

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
Rev. Kevin M Smith
January 14, 2017
Luke 18:18-30

Personal Steps of Faith

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a man of faith. He was a minister and his platform for his public ministry began in the pulpit. But first and foremost he was a man steeped in a relationship with God. He once said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."
(<https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/martinlutherkingjr105087>)

Even more daunting are mountaintops during your life that lie ahead of you. You take that first step, not knowing all that will confront you, not knowing all the experiences you will have with each step you take. You take that first step, and each step after up that mountaintop, in faith that eventually, one day, you will reach your goal, the mountaintop. All of us have our own personal mountaintops we must ascend.

When Dr. King was sitting in the Birmingham, Alabama, jail for leading a protest in that city as President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he wrote to his fellow clergymen,

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the 8th century BC left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Just like the Apostle Paul when the people of the Way of Jesus called for help and he went, so did Martin Luther King, Jr. answer the call to climb the mountain for his oppressed sisters and brothers.
(<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jan/19/local/me-beliefs19>) Dr. King was not climbing a staircase; he was climbing a mountain of trouble and a mountain of promise.

We heard of another challenge this morning in our Gospel Lesson from the Book of Luke. In the story, a person with some measure of personal power comes to Jesus confident in his righteousness, but still wondering what it took to inherit eternal life, as if the goal of being righteous was just to obtain eternal life. This “ruler,” or young man as he is referred to in some places, is a confident person. He believes he has checked off all the boxes on the checklist of living a good life. He bragged that he had kept all of the big commandments even in his younger days until this time he met Jesus. He probably even thought that all his keeping of the commandments had brought him his financial prosperity he had gained. Wow, and the prosperity gospel television evangelists had even been invented yet! But, alas, and sadly this young ruler, with so much worldly success ahead of him, had so much to learn about living a life in relationship with God through faith. When he asked Jesus what he must do to earn eternal life, to obtain that one last golden prize, Jesus said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” The righteous ruler hangs his head and sulks away. It was not his adherence to the commandments that blocked his ascension to the mountaintop; it was his idolatry of his wealth. The unknown steps on the path to the mountaintop required costly faith and he was reluctant to pay the cost. That mountain was too high for him. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s faith was the rock solid foundation of his climb up to the mountaintop. Without faith, would Martin have even taken that first step?

Jesus was asking that young righteous ruler to do something extreme. Even back then giving up all your earthly desires to serve the public good, the common benefit, would have been an extreme thing to do. So many people today are just struggling to make ends meet financially. It warms my heart when I hear of common folks who have so little material wealth but who still reach out to neighbors in trouble and in need to help. The faith inside these people is so much larger than a little mustard seed. And, I’m sure that when people who have little or modest means, and, yes, even some folks with more than modest means, decide to climb to the mountaintop of seeking liberation and justice for their neighbors, rather than increasing their financial wealth, there is a faith at the core of their very beings that equality, and liberation, and justice, matter. These are the folks who are witnessing to and helping express the kingdom of God to a world whose values are more about building wealth and “getting mine.” At the root of taking unselfish steps up the mountaintop is faith that all can be better if I just do my part.

There were people back in the day of the Civil Rights movement who call MLK, Jr. an extremist, and the people, black and white, and other shades of skin, too, who marched with him extremists. Too many people in this country saw these marchers and radicals and extremists rather than people of a great faith.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a person of great faith. He had a doctorate degree from Boston University and served as Baptist minister and preacher. The Los Angeles times wrote about him,

He said that when his clergy critics called him an “extremist,” he was offended at first but later gained a “measure of satisfaction” from the label. After all, King said, Jesus, the prophet Amos, the Apostle Paul, German reformer Martin Luther and Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson were extremists too. “Was not Jesus an extremist for love,” King wrote, citing his command, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. Was not Amos an extremist for justice,” King went on, quoting from the Book of Amos, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” The question, King said, is not “whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be.” (<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jan/19/local/me-beliefs19>)

Whether you're are a Martin Luther King, Jr., or an unknown person who is willing to let your faith be the foundation of why you want to do good things for other people, even strangers you will never meet, my friends, let your faith lead you up that mountaintop of seeking to serve the common good. We have plenty of people in this world who are seeking to serve the almighty dollar, or achieve power and fame for their own sake. But, I am hopeful that there are more people, who will never tweet how wonderful it is to be them, and how right they are and how wrong other people are, who unselfishly, sometimes with great sacrifice, seek to do the right thing, the just thing, the generous thing for their neighbor; and they do so because they have faith that it will make the world a better place, a more peaceful and fair place, for their neighbors and for their family and generations of their family to come. And these folks do good things not thinking about some far off reward, or to inflate their ego, but because their faith either in God or in the ultimate goodness and capability of humanity inspires them

to do so. And, Jesus said to them, ““Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.” (Luke 18:29)

For this age, and for the life to come, my friends, let your faith be your inspiration for serving your neighbor, for seeking fairness and equality, for liberating yourself and others from whatever oppression there is, for seeking justice rather than position, power, and wealth, and for serving the common good. Take your steps of personal faith up that mountaintop. Amen.