



Stand Your Ground

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given on the feast day of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, January 20, 2019

Luke 6:27-36; Ephesians 6:10-20

Today we celebrate the feast day of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., pastor and martyr of the church. Dr. King was many things. He was a prophet for truth in the war against segregation in our country. He spoke and marched and lived a life that was itself a testament to nonviolent resistance against what he called the triple evils of poverty, racism, and war. I suspect that most of us, when we think about Dr. King, think of him primarily as an enemy of racism, and of course that is one of the primary evils he did fight in this country. I don't know if most people realize that Dr. King, as a pastor, based his thinking, preaching, and actions in the scriptures and in the way of Jesus. Sometimes what he said and did caused mainstream folks of his day to accuse him of not being a real Christian.

So what is a Christian?

In today's world there are great divisions between people who call themselves Christian. The Christian right and the Christian left often go to great lengths to distinguish themselves from one another. Today's gospel text, in which Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, is something that I don't hear honestly hear much about from either side, because it's so difficult. But Dr. King took Jesus' teachings, including the teaching to love our enemies, all the way into the marrow of his bones and the soul of his preaching and teaching, and he created an entire movement of nonviolent resistance that hated segregation, but loved the segregationist. It was a movement showing his belief that hate could not defeat hate; only love could do that. It was a movement founded on Jesus' teachings, on Jesus' way; it was a movement founded on the radical nonviolence of Jesus' own

life. It was a movement founded on the love of Christ, and as such has about as much claim to be Christian as anything else I can imagine. And Dr. King paid the same price that Jesus did—death at the hands of the Powers of his day.

We live in an era when the powers and principalities in opposition to God’s love are perhaps as visible as at any time I can remember. This is perhaps most obviously visible in politics, in our government shutdown, in the clash of narratives we have about immigration and a host of other issues that come across our headlines everyday. But it goes deeper than that. This is about increasing manifestations of hatred of neighbor, bold violence, dehumanization of those who differ in every sense, the corrupt measuring of life’s value in terms of money and power. It’s not enough to try to explain these things in terms of Republican or Democrat, white and black, progressive or evangelical. These things are markers of systemic sin that affects all of us, that go beyond any one person or group.

The text from Ephesians for today says this:

For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the principalities and the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness in this world, the spirits of evil in the heavens. That is why you must take up all God’s armor, or you will not be able to put up any resistance on the evil day, or stand your ground even though you exert yourselves to the full. So stand your ground, with a belt of truth round your waist, and uprightness a breastplate, wearing for shoes on your feet the eagerness to spread the gospel of peace.

Now this talk of spiritual warfare sounds pretty intense, even superstitious. But if you’re like me, in today’s endless bombardment of communication and accusing rhetoric, it’s easy to feel like we’re living in a war zone. When I read this text, I appreciated that description of feeling embattled. And then something else caught my attention: the phrase “stand your ground.” When I read that phrase I immediately thought of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed teenager who was followed and killed by George Zimmerman in Florida. Zimmerman was acquitted of

murder because of Florida's "stand your ground" legal defense, which means that people can lawfully use deadly force without having to try to retreat if they feel threatened. In today's American culture, "stand your ground" is about our country's belief that violence is the best way to protect ourselves from violence, even though the fear of violence is so often connected with our unexamined prejudice, ignorance and racism. So I was deeply moved to see the scripture speak about "standing our ground" in a completely different sense—in the context of the spiritual struggle against systemic evil. The author of Ephesians talks about using the truth, faith, peace, justice as our defense in the time of struggle. It is these things that enable us to actually stand our ground, not guns or hatred or blaming or demonizing the other.

This is exactly what Dr. King taught his followers. They stood their ground in the Montgomery bus boycotts and the marches in Selma and Washington. Their ground was in the truth of God's Beloved community, in which absolutely everyone, even Bull Connor and KKK members and every black and brown person in the country, are made in the image of God.

The truth is the fact that the best person has some evil in them and the worst person has some good in them; that all people are made in the image of God no matter the color of their skin or the country on their passport; that no person can be reduced to the worst thing that they have done; that we can hold people accountable to the wrongs they have committed by inviting them to greater humanity. In the context of 21st century America, we who are Christians can stand our ground, not by committing violence against those whom we fear, but by being rooted and grounded in love. In chapter three, the author of Ephesians prays that the people of Ephesus might be "rooted and grounded in love; that they might be able to comprehend what is the length and breadth and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, so that they might be filled with all the fullness of God." This is the ground on which we are called to stand, the love of Christ that will enable us to perceive the goodness in our enemies, even though we can never accept the evil that is done. This same love can make us humble enough to admit our own wrongdoing, our own racism and fear and

violence. We can stand our ground knowing God can forgive and make us agents of God's reconciliation even after we make mistakes, and learn to make amends for those mistakes.

So when I read the Ephesians text this week, this week when I myself was feeling overwhelmed and bombarded, I realized I did not need to have all the answers, or become defensive, or become violent in my thinking or my words. What I need to do every day is to remain rooted in the love of God, in the truth of God's Beloved Community, in faith that God can work through imperfect people like you and me to combat what Dr. King called the triple systemic evils of poverty, and racism, and war.

So this year, following the way of Jesus together, let us stand our ground, rooted in the love of Christ. Let us use the practices of the way of Jesus to help us. Let us continually **turn** from the temptation to use violent and racist thinking, words and actions to try to protect ourselves. Let us read and study the scriptures to **learn** about Christ's nonviolent way of love. Let us **pray** for our enemies and loved ones alike, that they may be filled with God's goodness and healing which wipe away hate and fear. Let us gather here to **worship** and celebrate the kingdom of God that is alive and growing in spite of empire and war. Let us **bless** those who are persecutors and guilty, bless each other with forgiveness and service, live our lives to become a blessing for others. Let us **go** to those places where Christ is ahead of us, to the poor and the forgotten. And let us **rest**, standing our ground in the truth that all people are created to be part of God's Beloved Community. Amen.