

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., MARTYR AND RENEWER OF SOCIETY | JANUARY 8, 2023

ISAIAH 49:1-7 | PSALM 40:1-11 | 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9 | JOHN 1:29-42

There's a story that Martin Luther King, Jr. tells in his autobiography about a low point in his life. It comes right at the start of his ministry in Montgomery. This should have been an exciting time. He's in his mid-twenties. He has an infant daughter at home. He's supposed to be working on his PhD and getting settled in at Dexter Avenue Baptist. And one night he tells another pastor named Ralph Abernathy that he can host some meeting about a bus boycott in his church basement. And when they need someone to organize the boycott, King agrees. And his expectation is that the boycott will be over in a few days after as he put it, some "negotiations between people of good will."¹

That's not what happened. Two months later, the boycott is still going on. He's starting to get death threats at home. This whole community of people is relying on him for guidance. And he doesn't see a way out. And one night, he can't sleep so he goes down to his kitchen and makes a pot of coffee and all the pressure becomes too much. In his autobiography, he writes, "The words I spoke to God are still vivid in my memory, 'Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering, I'm losing my courage... I'm at the end of my powers. I have nothing left.'"²

This isn't the way we like to think of our heroes. We like to think of them as having a clear vision, an iron resolve, and an unshakeable certainty about their call, not staring out the window at midnight riddled with doubt. And yet, even if this story doesn't strike us as exactly heroic, it still feels deeply human. Because most of us know what it's like to feel like we don't have the right gifts for what we've been called to do.

That feeling of inadequacy is exactly what St. Paul talks about in today's second reading. The church in Corinth had all of these divisions in it. And one of the divisions was because of a group of people who had received gifts and talents from God. But instead of making them grateful to God, those gifts only served to make them feel superior to others. And Paul spends a bunch of this letter telling them to, I'm paraphrasing, please knock it off. Because it meant that there was this whole other group of people in the church who felt that they did not have the right kind of gifts. They believed they were lacking what they really needed to be faithful in their service.

And maybe you can sympathize with that latter group. It is so easy for us to focus on the gifts and talents and abilities that we don't have. Maybe our experience isn't as intense as Jesus's in Gethsemane or King's at his kitchen table, but we know the feeling that God's calling is too much to bear. That we lack the right gifts. Or that we are the wrong kind of person. Or that we don't have the right timing.

When we feel that we're lacking, it's easy to fall into two traps. One trap is envy. To believe that other people have vastly superior talents. And we could really make a difference in the world if only we possessed the gifts that other people have. *Those are the kinds of people who can really make a difference. I'm not in a position to do much of anything.* The other trap is quietism. Quietism is the belief that until we have everything perfect, we should do nothing. If we aren't sure we'll do it perfectly right, better to do nothing and make

¹ Background here is from Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (Basic Books, 2008).

² Martin Luther King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Grand Central Publishing, 2001).

sure we're not wrong. That our highest goal in life is to do nothing wrong, or, as St. Paul says, to be "blameless."

Envy assumes that the gifts that God gives us aren't good enough. Quietism assumes that the gifts God gives us aren't actually supposed to be used. Neither one is going to cut it for St. Paul, and neither one should cut it for us.

And so right at the beginning of this letter, St. Paul wants the Corinthians and us to get it right. "You are not lacking in any spiritual gift... for in every way you have been enriched in [Christ]." In other words, you have what you need to do what you have been called to do.

So remember this group of people in Corinth who have talked themselves into believing that they don't have any spiritual gifts. The problem, Paul says, isn't that you don't have gifts. It's that you've fallen into that envy trap. You see your gifts and think they aren't worth much. But what makes those gifts valuable—we could say what makes them holy—has less to do with what they accomplish than with where they come from. They are valuable not because they help us do things other people find noteworthy but because they are given to us by God. Their worth comes from their source, not their end.

And we use those gifts to do what we have been called to do. And what has God called us to do? We heard this last week when we affirmed our baptisms. We are called "to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth." And thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are not just called or commanded or instructed to do that. But we are actually empowered to do just that. To proclaim the good news, serve all people, and strive for justice and peace.

St. Paul tells us that God has given us gifts so that we can participate in Jesus's redeeming and reconciling work. To use Luther's old phrase, we are encouraged to "sin boldly." To sin boldly does not mean that you should run a bunch of red lights and cheat on your taxes and go in the express lane with eleven items. To sin boldly means that you should make your reverent best guess at how to live in the world, knowing full well that sometimes you are going to get wrong.³ Instead of falling into envy—somebody else should use their gifts—or quietism—I don't want to make a mistake with my gifts—this means trusting that in Christ, God has strengthened and enriched us for our life together. That we are not lacking any spiritual gift.

That low point that King experienced turned out to be the spiritual foundation of the rest of his life. Not because he came up with a new strategy or developed a new skill. Not because he had a brilliant idea or found someone else to delegate responsibility to. Here's how he describes what happened. "I tell you I've seen the lightning flash. I've heard the thunder roar. I've felt sin breakers dashing trying to conquer my soul. But I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me alone."

That's the same thing St. Paul wanted those Corinthians and all of us to know. That Jesus will never leave us alone. Whenever we fall back into envy and quietism, Jesus will agitate us into humble service. And whenever we come to our lowest point, God gives us faith to take on a resurrection point of view. To see our gifts as signs of God's mercy. To make our reverent best guess. To sin boldly, yes, but to love bolder still.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

³ There's a good discussion of this idea toward the end of Charles Marsh, *Evangelical Anxiety* (Harper Collins, 2022). Can't find the page number right now.