

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
August 25, 2024
Pentecost 14

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, the arc of history bends towards justice.

That is a paraphrasing of a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.

MLK's full quote is this.

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

King said this as part of his speech entitled "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution."

He gave that speech at the Washington National Cathedral on March 31, 1968.

King said a similar thing with these words.

"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant."

Those words were expressed at King's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech.

And so, the understanding is that it may take a long time for change, that is change that is bent toward justice...

It may take a long time, but change does happen.

Justice will ultimately win out.

And as we think of that idea—that justice ultimately wins out, consider our country's course, our country's journey of change.

"The Emancipation Proclamation" whereby slavery was abolished...

"The Emancipation Proclamation" was declared on January 1, 1863, and it is one example of the course of change in this country.

Yes, change takes a long time, but it does happen.

It took from 1619 to 1863, until there was change, but it did happen.

Even so, racial oppression continued in the South even after The Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, and on the heels of Reconstruction.

Racial oppression continued with the emergence of Jim Crow, when voting rights were impeded and segregation reared its most ugly head.

And so, it wasn't until the 1960s when Civil Rights legislation brought greater equality.

Yes, change takes a long time, but it does happen.

Even so, our nation still struggles with racial inequality, when we consider the incarceration rates of people of color versus the Caucasian population.

Yes, change takes a long time.

On another issue, women were not allowed to vote in this country until the passage of the 19th Amendment on June 4, 1919.

From the beginning of this nation in 1776 until 1919, only men were allowed to vote.

Yes, change takes a long time, but it does happen.

On still another issue, with respect to what we might call poverty laws...

It wasn't until 1935 when the Medicaid Act and Social Security were passed.

It wasn't until 1964 when the Food Stamp Act was passed.

And it wasn't until 2010 when the Affordable Care Act was passed.

Yes, change takes a long time, but it does happen.

Yes, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

PAUSE

And even though Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed this sentiment so eloquently...

This sentiment was already rooted in the human psyche.

We see, for instance, the sentiment in the Gospel of John today.

We see the sentiment in the words of Simon Peter.

Peter says to the Lord, “To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

PAUSE

Now, Peter says these words in response to Jesus’ question, “Do you wish to go away, too?”

For to be sure, some of Jesus’ followers had just abandoned Jesus.

Why? Why were certain followers deserting? Because Jesus just told his followers that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood.

Upon hearing this, some of Jesus’ followers began to complain.

They just didn’t understand. They believed Jesus was speaking in terms of cannibalism, literally eating and drinking his body and blood.

Indeed, in the Roman Empire at the time of the early Church, there were people who had been exposed to Christianity but who didn’t understand...

There were people who were confused about Holy Communion.

And so there were rumors circulating that Christians ate human flesh and drank human blood, the flesh and blood of their God Jesus.

As a matter of fact, the ancient Roman known as Pliny the Younger, while investigating this unusual cult called Christianity, Pliny the Younger wrote to the Emperor to say that he (Pliny) determined that Christians were in fact consuming food of an “ordinary kind.”

It is striking to read that phrase “food of an ordinary kind,” because again, what it assumes is that there were rumors that Christians were cannibals, which was not the case.

And so, in John’s Gospel, from our reading today, we see as well that there were the rumors about Christians as cannibals.

And such was the case, that some followers of Jesus no longer went with Jesus.

And so Jesus asks his twelve closest disciples, “Do you, too, want to go away?”

And Peter says, “To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

You see, Peter recognizes Jesus for who he is.

Peter recognizes Jesus as the one who is bending that long arc of the moral universe, bending that arc toward justice.

Jesus has the words of eternal life.

To which we might say, “Wait a minute, what does eternal life have to do with justice?”

Eternal life after all has to do with heaven, has to do with existence in the afterlife, has to do with our salvation in the world beyond.

And justice, well that is a word that speaks to our present world, to our present condition.

So, what do Jesus’ words of eternal life have to do with the arc of justice?

Interestingly enough, this “assumed disconnect” is something we have been examining a great deal in the program Thriving Together, which I mentioned I (and Nadine and Otis) have been a part.

You see, there is an “assumed disconnect” which is evident in the divide between the white church and the black church when it comes to each church’s focus.

The White Church, denominations typically considered “white” including Lutherans, we tend to be focused more on the theology of eternal life—how do I live so that I can get to heaven.

On the other hand, the Black Church, denominations typically considered “black,” those churches tend to be more focused on exposing, and calling out injustice, particularly as it has affected the black community.

Not that salvation and heaven aren’t important to the black church, too.

PAUSE

There is an assumed disconnect then between “the words of eternal life” and “the call for justice,” but the truth is that justice has everything to do with the words of Jesus and the words of eternal life.

If nothing else, Jesus was a revolutionary. Jesus was one who spoke out about injustice as he saw it.

Jesus came from that long line of OT prophetic tradition, where the OT prophets repeatedly called out the powers that be who acted unjustly specifically toward the poor, the disadvantaged, and lowly.

And Jesus’ vision of eternal life, of salvation, was not so much about some far off world, some heaven light years away, where we would be transported and everything would be hunky dory.

No, Jesus’ vision of eternal life, of heaven, is that of God’s kingdom here on earth among God’s people, where justice and righteousness will rule the day.

That is what Jesus even taught us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer.

“Thy kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.”

And so, yes, Jesus has the words of eternal life, but those words are about justice, about righteousness rooted in God’s inbreaking kingdom here on earth.

And so, yes, we definitely must say that Jesus is bending the arc toward justice, toward righteousness, all that which is meant to be “right” in the world.

And those words “righteousness” and “justice” are one and the same.

“Righteousness” and “justice” being synonymous in the New Testament, both words stemming from the Greek word “dikaiosune” (DICK-KAI-O-SOON-NAY).

Jesus is bending the arc, where that kingdom of God here on earth will be one of justice, one of righteousness.

The Bible even envisions this arc in its completion, where the kingdom fully embraces justice.

Because Jesus is resurrected, because Jesus has defeated sin, death, and the devil, because Jesus has overcome, has overcome the injustice of this world...

Because of Jesus and the power of his cross and resurrection, the Book of Revelation can indeed speak of the end time, where a new heaven and a new earth, where a New Jerusalem comes down, and where things are put right.

Yes, the Bible in Revelation sees that vision of justice as “already, but not yet.”

The Bible in Revelation sees that vision of a just kingdom of God as one day coming to fruition, as the arc fully bent.

In short, we can sum up the vision of God’s just kingdom in Jesus Christ with just two words...Love wins.

Love wins.

God’s love in Christ Jesus wins.

That is what the empty cross declares.

Love wins.

Jesus is bending the arc toward justice, toward righteousness, because of God’s love.

PAUSE

And so what is our calling?

What are we to do today as followers of Christ?

What is our mission as we stand on this timeline of history?

Well, maybe the best way to answer that is by sharing one more quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.

King said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”

And so, like Jesus’ words and Jesus’ actions had consequence so as to change the world, because Jesus was light and Jesus was love...

Like Jesus who had the words of eternal life...and worked toward the vision of a just kingdom...

So, too, are we called to be light in the midst of darkness.

So, too, are we called to be loving in the midst of hatred.

Our very lives are an instrument, our very lives are a means of agency in this world, to help bend the moral arc of the universe just that much further.

PAUSE

Jesus asked his Twelve closest disciples and asks us too, “Do you also wish to go away?”

Or will you stand with this revolutionary movement which is Christianity, so as then to stand alongside justice?

Let us stand under that banner of Christianity that proclaims, “Love wins.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.