

## MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.'S VISION OF WORLD COMMUNITY

(01/17/10)

Scripture Readings: Matthew 15:21-28  
Luke 10:29-37; 17:11-16

*“But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.” (Luke 10:33)*

I like to walk our two dogs, Emmy and Brie, every morning. They like to roam free in the woods around our house. They like to explore, to experience different sights and smells, to play with each other and to bark at the neighbors, as if our neighbors were intruders on our street. Most of all they like to chase rabbits and squirrels.

They don't do very well with the rabbits and squirrels, at least if their goal is to catch them. I have told them on numerous occasions that it is a good thing they are living with a family that loves and feeds them, for if they had to catch their food out in the wild, they would be very hungry. They are so friendly, gentle and loving that I am not convinced they are really out to catch the rabbits and squirrels for food. I have a hunch that the initial pursuit is from instinct, for they take off like a shot. If they were to actually catch the animal, however, I have a hunch that they would just like to be friends. Since the rabbits and squirrels have no way of knowing this, they keep their distance.

On one of our morning walks some time ago, I stopped to chat with a man who is one of the pillars of a little church in our town. The church is a community church, much like ours, but their theology is somewhat conservative. I used to be invited to preach at their church until they discovered that I am a liberal. Then I never got invited back.

The man, who is quite outspoken, upon learning that I was the pastor of a nondenominational church, expressed his unsolicited opinion that the greatest threat to mankind in our century is the existence of denominations. I must confess that I have found my own denomination, the United Church of Christ, to fall somewhere between

benign and moderately helpful on a spectrum of influence in my life and ministry. I can think of far greater threats to humanity than the existence of denominations.

After I returned the favor by expressing *my* unsolicited opinion that a far greater threat to humanity is the existence of the kind of radical fundamentalism in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam that leads to fanaticism, to the construction of church states that cram their religion down people's throats, and to religious wars, we parted company. As I mused on our little exchange, it dawned on me that we were both targeting the same type of threat, though our focus was somewhat different.

I believe the greatest threat to humanity is tribalism. Tribalism, the radical identification with a single group that defines one's identity, usually gives rise to a splitting of the world into two camps or groups – our group and the other group. When we split categories into opposites like this, we invariably assign a positive value to one and a negative value to the other. We define ourselves as not-the-other and not-like-the-other. The “other,” then, becomes a threat to our basic values, to our way of living, thinking, or believing, and consequently must be controlled or eliminated.

The tribalistic way of viewing life is deeply imbedded in our Bible. The ancient Israelites divided the world into Jews and Gentiles, Gentiles being non-Jews. It followed, of course, that God loved the Jews and hated the Gentiles. This led to the self-righteous slaughter or enslavement of the Canaanites, the people whose territories the Israelites conquered. This dynamic is still a barrier to the realization of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

We Christians have carried on this troublesome and at times shameful part of our Judeo-Christian heritage. Our division of the world into Christians and non-Christians led to the misguided missionary efforts to convert the heathen. Our division of the world into Christians and Jews contributed to the mentality that gave rise to the Holocaust. The division of the world into Christians and Islamic infidels led to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Muslims during the Crusades. Our division of the world into

Christians and pagans set the stage for the torture and death of millions of women who were branded as witches in the Middle Ages. When we divided Christendom into orthodox believers and heretics, we opened the door to the tortures of the Inquisition.

This week, as many denominations celebrate a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we should reflect on how we Protestants divided Christendom into Protestants and Catholics, leading us to view Catholics as the enemy, and how Catholics did the same thing when they divided Christendom into Catholics and non-Catholics, with the assumption that only Catholics went to heaven. Tribalism, not particularly between denominations, as my friend believes, but as a ubiquitous psychological and sociological phenomenon has proved to be the greatest impediment to peace and the creation of world community in the history of the human race.

Tribalism is not the exclusive possession of religious groups, though religious groups have championed it throughout history. When our western European ancestors, those who became Americans, divided the world into civilized and primitive, the division led to the genocide of the Native Americans and the domination of the native peoples of the European colonies in Africa, Asia, and South and Central America. Our division of the world into white and black led to the enslavement of the black or African race and to the perhaps permanent damage to the cultural dominant of African-Americans in this country.

In this century, we Americans divided the world into capitalists, who are the good guys, and communists, who are the bad guys. This led us to view the Soviet Union, in the words of President Reagan, as “the evil empire,” and it was proposed as a justification for a preemptive nuclear strike that would blow the Soviet Union off the face of the earth. Concurrently, of course, the communists were projecting their shadow onto us, much as several Islamic groups do today in their depiction of the United States as Satan.

Whenever we split the world into two groups we invariably assign a positive value to one group and a negative value to the other. This judgment on the native inferiority of the other then becomes a justification for abuse. The Jewish theologian Martin Buber says that when we engage in this kind of dichotomization we are viewing the other person not as a “Thou”, a person who is an end in his/her own right, but as an “It”, as a thing. It is well known that in order to kill an enemy, we must first dehumanize him/her.

We can observe how this tribalistic mentality, this arbitrary dividing of the world into two groups, evolves in scripture and even in the life of Jesus. At times, Jesus talks about the world and his ministry in this primitive tribalistic way, while at other times he moves past it and encourages us to move past it.

The clearest statement of the tribalism which I find troubling in many religious traditions, not only our own, is found in II Kings 5.15. Here Naaman, whom Elisha has cured of leprosy, confesses: “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.” The world is divided into two groups -- Israel and the rest of the world. God is in Israel, but nowhere else. The passage implies that only the Israelites have a relationship with God. This makes God a very small God, the possession or the property of a single tribe. This belief leads to an inflated sense of importance, to seeing oneself as special in the eyes of God, and inevitably leads to the domination or forced conversion of other religious groups.

In Jesus’ time, the basic split was between Jews and Gentiles. The most commonly mentioned group of Gentiles in the New Testament is the Samaritans, the people of neighboring Samaria.

In Matthew 10.05, we read that Jesus split the world into these two camps, or at least the person who wrote the Gospel According to Matthew split the world into these two camps. We read:

*These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the*

*lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.*

This passage speaks to the theological issue of whether Jesus is to be seen as the Messiah, the one from the line of King David who was sent by God to redeem or free Israel, or whether Jesus is the Christ, the Logos, the Word of God, and consequently whose identity and mission were much bigger than this. At times, as we can see in this passage, Jesus seems to see himself and his disciples as ministering only to Israel. At other times he broadens his focus to include all people, even people who were enemies of the Jews.

The crowning statement of this conflict in the way Jesus viewed Israel and other groups as well as how he viewed himself and his mission, comes in the passage we heard this morning from the Gospel of Matthew. In this passage we see Jesus confront the limitations of his tribal perspective and begin to understand himself as part of a bigger picture.

The woman who comes to Jesus to seek healing for her daughter is a Gentile, more specifically a Canaanite. In this passage Jesus refers to her as a dog. He refers to the Jews as children, the non-Jews as dogs, and the benefits of his ministry as food for the children, not food for the dogs. If he said this, if he referred to the woman and her daughter as dogs, it was clearly not one of his finest hours.

The woman confronts him on his tribal perspective, gently calling him forth into a bigger picture both of himself and of all the children of God, when she says, "Sir, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Jesus, obviously moved by her answer, says, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Her daughter was healed instantly. I have a hunch that when confronted by the woman's faith and her humility, Jesus found himself ashamed of what he had said. If he wasn't, he should have been.

This morning we heard the story of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite, both of whom are Jews, pass by the man who had been beaten by robbers. By contrast, it is a Samaritan, a foreigner, one who was not expected to show sympathy to Jews, who is "moved with pity" and who ministers to the man. In this parable, Jesus

challenges the Jews to think of the Samaritans as their neighbors, to see them as in the context of an "I-Thou" relationship, to see them as human beings with feeling and compassion, not to see them in the context of the kind of "I-It" relationship which Martin Buber tells us is so destructive to the creation of world community.

Further on in the Gospel According to St. Luke we find the story of the healing of the ten lepers. Luke 17:11-16 tells us that of the ten who were cleansed, nine were Jews and one was a Samaritan.

*On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.*

Once again, Jesus dissolves the split, the categories of Jew and Gentile, the categories of Jew and Samaritan that we find in other passages of scripture.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached and lived that bigger picture which Jesus came to teach us. He tried to dissolve the tribalism and its accompanying judgments of superior and inferior that plagues our society. Although he fought for equal rights for blacks, he did not split the world into black and white. He reminded us that we are all children of God. It is because of this vision and his tireless efforts to this end that he was killed, just as Mahatma Gandhi was murdered by a Hindu fanatic for suggesting that Hindus and Muslims shouldn't have to be assigned different countries; they should be able to live together in peace and harmony.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream was a dream that prejudice and racism could be eliminated, that black people and white people could live together as brothers and sisters. He reminds us that this dream is deeply rooted in the American dream. He spoke to both whites and blacks from the steps of the Lincoln monument when he said:

*I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self evident: that all people are created equal.*

*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 down together at the table of brotherhood.*

*I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.*

*I have a dream that my four 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 the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and girls and walk together as brothers and sisters.*

*This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountains of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.*

*This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning,*

*My country, 'tis of thee,  
Sweet land of liberty,  
Of thee I sing.  
Land where my fathers died,  
Land of the Pilgrim's pride,  
From every mountain side,  
Let freedom ring.*

My dogs realize rabbits and squirrels are different from them, just as people are different from them. However, I believe they only have two categories: friends whom they know and friends whom they don't yet know. I really believe they just want to be friends with the little rabbits and squirrels they encounter on our walks. I don't think they have a category for enemy. There are just friends we know and friends we want to get to know. You can learn a lot from dogs.

My prayer for us as individuals, for our church, for our world, and perhaps especially for our nation is that we will set aside this myopic psychology of tribalism, a mind-set that has shaped our perception and our response to those whom we perceived as members of the “other,” the “out” or inferior group throughout history. When we dissolve this tribalistic perspective, we live the vision to which Jesus calls us: we see all the peoples of the world as children of God and thus as our brothers and sisters. When we do this, we carry forth the legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of our greatest Americans, who called us, who challenged us to live together, black and white, Jew and Gentile, as brothers and sisters. When we do this, we help to make his dream, his vision of world community become a living reality for us and for our children.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
January 17, 2010*