

This week marks my one-year anniversary as the pastor of Covenant, and it's not an exaggeration to say it's been a dream come true. Though it's been challenging to get to know each other in a pandemic, I know far more of you this year than I did last, so that's good. As I've gotten to know you as a church, of this I am sure: Covenant, you are beautiful. In ways both large and small you are living into your mission statement as an accepting, welcoming community sharing the glory of God's love with all. I'm eager to discover how God is inviting us to live further into that mission.

At the age of 26, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a year into his pastorate at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama. King didn't come to Montgomery to lead a movement. He came to preach and pastor as his father had done in Atlanta, Georgia. But on December 1, 1955, a 12-year veteran of the Civil Rights movement named Rosa Parks was arrested, not so that a white man could have her seat, which is how we often tell the story. No, it was much worse than that. Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to leave her seat so that a white man could have three empty seats beside him. This man could not stand the indignity of even sitting across the aisle from a black woman. Recounting the event in her autobiography, Parks said:

People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.

In the hours after Rosa was arrested on a Thursday night, the Women's Political Council in Montgomery quickly mobilized. They had been planning a boycott for many months and decided now was the time. By Friday morning, they printed over 52,000 fliers to be distributed to the Black community announcing a 1-day bus boycott on the following Monday, December 5.

On the evening of December 5, a group of clergy met and formed a new organization they called the Montgomery Improvement Association, and they elected the young pastor from Dexter Avenue to be their spokesperson. The one-day boycott ended up lasting over a year, and the Civil Rights movement was born. Over the next decade, thousands of people, mostly young people of color, were tired of giving in to the indignity and injustice of a racial caste system in a supposedly free country. Through their organization and commitment even unto death, our country and our world, bent closer to justice.

Justice is a central theme of the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. God created the cosmos in the outflow of love that is the divine life. God created humanity in the divine image, to live in mutuality with one another and all creation. God did not create us for domination, but as our Call to Worship said, "to seek justice, to share power, and live together in love and equality." This is the life God calls us to enjoy, but of course, we don't always live into our calling, do we? One of my seminary professors liked to say, we live our lives in the gap between our condition and our calling. We are called to love and justice, but we live in a world of cruelty and injustice.

The scriptures declare over and over that God will not tolerate injustice indefinitely. Israel's founding identity is that when they were slaves in Egypt, God delivered them from

their oppression. God called them to a new land of promise and rest, but it didn't take long for Israel to start acting like an oppressor themselves. God warns them about this again and again, that if the wealthy and powerful take advantage of the poor and the weak, God will not stand by idly. The prophets remind Israel that God will not be mocked, for we reap what we sow.

The prophet Amos tells Israel that the wealthy elite have trampled on the heads of the poor and denied justice to the oppressed for too long. Being God's chosen people will not shield Israel from divine justice. Amos goes so far as to say that when Israel worships God but neglects the poor, God rejects that worship: "I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies," says the Lord, and then come those words that Dr. King quoted time and again, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." And justice did roll. Within decades of Amos' prophecy, Israel was sent into exile for 70 years. We reap what we sow. When we sow injustice, we will reap judgment and exile. That was true for ancient Israel, and it's true for us today.

As you've heard me preach over the past year, you know that I prefer to preach on mercy, not judgment. I prefer to preach as I did last week on God's unchanging love for each and every one of us, rather than prophetic calls to justice. But what the prophets understood, and what Dr. King understood, is that love and justice are not opposing forces. They are different expressions of the same will of God for the flourishing of all creation. My favorite definition of justice comes from Dr. Cornel West who says, "Justice is what love looks like in public." Justice is not about evening the scales. It has nothing to do with vengeance or retribution. Justice restores the beloved community, brining care into our public life. Justice can feel harsh and unloving, at its best it is what love looks like in public.

For the man who couldn't bear the indignity of sitting across the aisle from Rosa Parks, allowing him to continue in his delusion that she is beneath him is unloving. For him to live a full life, he needs to see that we are, as King said, "tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." To treat her as beneath him, doesn't just degrade her, it degrades him as well. That's why our confession of sin said, "We participate in our own oppression."

The prophets remind us, at times with strong language, that we belong to one another. That's what our reading of Jesus' genealogy in Luke reminds us as well. Last week we heard God say that Jesus is God's beloved Son in whom God is well pleased. We might be tempted to think those words only apply to Jesus, but Luke's genealogy connects Jesus all the way back to Adam who Luke also calls, "the son of God." It's not just Jesus who is a child of God, everyone descended of Adam is too. This is Luke's way of saying that while we may forget it and deny it, we are all children of God, which is why we dare not treat anyone as inferior or unworthy. Racism and oppression deny our interconnectedness, and that's what God wants to restore.

Prophetic judgment feels harsh, but in fact, it invites us to our true calling of love and justice. Judgment is hard edge of grace, welcoming us back to right relationship, which is also known as the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not someplace we go when we die. No, it's our invitation here and now to take our place at God's big table, where everyone belongs. Dr. King called this the Beloved Community. All the protests and sit ins, all the truth-telling and advocacy was in service of this one goal, the creation of the beloved community.

On Christmas Eve in 1967, King preached a sermon in which he restated his commitment to non-violence. He said to his would-be oppressors:

Do to us what you will and we will still love you... Throw us in jail and we will still love you. Threaten our children and bomb our churches and our homes and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drag us out on some wayside road and beat us and leave us half dead, and we will still love you... But be assured we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.

Justice repairs the divisions between us, restoring us all as children of God. God loves us too much to allow injustice to stand forever. So let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

