

Who is My Neighbor?
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn
January 17, 2010

Scripture: John 2:1-11; 1 John 4:18-21

In a sermon titled “Antidotes for Fear,” Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King shared the story of a woman he knew as Mother Pollard.

She was, as King described her, one of the most dedicated participants in the bus protests in Montgomery, Alabama. King said she was an elderly woman, poor with hardly any formal education. But she possessed a deep understanding of what the Civil Rights movement meant.

King recalled a conversation with her several weeks into the bus protest. She had been walking to work, church and the store. Someone asked her if she was tired. Mother Pollard answered with what King described as “ungrammatical profundity.”

“My feets is tired,” she said, “but my soul is rested.”

One year ago, as we inaugurated the nation’s first black president, the souls of many Americans were at rest in a new way. Since then, we have been reminded that governing a nation of diverse views is no easy task, especially in times of unprecedented challenges at home and around the world.

Despite mixed progress and many mixed opinions about this administration, it’s undeniable that King’s dream is still alive in so many other ways, even if it’s not yet fully realized. We have much work to do. But today King’s dream has taken on new hues and shades and Charlotte is a prime example.

King dreamed of a nation where, in his words, “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

But today we recognize that, as with so many things here in the 21st century, it’s more complex. It’s not just a black and white issue. As a global city in a global village, we see that in the diversity of faces here in Charlotte. Whites are already a minority in our public schools, where students speak more than 100 native languages. It’s projected that by 2015 whites will be a minority across the city’s entire population.

In particular, Charlotte is increasingly Latino. Consider these data:

In 2007, the latest stats available, one in 10 people in Mecklenburg County was Latino, 89,000 people, compared to about 7 percent statewide. One in five children born in our city's hospitals is Latino. That equates to the population of one of the state's larger cities.

While these numbers may be a bit diminished by the recession, Charlotte is still one of the top cities the national media come to when reporting on Latino immigration. And, to be sure, our local and state economy would not be the same without our new neighbors.

You, of course, don't need data. We see our new neighbors around town, not all parts of town, mind you, but in east Charlotte, down South Boulevard and in other pockets. As with almost every city in America, we are effectively a segregated city, after all. Rev. King called segregation the "not-to-distant cousin of slavery" and, even with civil rights laws, the separations of race and class are plenty visible.

In his day, King and others pricked the conscious of Christians to bring about more equity and justice. God's word was the instrument of constructive agitation then. And, in the same way, we are confronted with the word of God, which directs us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Love takes many forms of course, including working for justice, and with our Latino brothers and sisters that brings the conversation to immigration in short order.

We can debate how our new neighbors got here, what drove them from their homes and families, why they came to the land of the free, the land of opportunity, who should stay and what obligations we have for those who are here. Those are necessary conversations if the many sides of the immigration debate are ever to find common ground and move forward.

What we do know is that both progressives and more recently evangelicals agree that immigration and enforcement policy in America is broken. Nationally, our denomination is active in shaping the direction of policy and the PCUSA website has good materials for our reading and education.

Here in Charlotte, signs point to a more active conversation than ever on these topics. Just last week, our own Joyce Deaton, in a letter to the editor, called the local sheriff to task for defending how his office has abused its license to arrest and deport immigrants for minor infractions – or none at all - under the 287 (g) laws. On the other end of the spectrum, the same day's newspaper reported the danger to our community posed by the Latino MS-13 gang. As with other gangs or professional criminals, there is no place here for them. All of these issues and others deserve more attention from the pulpit and in our educational efforts.

But for today, perhaps we should focus on just one word – hospitality. As a church, Caldwell has several immediate reasons – or, we might think of them as callings – to build bridges with our newest neighbors.

Our Vision Team to Guatemala, which will share its experiences at today’s covered dish luncheon, has a particular understanding of the poverty that pervades Central America and which, naturally, may cause some to look for opportunity elsewhere.

Our new partnership with Merry Oaks Elementary School puts many of you in the classroom with young, low-income Latinos and gives you a glimpse of the challenges their families face. And now God has put us together with the Central Avenue Bilingual Preschool. Soon, two classrooms in our Price Education Building will light up with the play and the learning of 34 Latino preschoolers, along with the love and caring of their teachers.

If we were not people of faith, we would have plenty of reasons to act. We could take the most pragmatic angle, that we have an enlightened self-interest in putting these children on the best path possible. These children are American citizens, if that matters to you, and they will grow up on our streets and in our schools and many will look to start their own adult lives here in our city. With education, they will be in position to accept economic opportunity and able to contribute to the community, which serves the peace, security and prosperity of all.

But surely our reasoning goes further, surely faith takes us further. Hindu scripture and the Qur’an agree with the Old and New Testaments that our creator expects us to care for the stranger, the wayfarer, the guest.

Perhaps, then, deep down inside, we need to ask what might be holding us back from loving our neighbor, whatever color or race or background. Perhaps the issue is not with them. It is with us, perhaps it is within us.

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In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear the story that is often called Jesus’ first miracle, but that label risks missing the point. When the wine at the wedding party Jesus is attending runs out, Mary urges Jesus to do something about it. At first, though, Jesus declines.

“What concern is that to you and me,” he says. “My hour has not come.”

Jesus seems to think that this is neither the time nor the place for him to act, to reveal his divinity. Perhaps it is too mundane a thing. Perhaps he had another time and place in mind. In this, as some scholars point out, Jesus establishes himself as an independent thinker. He is not going to do it just because his mother told him to or because his friends are watching.

Then, however, while the text does not tell us too much about it, Jesus clearly gives the matter a second thought. He searches for his inner voice, his inner guide, which for Christ was always an act of obedience to God the creator. Before people ever asked What would Jesus do? Christ asked what would my father have me do?

The text doesn't tell us why Jesus acts. We can be sure from everything else we know about Christ that this was not a frivolous act, not a mini-miracle, a just-for-the-heck-of-it whim to keep the party going. Christ acted in response to human need, just as he did with all kinds of people, the dead and dying, the sinner and doubter, the rich and the poor.

Christ acted that day out of extravagant abundance. But it was, as Rev. Ernest Hess writes, a miracle that pointed beyond itself. He was as generous with the wine as he would be with his love and grace, all the way to the cross, for our human need.

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Almost fifty years ago, Rev. King called a people to love that deeply and that courageously. He called a people to look beyond their own suffering and persecution and to look within themselves. He called a people to name their own hour and to find their own reasons to act.

He inspired non-violence in the face of violence and the shadow of Jim Crow. He summoned those with influence and power to leave the sidelines of the debate and to level the playing field, at least as far as laws would go. He didn't hesitate to admonish when it was called for. Nor did he withhold praise for others or even the sacrifice of himself.

Some may misremember history in a way that tricks them into thinking he did these things for power, prestige or political gain. But we forget that he was first and foremost a man of God, who had expected to live a full, even routine life in the pulpit, proclaiming God's love in Christ, as he did in one of his sermons with these words.

"Jesus eloquently affirmed from the cross a higher law. He knew that the old eye-for-an-eye philosophy would leave everyone blind. He did not seek to overcome evil with evil. He overcame evil with good. Although crucified by hate, King wrote, Christ responded with aggressive love."

Aggressive love. That is a powerful concept, isn't it? What does aggressive love mean for you? For me? For Caldwell? For Charlotte? Whom does it concern? Does it have limits that stop at borders of race or class or educational level? At denominational lines or thresholds of faith traditions or sexual orientation?

Is it hindered by fear? Or do we heed the words of 1 John that we heard earlier, that perfect love casts our fear, that we love others because God first loved us?

Two thousand years ago, the Apostle Paul wrote to a group of Christians struggling to find their identity and their purpose in a multi-cultural, pluralistic world. "In Christ," he said, "there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female."

In the same spirit, the spirit of Christ, acting as his body in the world, we are called to ask, as Christ did at the wedding, whether this is our hour to act in our pluralistic world?

We are so deeply blessed by the fruits of the example of those who decades ago invited their neighbors from Piedmont Courts into church for study, singing, worship and fellowship. And we are equally blessed by the presence and today the leadership of those who were invited, who now extend their own invitation to others into this part of the body of Christ. Now these living examples sit as one, side by side, black and white, in our pews and in our choir.

The work of understanding between black and white goes on. It is not finished. But for this time, for our generation, for our church, God seems to have handed us a new color of thread. God has called us to weave together black, white and brown.

God has sent us the wayfarer, the stranger and called us to invite him in. May God inspire not just our hospitality ... but also our love in all of its forms, that it may be the kind of courageous, aggressive love that Dr. King summoned almost 50 years ago,

Amen.