

## Words and Actions Together

By: Keith Holste

January 15, 2012. Pastor Keith preaches on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last speech, his "I have been to the mountaintop" speech, and compares King's words and actions together with Jesus' own words and actions that lift us all up.

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The other evening I listened to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last speech given, as it was recorded. It was a speech that he was reluctant to give, because he was very, very busy at that time. There were threats upon his life at that time. And he was in the eastern part of the country and had to make a trip to Memphis. But he had committed himself to the cause of the workers -- the sanitation workers, particularly -- in Memphis, and upheld his commitment and went. That's an interesting speech to listen to, and I encourage you to do it if you have time this afternoon, or tomorrow on the holiday. Just dial it up on YouTube. And it's not that hard to find. It was a very moving speech, with references about practical matters in the strike that was at hand in Memphis. But it also contained a lot of biblical imagery and included the famous, "I have been to the mountaintop" and "I have this vision of everyone together." He had this hope for a triumphant people and a gathered people altogether. He had that vision. Of course, as kids pointed out, he was a preacher first. He was the son of a preacher himself, and very well trained in Christianity, as a graduate of a seminary. He had great oratorical skills as we all know, but having read a number of his sermons, you may not know that he was very skilled at composing sermons. And they are a delight to read, how he put the thoughts together no matter what part of the Bible it was. He was a great speech writer.

But being so familiar with scripture, it's probably no accident that his speech in Memphis contains many of the same kind of approaches, I think, that we see from Mark's writing about Jesus in Capernaum today, and some other things that Jesus said along the way. Martin Luther King, Jr. learned a lot from the way Jesus did things. Mark was writing to a downtrodden people as he wrote down the gospel of Jesus. They were a struggling people, trying to survive the threats of the Romans and the Jewish authorities around them. They were looking for a way to build up their hope, and to give them some sense that they could continue on. So Mark tells them the story of Jesus in such a way that it would build up their encouragement and their hope that indeed they can live as Christians. And so he conveys to them the life and the teachings of Jesus in such a way that it gives them life and gives them hope for their struggles.

Well, we're at today's lesson -- only 21 verses into the chapter of Mark -- and we hear Jesus already perform his first act of ministry. We heard last week about how he was baptized and how he was led into the wilderness and tempted there. He chose four disciples. And all that's the first 20 verses only. Now in verse 21 he's in Capernaum, which was a commercial center, an agricultural center, a fishing town and kind of a trade center, as caravans moving from east to west through the known world would come by Capernaum, there at the picturesque place at the north end of the Sea of Galilee. Well, Sabbath comes and Jesus goes to the local synagogue, and he preaches there. Mark doesn't say what the content of Jesus' sermon was, but we know the reaction he got. Mark says all the people were astounded. He preached like no one they had ever heard before. The scribes they were used to hearing usually would quote the rabbis from the past, and kind of mine the books and the scriptures for what so-and-so had

said about this and that text, and they weren't so inspiring. But Jesus was different. He didn't remind them of what other people had said before. He spoke himself of what he knew to be true. He preached with authority. He didn't have to get words from the scholars who had gone before him. This was something very different for them to listen to: someone who spoke out of his own authority.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a great gift too. And you can tell, listening to the people's responses as he gave his speeches, that they believed he was a prophet in his time. They saw him communicating the truth to them, and they followed him. There were others in his entourage who had great oratorical skills: Jesse Jackson and Ralph Abernathy and Andrew Young, people like that. They all could hold their own, but none of them moved the movement the way that Martin Luther King, Jr. did. The response to him was such that great change did come about. He elicited the kind of response that did bring people to action. He couldn't do it by himself; it was because people responded to what he said that change happened.

Well Jesus did two things in Capernaum that day. He preached in an astounding way, and he dealt with a man who, it says, suddenly rose up from the midst of the congregation, who had a demon or unclean spirit. The man didn't possess himself. He wasn't, you might say, in control of himself. This demon spirit controlled him. He was a prisoner in his own body. And this unclean spirit that came out of this man taunted Jesus and said, what are you here for? Have you come to destroy us, spirit? We know who you are, the Holy One of God. And he also said, what are you doing here from Nazareth? We're here in Capernaum. It says that, maybe as though someone in Memphis would have said, why do you come from Atlanta, Martin Luther King, to bother us? And so he held his geography against him too. But Jesus rebuked, it says, this unclean spirit and it came out of this man with a convulsion and with a crying out. And when the people witnessed this they were amazed, it says. They said, a new teaching with authority. The action of Jesus exorcising the demon from this man, backed up the astounding words of Jesus. And so words and actions go together to be the most convincing. The people said, we behold something completely new here. Not only were the words he said astounding, but the actions he said are heaven come to earth. This is new too. This man is a prophet to behold.

Well that coming together, words and actions, was something that Martin Luther King, Jr. did very well also. He didn't just speak from podiums and pulpits. He was also the one leading the marches, giving the instructions and the tactics, and being arrested himself and going to jail. And as we know, word spread about him. And when he was speaking in Washington D.C. at the Lincoln Memorial, some 200,000 were thought to have been in that crowd to hear him speak. His actions and his words together made him have great impact.

Well in his sermon at Capernaum, Jesus took on an evil spirit. Jesus knew it as it showed itself to him, and he brought the power to bear to exorcise this demon from the man. Martin Luther King, Jr. was not afraid to name the ills of the society that not only affected him and those of his race, but all those ills that affected all of society, whether it be issues of hunger, housing, the way finances work, and war that was going on at the time -- all these things that were of concern to all people were of concern to him. And he named them. Just as Jesus named the demons in that man, Martin Luther King, Jr. would name the demons' expression in the society of the day. The powers that profited from and enjoyed the status quo, as always happens, began to marshal forces so that his protest would be quelled. The resistance to King was predictable, and he was feeling it by way of threats, even on the day that he gave the speech.

As Jesus would name himself, more and more authorities, especially those in the religious institutions as the ministry of Jesus went on, and he would point his finger and show how the church was acting in evil ways in his day -- those evils that he named would push back to him too, as we would say these

days. He would say that the religion of his day was full of evil. It was full of corruption and needed to be corrected. And this cleansing of the devil from this man was the first step that he took. But we know how the institutions of his day pushed back against Jesus and finally took his life, because they couldn't stand to hear the naming of them amongst the evil of the world.

For this man with the spirit to have been in a synagogue was a transgression of boundaries. The pharisaic Jewish system was all based on cleanliness, was about keeping a system of ritual cleanness. We heard something about that in our second lesson today, as Christians later on who had been Jews weren't sure how to handle certain meats. Were they clean or not clean? Were they under those rules or not? But for the Jews of that day, it was all about keeping this ritual cleanness: not touching certain things, not eating certain things, not touching certain people. But here was an unclean man right in the midst of their worship gathering. What could be worse than that? But Jesus lives in an unclean and messy world, in Mark. He's bumping into unclean people who have various ailments and bad spirits throughout his ministry. But what he does is that he rids them of their demons, he rids them of their diseases, so that instead of being outcast they become the welcome ones. Instead of being the ones shunned from the community, they become healed. To other people he'll say go show yourself to the priest, you are clean, you can join the community. He'll say that to some lepers he heals later on. Jesus was about rubbing shoulders with the outcast, so that they might be cleansed and then be welcomed into the community.

Well that vision of Jesus is what Martin Luther King, Jr. was about too, in that which he brought to the work. He talks about it in that Memphis speech. He knows it will be messy. He and all African Americans were seen as unclean ones in the country: not welcome to eat in many places, not welcome to drink in many places, to share motels, schools, many other institutions with whites. They were the same as unclean. His dream was to name the ill, to come up with strategies that will confront that evil and make a new world. But again, the vision wasn't just for people of his race. It was for all people. He wanted there to be equality for all. That's why he worked, that's what he worked on and spoke and lived, and what he finally died for himself, as the pushbacks came in such a way that they took his life. He wanted everyone to be included. He named the outcast. He wanted there to be a cleansing so that everyone could be together.

When Penny and I were in El Salvador a few months ago, the Lutheran Bishop there, Bishop Gomez, spoke of his dream for the ELCA church in El Salvador. In his country where machismo reigns and where women have little on their own and children are fortunate to go to school, his hope was for the ELCA church and his congregations, that they would become places of welcome and openness to all. He wanted them to be models of openness in a repressive society, and to be that way in the name of Jesus. That made me think that that's what our church is about here in the United States as well. Not that our society is all like that in El Salvador, but we still have plenty of problems to go around, plenty of people feeling outcast, plenty of people feeling not wanted, not important, or too ill or too different to be included in. The reign of God breaks in when our congregation and any congregation is an open and welcoming place, where all are welcome and know they are welcome. All are to be received in the name of Jesus.

Last week we heard how the heavens opened up at the baptism of Jesus, and that's no accident as God comes down. But it is a kind of a compressing of heaven and earth together. That was a way of saying God's power was being unleashed in the world. It would be there with Jesus, and wherever he went heaven would come down to earth through him. The boundary of heaven and earth is blurred and collapsed as God's power comes to earth in Jesus. God is active and God is alive in Jesus, and the people of Jesus. That power of God unleashed comes out in the words of Jesus, as he speaks to that

man and says, "Devil be out. Be cleansed." And he was. It comes out in the cleansing of that man. Heaven on earth. Heaven involved in the work of earth. In following weeks we'll see now in the first seven chapters or so of Mark how the various powers of God are unleashed on earth to do different things that show that God's power is active.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was sensitive to this collapsing together of heaven and earth. He knows that any talk of heaven is empty unless it touches the earth. What use does it have, he says, of talking about the riches of heaven when people live in poverty? What use does it have, he says, of talking about milk and honey flowing in heaven when people don't have anything to eat and they are starving? He believed with Jesus that it doesn't have to be that way. God breaks in. God is active. God gives his power to be with his people to bring about change. With Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. it was all about getting and putting people together. Let them get together. By uniting and working together, they could accomplish good and great things. God could use them to bring about change for a more perfect earth. We hear the words of Jesus. We see the actions of Jesus. He lifts us up so that together we may be a force for good in the world around us, forming an accepting community of faith as we go. Amen.

And now, may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

2012, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Keith Holste, Mark 1:21-28, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13