amicable relationship with each president, and, more importantly, in his growing desire and drive to drop a few words here and there to speak truth to power. All of this, of course, while being barely visible to almost everyone he encountered in the most famous house on earth. Still, the movie nuanced in that true-esque way that Cecil's occasional words carefully planted may well have changed the hearts and minds of the presidents he served.

The movie made me think of the principle of the mustard seed. You know: small beginnings, large endings; intrinsic in rooting down deep, extrinsic in stretching far with shoots and fruits. It made me think of the secret of leaven in the loaf, that invisible power that makes things rise. It made me think of times in my life when a barely perceptible nudge or comment offered by another has brought me to new places of understanding. And it made me think, too, of my offering such seemingly small corners on which others have made significant turns.

Cecil, bless his heart! One president at a time - and, by the way, he didn't like all of them equally! But, there he was with a strategically placed word, encouraging a slowly changing mind, and taking small but steady steps forward for the world.

Let's take that last phrase about small but steady steps and turn the corner home as we imagine a staircase. Both Martin and Cecil have been a part of enormous progress and we cannot overlook that; but they also bear a shadow in common, and it's a large one. Because, for all of the advances we have made, old challenges keep re-emerging. That's the way of history and life.

And so, Martin Luther King, never mincing the truth, put it this simply: "The time is always right to do what's right. You don't have to see the whole staircase to take the first step."

What a perfect metaphor in the pursuit of social justice! And it fits, whether grappling with the sharp racial divide that still exists in our nation; or questioning new restrictions on voting rights; or advocating for a generation locked out of the economy. By the way, among the two major goals in the march in 1963 was jobs ó and that remains today as a

critical issue for many Americans, but especially people of color. The metaphor fits in the ongoing struggle for affordable healthcare, or in response to the climate changes that threaten the survival of our planet.

Dr. King again: "The time is always right to do what's right. You don't have to see the whole staircase just take the first step!"

He also said this: "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Every step requires the tireless passionate concern of dedicated individuals." Take the first step!

And he said: "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope." Take the first step!

He also said: "One of the great agonies of life is that we are constantly trying to finish that which is unfinishable." Take the first step!

He also said: "Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal." Take the first step!

He also said this in a prayer that could belong to each of us: "Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do, and use it for a purpose greater than myself."

And so, be it ever so simple today, I thank God for Martin! I thank God for Cecil, who was really Eugene! I thank God for the many, visible or not, who keep climbing. I thank God for our brief time in history and the accomplishments made, as well as challenges that need our very best. And I pray that God would empower and emblazon and inspire us, each and all!

Because the dream is not over, the power of redemptive love is alive, there is work, tall and mighty, to be done, and it starts with the first step. Amen.

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¹ "In the Service of History" by Michael Phillips, Tribune Newspapers; in Hartford Courant, Friday August 16, 2013, p. D-5.

² All quotes of Dr. King are from: A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King. HarperOne, 2003.