

Jan. 17, 2010

Martin Luther/Martin Luther King, Jr.

Title: The Christ Centered Faith of Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr.
Hebrew Scriptures, Psalm: A Mighty Fortress in Our God. Psalm 46

Prayer: May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and his name sake, Martin Luther - what do they have in common? How did the spirit of Martin Luther inspire Martin Luther King, Jr.? Both men came from poverty. Both were well educated college graduates. Both took bold and unconventional actions. Both confronted governing authorities and the laws of the land. Both spent time in prison for their beliefs. And, both gave speeches that rocked the world.

We are familiar with the life of Martin Luther King, but the life of Martin Luther is not so familiar to us.

- He was born in German in 1483 when all of Europe was Catholic and the pope had complete authority over the church.
- His father wanted him to be a lawyer, but, one night on the way home he had a transforming experience during a thunderstorm and became a Catholic monk.
- As a monk he studied the bible. He was appointed a priest for a local parish and later became a university professor.
- He was well educated with masters and doctoral degrees in theology and biblical studies.
- But there was this one persistent problem - his spiritual life was dominated by the painful belief that no matter what he did or how 'perfect' a monk he became he was not worthy of God's grace.
- Then, when he read, again and again, the overflowing, generous healing stories of Jesus and meditated on Paul's words of the all inclusive love of God he gave up the God of judgement and anger. He writes: "My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would influence God. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him...."
- In its place he came to a new understanding of the life and death of Christ. He writes: "If you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love."

This changes everything. His conclusion - through Christ we walk into the loving heart of God. This was a very different kind of God than the authoritative God of threats, intimidation and punishment that was being perpetuated by the church. From his own spiritual journey, he begins to preach a Christ centered faith of love and grace. That's when the trouble begins.

Luther's first public act of disobedience is to nail the famous 95 Theses to the door of the Castle church in Wittenburg. These call for 'reforms' to be taken by the church, many focusing on putting an end to the paying of money to free a person from punishment in purgatory. The popular song of the day:

As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, The soul from purgatory springs.
Who would not want to pay to set free the souls of their loved ones? Such a practice was bringing in huge amounts of money for the church.

Luther was put on trial for heresy. In the court room he delivered his famous "Here I stand, I can do no other" speech. Based on the Bible, on clear reason and his conscience, he would not/he could not retract what he had written as false. His words spread across Europe like a wild fire. They were heard by kings and queens, by priest and monks, by peasants and professors. This was the beginning of the Protestant Reformation that would hold up the reading of scripture, the freedom of conscience of each individual, and through Christ, God's grace and mercy as a gift freely given to all - justification by faith alone.

Martin Luther was put into prison and scheduled to die for his beliefs. He escaped with the help of some friends and lived in hiding for the safety of his life. When he came out of hiding he continued to preach and write books that were always at odds with the prevailing beliefs of the Catholic church. Printed in German rather than the church language of Latin, the books became so popular the church began burning them. This started the public protests of burning the books of the church. Luther's defense: "Since they have burned my books, I burn theirs. The canon law was included because it makes the pope a god on earth."

Martin Luther was convinced that the gospel stories themselves and the writings of the apostle Paul are the keys to spiritual fulfillment and the comfort of a loving God. For this reason, he translated the Bible from Latin to popular German. This took the interpretation of scriptures out of the control of the church elite and put it into the hands of the people. And there were riots in the streets, the dismantling of the unquestioning control of the Catholic church and the introduction of the freedom of conscience and freedom of beliefs.

On the personal side of life, Luther married Katherine Von Bora. They had six children and this is when he experienced first hand the tender, forgiving love of a parent. For Luther his home became a Christ centered community of love, respect and intellectual pursuits. For the first time in the history of the Christian faith, home life and raising children were recognized as an honorable and rewarding faith journey. This too would forever change the understanding of the spiritual integrity of children and women and open ever wider the influence of Christ in the quest for equality and freedom for all people.

Christ centered faith led Martin Luther to rethink his faith in all areas of his life. It was this same deep Christ centered faith that motivated Martin Luther King in all that he did.

Remember the civil rights movement - how we sang *We shall overcome* holding hands with friends and strangers and believing every word, *we shall overcome (pain, hurt, hatred, unfair treatment) some day*.

There were frightening news reports, mobs of people out of control, angry adults shouting insults, school children having tomatoes thrown at them. Fire hoses were aimed at old and young, men and women. Police were hitting people with billy clubs. People lost their lives believing “some day we shall overcome” racism, discrimination, violence.” Some day we shall have voting rights for all people; equality of education, housing and jobs; fair treatment in the courts.

We believed it all, the struggle of standing up for civil rights in a non-violent public movement because, just because, Jesus once said, “Let the children come onto me.” From that day forward, some 2,000 years ago, there was a crack in the wall that would welcome into God’s realm all children - black and white, Spanish speaking and African, lame and blind, crying and laughing children. What a pivotal moment that was in the history of the world. Jesus, the man from Nazareth, who was beaten and persecuted himself, directly influencing the laws of our country today.

The astonishing logic of the statement: If God welcomes all the children, it must be a really good idea for us to do the same. Martin Luther King heard the words of Jesus and he too believed the power of those words. It caused him to have a dream, a wonderful, marvelous dream that he gave to the world at the rally in Washington DC in 1963: “I have a dream today.” he said. “that all God’s children, black people and white people, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing, “Thank God almighty, we are free at last.”

It was Jesus on the heart of Martin Luther King that kept him going and held his hopes up high. From his prison cell when arrested for ‘disturbing the peace’ he wrote these words: “Love is the most durable power in the world.” He continues, “This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most potent instrument available in humankind’s quest for peace and security.”

Then he gives us this insightful quote: “Napoleon Bonaparte, the great military genius, looking back over his years of conquest, is reported to have said: ‘Alexander, Caesar and I have built great empires, but upon what did they depend? They depended on force. But, centuries ago Jesus started an empire that was built on love, and even to this day millions will die for him.’”

Christ centered faith - that is what motivated Martin Luther King. Not politics, not circumstances, not fame or glory. When you read over his speeches, when you listen to the images he uses and the stories he tells, you realize that he is never far way from using the language of faith.

Like Martin Luther, Martin Luther King was able to turn his faith convictions into practical faith based guidelines. Here are the first four promises of the nonviolent pledge taken by thousands of people:

1. Mediate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. Remember always that the nonviolent movement seeks justice and reconciliation - not victory.
3. Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. Pray daily to be used by God in order that all people might be free.

The faith assumption - stay focused on the life, teachings and love of Jesus. As with Jesus, victory is not the goal, but rather bringing harmony and peace into the world. (The church calls this reconciliation.)

Christ centered faith - more than anything else, that is what we in the church should be celebrating on this Martin Luther King day. Our schools and news reporters regularly leave out this component, but we must never do that.

Martin Luther and Martin Luther King - their times in history were very different, their causes were different, and their leadership styles were different. Yet, they both based their faith on the belief that each individual is worthy of God's grace. Both of them lived a Christ centered faith. May we do the same. Amen.