Reflections From a Birmingham Jail

On April 16, 1963, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was roughly arrested and put in an Alabama prison cell for congregating without a license. This was his 13th arrest. He was attempting to bring national attention to the brutal, racist treatment suffered by African-Americans in one of the most segregated cities in America—Birmingham, Alabama. He was thrown into solitary confinement, denied bail, access to an attorney, and even to his wife.

Somehow someone was able to smuggle a copy of the Birmingham newspaper to him which included a letter written by eight local Christian and Jewish religious leaders, which criticized both the demonstrations and King himself, whom they considered an outside agitator.

Isolated in his cell, without notes or research materials, King drafted an impassioned defense to compassionately and non-violently bring about justice and freedom to Birmingham blacks, and to change the power-structures of racism and abuse.

This 7,000 word response was his Letter From the Birmingham Jail.

John 18:36-37 MSG

36 “My kingdom,” said Jesus, “doesn’t consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn’t be handed over to the Jews. But I’m not that kind of king, not the world’s kind of king.”

37 Then Pilate said, “So, are you a king or not?” Jesus answered, “You tell me. Because I am King, I was born and entered the world so that I could witness to the truth. Everyone who cares for truth, who has any feeling for the truth, recognizes my voice.”

38a Pilate said, “What is truth?”

As God’s Children, which Scripture demands us to accept that we are, we are Royalty of the Highest Order, Kings and Queens, sons and
daughter of the Most High, just as Jesus was, and as such we are all called to stand against injustice.

— Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from the Birmingham Jail

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Wow! In order me to be the Royal Child of God I was born to be, destined to be and empowered to be, I’ve got to make sure that you become that too. I can’t do it alone.

If you are being oppressed, thwarted, or have been educated to believe you are less than God’s beautiful amazing son or daughter, then I’ll never get there myself, without making sure you do as well. We’re in this together, King writes, “tied in a single garment of destiny.”

The Apostle John apparently agreed, because he writes in his Gospel verse 5:18, “18 Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all people, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all people.” New International

John was talking about Adam’s sin, who he believed condemned all humanity, and He thought Jesus acts of righteousness were so powerful, and they bring justice and righteousness to humanity.

But what about my sin. Does my sin hurt you, hinder you, thwart you? We see this in our children, often mirroring our own flaws and failings, but the Apostle John, and Martin Luther King Jr take it further.

I think they would concur that my sin does hurt you, and if you’re not free, none of us are.
Injustice, lies, oppression and misinformation is all around us. Some of the places we miss it are in societally accepted institutions, like the medical field, institutions of education, media and the church.

In fact, there are so many lies, so ways to spin facts into whatever pretentious truths we want them to say, so many ways to proof text, and cut and paste data to mold it, that it can cause to ask Pontius Pilate’s portentous question, “What is Truth?” We do this with news, with scientific research, and sadly even with Scripture. Instead of going to the data with open minds, we can superimpose our predispositions on the data and wrangle it to justify our positions.

We are called to seek the Truth, to speak the Truth, and ultimately to live the Truth.

Racism exists, sexism exists, closed-mindedness, unhealthy behavioral, psychological and emotional patterns are acted out all around us for new generations to observe and model, spiritual and religious drivel and pablum, fit for the nothing more noble that the garbage can, is passed off as food, and stuffed down the throats of innocent Truth seekers in all kinds of institutions, and we must stand against it.

MLK writes, “We must be willing to speak against lies, against injustice, against oppression, wherever we see it. We can’t claim a bystander’s distance, because we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

So we are all called to be agitators, to be revolutionaries against the unjust power structures we see in the world, as followers of Jesus, who came to overcome the world, and the powers within it that stand against the Truth, and, as Martin Luther King Jr.’s story tells us, the world ain’t gonna like it!
In John 16:1-4, Jesus says, “I’ve told you these things to prepare you for rough times ahead. They are going to throw you out of the meeting places. There will even come a time when anyone who kills you will think he’s doing God a favor. They will do these things because they never really understood the Father. I’ve told you these things so that when the time comes and they start in on you, you’ll be well-warned and ready for them.” MSG

So Jesus says we need to stand against injustice, because it’s just the right thing to do, regardless of personal cost. It obviously cost him his life, the ultimate sacrifice.

But how do we bring about real change, real justice, with compassion for the ignorance and blindness that is so often behind the injustice. When we see injustice, often our anger rises up, and we do violence to the perpetrator through insults, labels, manipulation or even violence. It’s like our goal is to “shame” the other party into seeing Our Truth, and all we end up doing is creating more resistance to change, more defensiveness, more negativity.

Has this ever happened to anyone in a marital spat or family squabble?

For some reason people don’t seem to like our guilt-trips, passive-aggressive digs, silent-treatments, manipulation and cut-downs. Hmm! How strange of them.

Bonnie McFarlane wrote, “I once gave my husband the silent treatment for an entire week, at the end of which he declared, “Hey, we’ve really been getting along pretty great lately!”

Another Joke – A nice, calm and respectable lady to her pharmacist and said, "I’d like to buy some cyanide."
The pharmacist asked, "Why in the world do you need cyanide?"

The lady replied, "I need it to poison my husband."

The pharmacist’s eyes got big and he exclaimed, "Lord have mercy! I can't give you cyanide to kill your husband! That's against the law! I'll lose my license! They'll throw us both in jail! Absolutely not!"

The lady reached into her purse and pulled out a picture of her husband in bed with the pharmacist's wife.

The pharmacist looked at the picture and replied, "Well now. That's different. You didn't tell me you had a prescription."

How we bring about change is as important as the change we’re bringing about.

Conflict can actually be a wonderful opportunity build new heart-to-heart connections with the very ones we’d like to see change their behaviors.

In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, King writes,

“So I have tried to make it clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends.”

Teens and political views – I once led a youth group with approximately 300 teens. We usually broke into smaller groups for discussion, but we also had large group lesson times. One time the subject of Pro-Life vs Pro-Choice came up, and there were many heated arguments on both sides, with both parties spouting rhetoric they’d heard from their parents and from school and opinion-news sources. There were some really smart kids among them.

At some point, the argument began to become what I call violent; they moved from thoughtful arguments to angry insults. One Pro-Lifer angrily denounced the Pro-Choicers as sanctioning murder for convenience and a Pro-Choicer stood up, with eyes-bulging, denouncing that Pro-Lifer for siding with a bunch of white congressmen
in DC trying to throw women back into the Middle Ages and slavery. Wow!

It was a fun evening, and former friends were red-faced and spouting vitriol. I stepped in to moderate the situation and said, “I think that every Pro-Choice person has to ask themselves if they are completely and absolutely convinced that they believe that a fetus is not a tiny, vulnerable human being. If they are totally convinced of that, then they have a right to angrily denounce the Pro-Life position. I also think that every Pro-Life person has to ask themselves if they are absolutely convinced that they can understand the terrible pain and fear that a young girl may be facing when she gets pregnant with no support system. If they truly believe they understand and know exactly what they would do in that situation, they can denounce the Pro-Choice position. Otherwise, I suggest the best solution is to listen with curiosity and compassion to the perspectives of our sisters and brothers, and try to learn why they’ve made the difficult and perhaps courageous choice to believe the way they do.” Then I asked them to join me in a quick prayer for God to help us do that. There was silence for a while, and then a miracle happened and God’s Spirit showed up. When they began to speak again, the previously most angry and vocal ones began to talk about the positive points that their opponents had previously been making. Everyone was humble and kind and quick to give concessions to opposing positions. Empathy and Understanding replaced Anger and Insults. As a youth pastor, I was super proud, and super relieved that no angry parents were going to be knocking at my door the next day.

Marshall Rosenberg, in “Non-violent Communication: A Language of Life” shares the 4 ways to deal with anger. We get justifiably get angry when we see injustice. We are called as Christ-followers to roll up our sleeves and speak out, speak the truth,
try to bring God’s Kingdom of Compassion, Forgiveness and Love to our little corner of the world.

Two of these four options we have when we get angry can lead us to more successful intervention and change and use moral means to bring about moral change.

1. Reject it – this is the only response that leads to anger – responses include denying, making excuses, deflecting, defending, attacking

2. Receive it – this response leads to shame – responses include feeling misunderstood, allowing ourselves to be manipulated, feeling guilty, foolish, inferior (position children are often put in because adults are simply bigger than them and often use the knee-jerk reactions of guilt-trips, shaming, pouting, silent-treatment, verbal and physical violence that leaves the child feeling emotionally abandoned, abused, inferior and shamed)

3. Try to empathize with your own pain – this response leads to self-revelation – In this way, one hears the ugly criticism or deplorable behavior and takes the time to honestly experience the pain, the sorrow, the frustration, the hopelessness, and looks to see what deep-seated needs are not being met by those behaviors. This is a wonderful way for us to discover our deepest values. Once we have clearly elucidated them, we can begin to work for change, request change from the perpetrators, solicit help from others.

But there’s one more option Marshall Rosenberg gives before we attempt to bring about change.

4. Try to empathize with the other person’s pain – this response leads to compassion, and quite possibly new information and perspectives that may very well temper our initial perspectives –
In this way, one sees the unjust behaviors, criticism, power structures or belief systems, and seeks to understand the motivating feelings and deep-seated needs that the other person has. When we look for it, we find frightened, sad, anxious, lonely people. We see the fear behind the racism, the helplessness behind the sexism, the loneliness behind the cold shoulder. And we ideate possibilities for change out of curiosity and compassion.

At the very least, if we keep ourselves busy giving both ourselves and the other person empathy, we won’t have any time left for hate and anger.

1 Cor. 16:13-14 says when being vigilant for truth and interacting with others, “13 Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong. 14 And do everything with love.”

So we have choices in response to injustice. Anger will only be experienced if we choose to reject someone’s verbal attack or behaviors. If we try to understand the feelings and needs behind our own pain AND the other person’s feelings and needs behind their pain, our success rate in bringing about change will be much more efficacious.

We have a better chance to help people explore new options for behaviors if they can feel our empathy and compassion. Often they will willingly solicit our advice for new, more just actions, because they may not honestly have known any better way of thinking or behaving, and at least a part of their God-breathed soul is truly, if unconsciously, looking for a more successful, more loving way.

When the kids in my former youth group began to use moral means to present their positions, ends that included deep, careful listening, reflecting back what they had previously heard, and affirming their
former opponent’s arguments, they all began to become more influential. Moral means are actually more effective. During America’s struggle for Independence against British Rule, 30,000 Americans and 24,000 British were killed or permanently maimed. During India’s struggle for Independence under Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violent, civil disobedience against British Rule, thousands experienced wrongful arrest, but the death toll amounted to a few hundreds.

Jesus’ way of compassion, of using moral means to bring about justice, not only keeps our hearts pure, open, loving and true, but it also brings about change with the least collateral damage to both sides. We have to fight, but how we fight is just as important as what we’re fighting for.

I’m going to close with two last quotes by Martin Luther King Jr’s Letter from the Birmingham Jail who we’re remembering in this service today, and who our nation will be remembering tomorrow.

“Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.' But they went on with the conviction that they were a 'colony of heaven' and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be 'astronomically intimidated.' They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest. Things are different now. The contemporary Church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the Church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the Church’s silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.”
“The early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the Church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.”

Thank you Rev. King.

Amen