

Today's lessons present us with different ways of taking a stand

- In Isaiah, the prophet takes a stand against despair
- In King's Letter, the preacher takes a stand for justice
- In the Gospel, Jesus takes a stand for generosity

Let's start with the Gospel

- Must confess to my own discomfort with this story
 - As a recovering alcoholic I want to distance myself from six stone jars holding 20-30 gallons each of superb wine!
- But then I look more closely at the inauguration of Jesus ministry in the Gospel of John,
 - Three important features of this story are named by commentator The Rev. Dr. Lindsay Trozza¹
 - 1st Cultural expectations for supplying a 3-day feast
 - The norm was a huge pot luck
 - guests were expected to bring food and wine to weddings
 - Why wasn't there enough?
 - Were the family and guests poverty stricken?
 - Or was the community expressing a lack of support for this particular couple?
 - No matter what the reason, running out of food or wine would be a painful & embarrassing end to the wedding celebration
 - 2nd Wine is often described as an expression of the feast the Holy One offers the community of faith.
 - In the Hebrew Scriptures:
 - There is a superlative feast Wisdom hosts in the Book of Proverbs (9:1-6)
 - Lavish feasts and fruitful vineyards are described by the prophets Joel (3:13, 18), Amos (9:11-15) and Isaiah (55:1-11) as signs of healed relationships between God and the people.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=394

- And to which we add our own imagery & experiences at the communion rail.
- 3rd This was a miracle that only the servants knew about
 - Jesus turned power dynamics upside down starting with his very first miracle in John's Gospel
 - He responded to his mother's request
 - He worked anonymously: the bridal party, even the upper servants, did not know
- John tells a story of profound generosity
 - Again: only the menial servants - the kitchen staff- knew
 - They did the hard work of filling those heavy jars
 - ...and had the courage to take that dipper of what-had-been water to the steward
 - Sometimes stepping out in faith, for what we think God is calling us to do, can feel really scary
 - Like carrying what we know was water in the jug we just filled to the chief steward - who might fire us for being so absurd.

Absurd, like the stances Martin Luther King, Jr was taking in the 1950s and 60s in the Deep South or the Windy City of Chicago.

Today's 2nd reading was taken from King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail".

- I think this week is the first time I've read the whole letter
 - Which I strongly encourage you to do
 - The Atlantic has uploaded and reprinted the entire letter in celebration of MLK this year²
- Written in 1963, when King was jailed for leading a peaceful protest & boycott
 - of white retail businesses during the Easter season
 - Stores which had reneged on negotiated promises to remove their "whites only" signs from their windows

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/letter-from-birmingham-jail/552461/>

- Letter was smuggled out of jail by King's lawyer & had been written in the margins of a newspaper
 - that carried a letter from 8 moderate white clergy criticizing King for leading the protests

There were phrases and quotes from the letter that I recognized:

- *Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.*
- *We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.*
- *"Wait" has almost always meant "Never."*

There were treasures I just discovered in the letter,

- like the succinct summary of a rigorous, time consuming process
 - *In a nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps:*
 - *collection of the facts to determine whether injustice exists*
 - *Negotiation*
 - *Self-purification*
 - *And direct action*
- King clearly recognizes that things must get messy. He writes
 - *I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a kind of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.*
 - *[and later]...we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure.*
 - *[later still] ...we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the tension that is already alive.*

Or the passage we heard today, about how extreme the call to walk in obedience to the gospel and our conscience can be.

- King is responding to the religious leaders who had called him an extremist for confronting unjust social structures
- At first, he says, he was disappointed to be labeled an extremist.

- But then he considered the company he was keeping
 - Jesus - who urges: love your enemies, returning blessing for curses
 - Amos - evoking justice that rolls down like a river
 - Paul - giving his body for the gospel
 - Reformation leaders like Martin Luther or John Bunyan (author of *Pilgrim's Progress* who was jailed 12 years for preaching)
 - Our own political leaders: Lincoln declaring that we could not survive half slave & half free or Jefferson verbalizing the dream that all people are created equal

- So the question King poses to us is:
 - Will we be extremists for hate or love?
 - For the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?

From the distance of five decades

- We may find it easy to see & affirm the justice King sought
- Even as we see the ongoing injustices around us
 - & struggle to figure out how to respond

Which injustices grieve you?

What might be the things you are called to do as an extremist for love?

- It won't be comfortable
- Like the kitchen help who filled the water jars & wondered just why they were offering what must-be-water to the head steward
 - It is nerve wracking
 - And sometime the "cup of water" we carry is our own transformed heart.

Lessons

Isaiah 62:1-5

Psalms 36:5-10

Portion of MLK, Jr Letter

John 2:1-11

THE REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. (Birmingham jail)

Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal . . ."

So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified.

We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime-- the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.