

“The Call to be Maladjusted”
by Rev. David J. Wood
2nd Sunday after Epiphany: MLK Sunday
January 18, 2026
First Congregational Church of Camden

Amos 5: 21-24

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Matthew 5: 38-48

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

~~~~~

It was the morning of Dec. 5, 1955...just days before Rosa Parks had been arrested for refusing to give up her seat at the front of the bus. It was the first work day since a bus boycott had been called. Martin Luther King and his wife Coretta arose early, wanting to catch the first bus...they watched and waited.

As headlights of the first bus appeared they rushed to the window as it passed by. they were stunned. The bus was empty. The next one drove by and the next one and the one after that. All empty.

King, astonished and overjoyed, jumped into his car and drove around for several hours – he saw only a handful of white passengers...otherwise the buses were empty. That meant that more than 30,000 individuals in the Black community of Montgomery had refused to ride the bus.

That afternoon, a group of clergy met to establish a leadership team to oversee the Boycott... King showed up late to the meeting. He was the new minister in town. 26 years old...first child born just 2 weeks earlier.

After some wrangling and posturing among the known and established ministers, King was abruptly nominated and elected to head the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association. The first order of business was to plan for the mass meeting to be held that evening in the Holt St. Baptist church.

Dr. King eventually returned home with less than an hour to prepare...he usually spent 15 hours preparing his sermons. Later he would recall that he became “possessed by fear” and “obsessed with feeling of inadequacy.”

By the time he was picked up by his friend, Elliot Finley, he had written only a few notes on a piece of paper.

They set out for the Holt St. Baptist Church...notices & flyers had been posted but one knew how many people would actually show up. A traffic jam on the way to Holt St. Baptist Church gave him some extra time to prepare. And a bit more as the traffic backed up even more. Soon they realized they could go no farther by car.



Still blocks away from the Holt St. Baptist church when they were stopped...they abandoned their car. More than 1,000 people waited inside the church – thousands crowded outside stretching across the acres surrounding the church. Impromptu loud speakers were being set up for the outdoor crowd..

It took them 15 minutes to thread their way through the crowd to the doors of the church.

As they were making their way through the crowd, King turned to his friend and said, "You know something, Finely, this could turn into something big." Soon after the meeting began, Dr. King stood to speak.

Few in the crowd had heard him before or even had heard of him. He started by talking about the events of the past few days...he spoke in a slow, even cadence and in a measured tone... he spoke about the success and importance of the boycott, the arrest of Rosa Parks...the crowd was listening, but subdued...the usual yeses and amens from the crowd...

After a long pause...King continued...his voice rising...



*"And you know my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression."* There were some yeses and amens...but they kept going and it dissolved into a rising cheer and sustained applause...all within the space of a second..the noise rolled on and on, like a wave refusing to break...and just as it began to subside...a wall of sound came thundering in from the enormous crowd outdoors...with feet stomping the whole building was shaken.



That one sentence set something loose... the call and response typical of a worship service in the Black church had exploded into something King had never experienced before...

Finally, he was able continue.

*There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July, and left standing amidst the piercing chill of an alpine November. There comes a time..."*

The crowd irrupted, drowning him out...  
Eventually he started up again...

*We are not here advocating violence...I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation that we are a Christian people. We believe in the teachings of Jesus. The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest. That's all....*

*"My friends, I want it to be known that we're going to work with grim and bold determination – to gain justice on the buses in this city. And we are not wrong. We are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, God almighty is wrong!"*

[the audience exploded again]. Rising above the applause, he proclaimed...

*If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer and never came down to earth! If we are wrong Justice is a lie!" "And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."*

When the crowd finally settled...he talked of the importance of unity and dignity and of love as they worked for justice....and of the hope that God would grant them the courage to stand up for their rights before it was too late. And he concluded, as he had begun, in a calm, measured voice: *"As we proceed with our program – let us think on these things."*

He stepped away from the pulpit and sat down.

The crowd sat in stunned silence...before erupting into applause that continued as he made his way through the crowd...

He was 26 and he had 12 years and four months to live.

Dr. King and his colleagues feared the Montgomery Bus Boycott would last only one day and that less than half the black population would participate. The boycott lasted for 381 days and led to the desegregation of public buses in Montgomery and across the Nation.

The modern civil right movement was begun in a church by a preacher calling on an overflowing congregation to act like Christians.

~~~~

What does a Christian influence on our culture and society look like...I find it most helpful to speak not just about ideals or convictions...as important as they are...but to talk first about individuals who have embodied and exemplified a Christian way of life and who translate those ideals and convictions into a lived life.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is one of those people.

Such lives have a certain kind of perfection even though they themselves would never claim perfection.

One way of knowing what kind of time we are in is by remembering and recalling those people who lived in the midst of a difficult time and understood what kind of time they were in...and what it meant to be a Christian in such times.

I love the story I began with. The people of Montgomery and their clergy leaders were living responsible lives...responsive to what was being asked of them in that moment...with no conception of what the outcome would be...they had no idea of how they would get from here to there. They were like Abraham, as described in Hebrews 11:8: "he set out not knowing where he was going."

The Jewish Theologian, Abraham Heschel, has written that "Religion begins in the consciousness that something is being asked of us." Being faithful is shaping one's life in response to that call.

Many things have been written about Dr. King...who he was, why he was...what motivated him...what he really believed.... The best one I have come across is the one we have in Dr. King's own voice...in an interview in 1965. When asked about how he saw himself he said,

:

"I am many things to many people: civil rights leader, agitator, trouble maker, and orator, but in the quiet resources of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher." This is my being and my heritage for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher, the great-grandson of a Baptist preacher. The church is my life and I have given my life to the church." (1965)

~~~

The text we read from Matthew about loving ones enemies...is one that has been hotly debated for millennia in an attempt to understand how it should be implemented in real life. More often than not, it gets turned into a philosophical, ethical dilemma of what you would do when faced with the threat of violence....

Two months after the Boycott had begun... Dr, King's home was bombed.



An angry crowd of 300 or more black supporters gathered outside his home in Montgomery with guns and knives sticks and shovels and hoes...

At one point, Dr. King addressed the crowd....

*"If you have any weapons, take them home;*

*if you do not have them, please do not seek to get them.*

*We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. We must meet violence with nonviolence.*

*"Jesus still cries out, Love your enemies  
bless those that curse you pray for those who despitefully use you"*

*This is what we must live by.*



~~~~~

It is not difficult to imagine that we are living in a time when we it is very possible that 'loving our neighbor' means we will find ourselves at odds with the policies and actions of our government. There is a meanness and a cruelty and an inhumanity that is at play in our common life that leaves us bewildered, appalled and, frankly, angry...unsettled and upset.

As Richard Lischer, a theologian who teaches at Duke Divinity School put it a few years ago, *"The deepening social and political divisions in this country are God's way of asking Christians, "Are you ready to give an account of your faith?"*

He continues...

Of course, Jesus is not a Democrat or a Republican, but he does have a coherent platform, and it's been published! It's called the Sermon on the Mount. It's called the Beatitudes. It does not begin with power. It does not feed on self-promotion. The religion of the cross can't be about winning. It begins with sacrificial love -- Christ's love for us and all people. It includes welcoming the outsider, caring for the sick, forgiving enemies, forgoing violence, upholding life and glorifying God in all that we do."

~~~~~

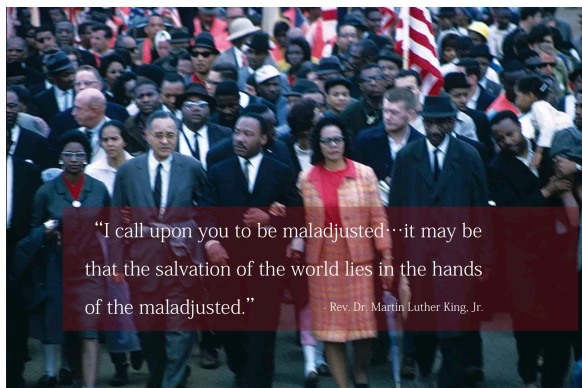
It's not at all hard to see how one's basic Christian convictions will set one at odds with the status quo – at least the status quo as defined by the rhetoric, the policies, and the actions of our government.

In 1963, Dr. King gave a speech in entitled, "Creative Maladjustment."

He talked of how everyone wants to live a well adjusted life. Then we went on to talk of the importance of being maladjusted.

"There are certain things in our nation and in the world to which I am proud to be maladjusted

and which I hope all people of good-will will be maladjusted until the good society is realized. I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few leaving millions of God's children smothering in an air tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self-defeating effects of physical violence. [I want to be] as



maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth who could say to the men and women of his day, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you. Pray for them that despitefully use you."

He concluded: "I call upon you to be maladjusted...it may be that the salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted."

I think we are living in a time when that call to be maladjusted is as present as it has ever been.

~~~~~

It was April 4, 1968. Dr. King was in Memphis to support the strike by sanitation workers. It was early evening, Dr. King and his closest colleagues were on a balcony at the Lorraine Motel, getting ready to go to dinner and from there he was to go and speak at another mass meeting. By now, from Montgomery to Memphis, and beyond, Dr. King was well known and widely acclaimed for his ability to draw and hold a crowd with his oratory. Below the balcony, in the parking lot was the saxophonist and bandleader Ben Branch—he would be performing that night at the meeting.

Dr. King leaned over the railing and called out, “Ben, I want you to sing for me tonight...i want you to do that song, “Precious Lord, Take my Hand.” Seconds later a single shot rang out. Reflecting on the meaning this song had for Martin Luther King, someone commented that while some think of this song as somber and sorrowful, “King never saw it as a song of despair: rather, he viewed the tune calling out to God as a sign of hope, a way of gathering strength before carrying on to fight for what is right.”

May it be so for us as well. Amen.