

**“WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?”**

**Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42**

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**The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger**

In 1986, I was helping my mother move to Seattle, unpacking a box for her, a box whose contents had not seen the light of day since the 1960s. I don't remember the contents of the box—they were unremarkable—but I remember the old newspaper in which they were wrapped. The paper dated from sometime in the 1960s and the banner headline on that crumpled, brittle old copy of the front page of the Los Angeles Times read: Mayor Yorty—he was mayor of Los Angeles: “Mayor Yorty pleads with Martin Luther King: Don't Come to Los Angeles.”

It was a shock to read the article, to scan the long and distinguished list of civic leaders who were imploring King to stay away. We are so accustomed to thinking of Dr. King as the closest thing we have to a national saint that even though we know his story, we sometimes forget that when he was at his most active, he was seen by many—especially by those in power—as a dangerous man, a fool, a troublemaker and a threat. All because he preached a gospel of God's color-blind and country-blind love, a gospel of inclusion and non-violent change.

Switching gears for a moment, our gospel lesson this morning is John's version of the calling of Jesus' disciples. The account is quite different from the other three gospels. In John's version, Jesus doesn't go looking for disciples. Instead, John the Baptizer points out Jesus to Andrew and another disciple, saying “Look, here is the Lamb of God.” The Lamb image has its roots in the Exodus story of the Hebrew Bible. The Passover Lamb was killed, and its blood sprinkled on the doorposts of the houses of the Israelites when they were enslaved in Egypt, saving them from the final plague upon the Egyptians, and ultimately allowing their release from oppression. Lamb of God is one of those slippery biblical references that is at the same time both concrete and vague. John is calling Jesus the one who will save the people, the one who will free them; but saving and freeing can be understood in so many contexts: healing, miracles, violent revolution, or a get-out-of-jail-free card to heaven. People sought out Jesus for many reasons; so when the disciples came after Jesus, he turned to them and asked baldly, “What are you looking for?”

Such a simple question, but one that cuts straight to the heart of things. The commentaries make much of the disciples' inarticulate answer to Jesus' question; they ask to see where Jesus was staying, but I'm not sure that you or I could do better. Why did you come to the Christian faith? Why do you come to this particular church? What are you looking for? If you were put on the spot, asked to put words to what you are seeking in your religious life, what would you say?

I obviously can't answer for all of you. Each of us sees our religious seeking in somewhat different terms, but let me offer one possible answer, based on the particular theology of the United Church of Christ. This is not a church that places significant emphasis on healing and miracles—which is not to say that we disbelieve them; but if that is what one was primarily seeking in their Christianity, that person would probably find a different church. And the idea of being Christian as a free pass to heaven card: in

this church we don't believe that our being Christian is essential to our salvation. The United Church of Christ is, in fact, the only Christian denomination that has publicly stated that we believe in the full integrity of other religious traditions as paths to God. So if you would come to the church to be saved, in the sense of a salvation that includes some and excludes others, you probably would not come here.

The center of the religious proclamation of our denomination and of this church is, I think, closely tied to the text of the choir's anthem this morning. We are a church that proclaims, celebrates, and seeks to live out the theological conviction that love is indeed as strong or stronger than death. Love is as strong as death. In the widest possible sense, that is the center of our theology. And I believe that if not all of us, then at least many of us who come to this church come because that message is essential to our spirituality. We come because we believe or because we are yearning to believe that someone like Martin Luther King, Jr. was not a one-time phenomenon, that others can rise in his place, that we even can rise up in his place and transform the world through acts of love and compassion rather than violence and oppression.

Now I'm always nervous when I speak about love in the church. My preaching teacher in seminary was fond of saying that he never heard a sermon about Christian love that wasn't trite, saccharine, and bad. It's way too easy for those who speak about love in the church to devolve into the sappy sentimentality of a Hallmark card. But when we look at the life and teaching of Jesus, when we look at the life and work of spiritual giants, saints like Dr. King, there is nothing of the Hallmark card in them. The kind of love that Jesus preached, and Dr. King tried to live, is stern and disciplined: not warm and fuzzy at all, but an act of spiritual will. It is a love that faces danger, and refuses to turn back; love that looks directly into the face of scorn, hatred and violence, and resists answering in kind no matter what the provocation. It is love that tells the truth uncompromisingly, and will not give up, no matter how little reward is seen. This is the love, the faith that scripture promises can move mountains; and I believe that what we are looking for in the church is the hope of that promise. Whether or not we can articulate it, we come to the church because we are convinced or because we want to be convinced that God's ways are, in fact, better than our ways, and that the power of holy love is not just a pipe dream, but truly our best and surest hope.

I don't have to list for you the forces in our society that reek of decay and death. You know them and see them. We all worry about them. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by it all: the fouling of our air and our waterways; the widening gap between rich and poor; racial strife, war, envy; greed, prejudice of every stripe, and guns in the hands of children. The catalog goes on and on and on. And there is so much in our society that tells us it's only logical, it's only reasonable to fight violence and hate with an answering violence; and the way to respond to economic injustice is by securing our own fortunes first, trying to grab a larger piece of the pie; and energy concerns will be most easily addressed by tearing up the unspoiled places of the earth to find more oil. These voices call themselves pragmatic, realistic. But the way they point us is not Jesus' way. It is not God's way. And it is not, I believe, the church's way when the church is acting out of its authenticity.

What's hard about being Christian is that we are asked to believe such difficult things. And I'm not talking here about the Virgin Birth, or bodily resurrection, or the mystery of the trinity. I'm talking about

what is harder than that. We are asked to believe in faith that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. We are challenged to cast our lot not with those who are pragmatic and realistic, but with dreamers and risk-takers, those foolish enough to believe that if we stretch out our arms to embrace the world rather than hold it at bay, if we love beyond what is reasonable, prudent, and healthy for ourselves, if we do these things, then and only then will we find within us and around us the power of God. And if we cast our lot with the whole company of God's fools, then eventually that foolish love will triumph over every kind of death and destruction the world can deal out. What are we looking for? We are looking to find within ourselves and within the community of faith the hope, the reality of that promise.

This week, in school classrooms and civic halls, on college campuses and in private homes, many will be telling the story of Martin Luther King Jr.: about his dreams; about what he accomplished for African-Americans and other people of color; about his teachings on war and the way of non-violence. He deserves all of the honors he will receive in those settings. But in this setting, in the church, we honor him for more than that. We honor him for making real the promise. We honor him for affirming that what we are seeking in the church is true. We honor him for demonstrating that love is indeed stronger than death. We can believe it. He has proved it. We can do it. All we need is the courage and the faith and the love to be equally foolish. Thanks be to God. Amen.