

“Pride (In the Name of Love)”

January 18, 2008

On Tuesday of this coming week, as a nation, we will observe a rite of passage that, in its own right, is something worthy note. On January 20th, we will witness the peaceful transfer of power from one president to another. Even with all the political acrimony and divisions that exist among us...the transfer of office from George W. Bush to Barack Obama comes from casting ballots, not bullets. Moreover though, the significance of this inauguration does seem to carry with it a bit more historical weight—especially coming the day after we observe Martin Luther King, Jr. day. Barack Obama is the first person of color to be elected president. No matter who won the election...had John McCain and Sarah Palin been elected, that too would have set historical precedent...no matter the outcome, this election was about change...about firsts.

Being the first of anything is difficult—I mean, those of you who are first children, the oldest child in family...you know what that’s like. Take my brother and me for instance...my brother was the first of four, and I was the last...We often laugh that we don’t think we had the same parents. For my brother the rules were very strict...they even peeled his grapes for fear he’d choke on them. Me, well by the time I came along, they had relaxed quite a bit...Stanley, which one is he? Umm, he’d be the one out playing in traffic!

On a more serious note, the first of anything most often is a challenge...pioneers, groundbreakers, challengers of the system are often misunderstood and maligned because what they are doing doesn’t fit the mold...AND it tends to challenge the “establishment”—the establishment which stands to lose its control and dominance in whatever arena that “first” is challenging.

And we don’t have to look too far to find this even now. In 1984 my mom was ordained in the Presbyterian Church and found a very cool reception from her male colleagues and the governing body of the church. She was bypassed for appointments and always felt as if she was held to a different standard.

And, our very own Linda McCoy who was ordained as an elder in 1987 faced many of the same challenges in the United Methodist Church. The first United Methodist woman ordained was in 1956...since then no more than about 10% of our clergy population have been women.

To this very day at St. Luke’s we routinely have requests for pastors to do weddings and funerals. An all too often, common scenario is that and if one of our three clergy women are suggested, the person will say they’d prefer to have a male pastor perform the service. I’m proud to say our stance is that if they don’t want the pastor we have assigned, then they can find another church.

Well, as we think about the enormous weight of the civil rights movement, and the observance of Martin Luther King Day tomorrow, there is another story of a *first* that I heard recently. In 1958, seven years before Martin Luther King would lead the civil rights march in Selma, Alabama, Canadian hockey player Willie O’Ree became the first black player to break the color barrier in the National Hockey League. In coming to an all white league, what surprised him was not that people didn’t accept him; he expected that...but the degree of raw hatred that existed—that surprised him. O’Ree was signed by the Boston Bruins, and the incident that crystallized this hatred in his mind was a game playing against the Chicago Blackhawks in Chicago.

He was checked into the boards hard by a white player...the player then gripped the end of his stick and bludgeoned O’Ree in the mouth and eye, which knocked out his front teeth and lacerated his eye. Again, that he’d been hit didn’t surprise O’Ree... that was hockey. What shocked him was the other player’s response...the other player stood back admiring his work, laughing and using racial slurs.

O’Ree said, as a *hockey player*, not as a black man, he had to retaliate to being attacked on the ice...he did, and he was ejected from the game. He was taken to the locker room stitched up and had his nose plugged. He wanted to rejoin his team, but had to remain in the locker room because of the vengeful crowd’s desire to bring bodily harm to him. As he sat in the dark dressing room, he said to himself, Willie, it’s just not worth it...you can go back to your home town and play hockey, you don’t need to put up with all of this.

As he sat with that thought, he turned on the lights, and said, “To heck with it, if I’m going to leave the league, I’m going to leave the league because I don’t have the skills and ability to play anymore. I’m not going to leave because some guy is trying to goad me, and get me out of the league. And he did continue to play...he played again in Chicago.

As I thought about the poignancy of Willie O’Ree’s *first*, I began this internal dialogue about human nature vs. the nature of humans.

What I mean is, is it human nature to divide, to label and then hate, or is it the nature of humans that we learn to do this? This is an age-old argument...and it is much more significant debate than just word play...*human nature vs. the nature of humans*. Think about it for a second; is it in our DNA...is it part of who we are...how we were created...to see each other as different? To divide and name each other into convenient categories...and ultimately to distrust, fear and hate those who are not in *our* category. OR, is this something we learn.

You know, pride is a funny thing...we can take great pride in our work...we can be proud of our

accomplishments, but listen to the very first entry the dictionary offers for pride it says:

a high or inordinate opinion of one's own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority, whether as cherished in the mind or as displayed in bearing, conduct, etc.

Now, listen to what Isaiah has say about pride in our first Bible passage:

The haughtiness of people shall be humbled, and the pride of everyone shall be brought low; and God alone will be exalted on that day.

>> Song: *Pride (In The Name of Love)* <<

See, here's the thing. I don't believe God put it in our DNA to separate, label and hate...we've kind of figured that out all on our own. And, I truly believe this is what Martin Luther King's dream was about. You see...King was a first too. King challenged the system...King challenged the status quo...and he used the most powerful weapon of all...love. King was a proud man, but the pride Martin Luther King brought was different...it was in the name of love. The pride of love was that love is superior to hate, and that one's dignity and self worth is not measured by our dominance or superiority over another, but instead measured by our love for one another.

I have a dream...*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*"

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood

And you see...when the song says, I still haven't found what I'm looking for...these are the words of Martin Luther King...these are the words of Jesus. They must be our words too. The truth of the matter is that the table of brotherhood isn't yet fully set...the truth of the matter is we *are* judged by the color of skin, judged by the God to whom we pray, judged by our gender, judged by our sexual orientation, our tax bracket and clothing labels...

And the truth of the matter is that still, today, the content of our character is valued only so long as it doesn't ruffle the feathers of the status quo.

I believe in the kingdom come. Then all the colors will bleed into one. I believe in the kingdom come. Then all the colors will bleed into one. Now you know these are lyrics from *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*...but for me, it's at the very essence of what I believe to be capital T truth.

There is a prayer I often use when I do a funeral part of it says this..."God, often times we think of heaven as a far off place. But perhaps heaven is closer than we think." You see...often times we think the Kingdom is a far off place, but perhaps it is closer than we think. The church and the Bible often use words that make simple things confusing...kingdom simply means...the way of God...the way God intends for things to be here...now. Peace, justice...unconditional love...that is the kingdom come. And it was Jesus, Mother Theresa, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King...firsts, all of them...firsts whose challenge of the status quo is a reminder to us that the kingdom...the way of God...isn't a far of place...it's not something mysterious that happens after we die...it is something each of us creates in the here and now. A reality made true by radical love for one another.

I believe this...this *is* what we are looking for...for the Kingdom come, where all the colors bleed into one. Where the table of brotherhood is open to all, where distrust and hatred for those who don't look exactly like us is replaced with openness and unconditional love...

CLOSING:

Do you remember those bracelets that many people were wearing a while back...WWJD...What Would Jesus Do? I was never quite comfortable wearing one of those because I always thought it was a bit presumptuous of me to assume I knew what Jesus would do. We'll I got over that! I'll tell you what I think Jesus would do...it is what Willie O'Ree did, it is what Martin Luther King did...it is what countless others have done...they have loved their enemies. It is these pioneers, these "firsts" that have challenged the system, the status quo...not with overwhelming force...superior strategy, not with wiliness or guile...but simply through love.

"You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst."

Have a great Sunday, go in the name of love...AMEN

