

“This is Spirit”

January 15, 2017

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It's so good to be with you this morning, especially on this weekend when we honor the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. What I would like for you to think about for a few minutes this morning is this: That the work of the Spirit of God inside the human heart is to break down walls, build bridges and bring people together. Now, that's a sweeping generality, but I think it's true. Building bridges is the essence of the Christian faith.

I love that at the baptism of Jesus, the Spirit came upon him as a gentle dove. I love that when the early Church was born, the Holy Spirit came upon the people as a mighty rushing wind, and people from different backgrounds and ethnicities could understand the gospel in their own language. I love that Jesus talked about how the Spirit of God is within us all, and that the Spirit heals those places inside our hearts where we are fractured and fragmented and broken. Remember the word *religion* literally means to *bind back together*, and that happens within ourselves and it happens with those around us when we allow the Spirit to have influence on our lives.

You see this in our reading today from the Gospel of John. Jesus is baptized and the Spirit of God comes upon him, and then as a natural consequence, the disciples go out and begin welcoming others into the Jesus movement. Notice that the Spirit arrives and people are welcomed. The Spirit arrives and people are brought together. The Spirit arrives and community is born. That's the spiritual rhythm of the Christian faith. And so anytime we can be people of reason and love, we are participating in the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit.

But there's another side to this story. What do we do when it's not so easy to bring people together? What do we do when there are real differences with people? Not imagined but real. What does the Spirit of God do for us in those moments when we think we're right and the other person is wrong? Or what do we do when we feel like another person is taking advantage of us? How do you respect someone who doesn't respect you? How do you listen to someone who is unwilling to listen to you? Do you see

where I'm going with this? I love that the Holy Spirit wants to bring people together. Yes, count me in for that.

Yet sometimes the Holy Spirit creates tension inside us too. Yes, you heard me right. God creates tension in us. I know everyone thinks God is supposed to be one great big dose of spiritual Xanax, but that's really not how it works. Faith troubles the soul from time to time. Faith brings discomfort to us from time to time. Faith challenges our assumptions from time to time. There's always a tension between the world we want and the world we have, and frankly, that tension is a good thing.

Last Sunday night I watched the Golden Globes award ceremony. I mean, really, we live in Los Angeles, we have to watch the award shows! It's sermon research! But beyond *La La Land* winning most of the awards last Sunday night, the big moment was when Meryl Streep was given a lifetime achievement award. Did you see that? Meryl Streep is amazing. Who doesn't like Meryl Streep? Well, apparently, the President-elect doesn't like Meryl Streep.

In her acceptance speech she mentioned the need for us to keep loving the arts, to keep the press unfettered and free. And she also addressed the penchant of *some* people, she didn't mention a specific name, but of *some* people to wield their power in inappropriate ways. Her speech was heartfelt. She was speaking the truth of what many are feeling in our country. And she ended by pleading with the press to do their job. To keep track of information. To give us the facts, not the spin but the facts.

But that five-minute speech created an enormous amount of tension this past week. Some people loved it. Some people hated it. Some people thought it was completely inappropriate to make a political statement at the Golden Globes. And then Donald Trump tweeted the next day that Meryl Streep is an overrated actress. It's tension! (I don't know, maybe we do need a Xanax!)

I'm all for America coming together. Aren't you? I want our new President to succeed. Don't you? I have enormous respect for the office of the President, and I don't care who is sitting in the Oval Office. Don't you? But tension is real. We can't come together and pretend like racism doesn't matter. We can't come together and pretend like xenophobia doesn't matter. We can't come together and pretend like sexual orientation doesn't matter. We can't come together and pretend like common decency and truth and respect don't matter. And so what do we do when we feel this tension?

I think we turn to God's Spirit within. And sometimes that Spirit gives us wisdom and insight. And sometimes that Spirit doesn't give us the answer, but it remains a presence with us even while we live with the tension. And sometimes the Spirit gives us insight on how to disagree with an idea without diminishing the person. And sometimes the Spirit gives us strength to stand up for what we think is right. It's tension, but it's the kind of tension that is not a bad thing.

I'm thinking about creative tension for another reason this morning. In the spring of 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr was in a Birmingham jail. He was there because he was leading protests and sit-ins in the city of Birmingham. The conditions of black people in that city were deplorable. But while he was in prison, his friends sent word to him, and the message was clear: "Dr. King, we think you're moving too quickly. We think you need to back off a little bit. You need to negotiate with the mayor and with the governor of Alabama. We can't get all of this at once. We can only make changes a little bit at a time. You need to slow down and be more realistic."

That was the message. Imagine how Dr. King felt in that jail. Imagine what it would be like to get a message like that from your friends. Yet Dr. King had a message of his own. While sitting in that humiliating jail cell, he wrote what I think is the most interesting document of the Civil Rights Movement. He wrote a letter to his friends and supporters. It was one thing to feel conflict with the segregationists, but another to feel this deep tension with your colleagues. Dr. King, and I'm paraphrasing here, Dr. King wrote and said "I hear you. I understand. But we have to live up to our promise. And we have to keep following the dream. There is injustice here for our people. Our people need us to stand up. And protest. And resist. You're worried about us doing too much. You should be worried about why we're doing these protests at all. Think of the deplorable conditions of African American workers in Birmingham. Think of the prejudice they have lived under for generations. Think of the pain and suffering they have experienced because of segregation. We can't slow down. We are doing this for them."

It's such a fascinating document because you can feel tension inside every sentence. Sometimes good people disagree. Sometimes people who love one another disagree. Sometimes people who love the same country disagree. The Spirit of God within us helps us build bridges. And God knows we need more

bridges. But what I'm also saying is that the Spirit of God helps us live with the tensions we encounter in life. I'm thinking of the wisdom that comes from one of my favorite writers, Parker Palmer. He wrote several years ago now: "The tensions we feel are not trying to tear us apart, they are trying to open us up to a deeper place."

And that's what happened to Dr. King. Listen to how he responded in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, and notice how he uses the very word *tension*. He writes "You may well ask Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation the better path? You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to dramatize the issue so that it can no longer be ignored. I am not afraid of the word *tension*."

That is an amazing paragraph. "I am not afraid of the word *tension*." The Civil Rights Movement, at times looked like it was tearing the nation apart. But it was actually opening our nation up. It was a creative tension. The Feminist Movement looked like it was tearing our nation apart, but it was actually opening our nation up. The Black Lives Matter Movement, so necessary to call attention to the threat of violence that black people live with every single day in this country, it's not trying to tear our nation apart; it's trying to open us up so we can address injustice in our day. The Environmental Movement is not trying to tear our nation apart, it's trying to open us up to the plight and possibilities of Mother Earth. And some of the tension that Meryl Streep and Donald Trump were feeling last week, and what a lot of us are feeling these days, that tension is trying to open up something new in America. I'm not quite sure what it is yet, but I believe something new is trying to open up for American right now. It's tension. But even tension can become the landscape of the Spirit.

And so friend, let me encourage you to not relieve your stress about things too quickly. Live with the tension. Let it open you up. Let it become part of the landscape of the Spirit of God. And this week especially, let's pray for our nation and the new President. I love you all. Let's love one another. And I say it as a real prayer, not a cliché but a prayer. May God bless America. Amen.

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