

Taking Up the Sword

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 28, 2020
(Proper 8, Year A, BCP)

Church of the Ascension, Chicago
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Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." - Matthew 10:34-42

Most of us, I gather, know the general contours of what took place in Birmingham, Alabama, during Holy Week and Easter and beyond, in 1963. In his inauguration speech a few months before, newly elected governor George Wallace had called for “*segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.*” Real change in Birmingham would require shock treatments: marches, lunch counter sit-ins, boycotts of businesses that hired only whites.

Members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Birmingham in early April to share in administering these shock treatments. Then, on Good Friday, April 12, 1963, eight prominent white clergymen published a letter in the *Birmingham News*. They titled their letter, “A Call to Unity,” but it was run under the headline, **WHITE CLERGYMEN URGE LOCAL NEGROES TO WITHDRAW FROM DEMONSTRATIONS**. The letter partly took aim at the ‘outsiders’ who were stirring up trouble.

“We ... strongly urge our ... Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham. When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.”

By virtue of alphabetical order, the first signature on the letter was that of Charles Colcock Jones Carpenter, the Episcopal Bishop of Alabama.

That same day, Good Friday, fifty citizens of Birmingham were arrested for their agitation, as was Dr. King, from Atlanta—one of the ‘outsiders.’ It was Dr. King’s thirteenth arrest. His now-famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail* was his response to the white pastors’ *Call to Unity*.

“... I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.”

“You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham,” he went on. “But [you fail] to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrationsIt is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place ... but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.”

Birmingham 1963 has come to my mind, I gather, in part because of the resemblance to all that we now place under the umbrella of Black Lives Matter. So much of the same unrest, so many of the

same conflicting interpretations, the same shocking exposure of systemic racism, the same denial of it, the same hopes and fears, and a President who Tweets *"When the looting starts, the shooting starts,"* quoting a Miami police chief from the 1960s. Sadly little has changed in 57 years.

It may be that Birmingham also comes to mind because Chicago's Pride Parade would normally take place today, the last Sunday of June. You might argue that Birmingham and North Halsted are worlds apart and have nothing in common. I'm guessing, though, that Jesus would have seen the connections, and would have pressed us to see them. We humans demonize what we fear and don't understand. We who are religious often enlist God as we minimize, incarcerate, exploit and kill those to whom we can give labels that make them other and less than – outsiders. Some of us know by first-hand experience about being demonized and misunderstood outsiders.

Birmingham 1963 first came to my mind this week because I wondered if or how it might illustrate or shed light on the first words of Jesus in this morning's gospel text: *"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."* What a salvo from the one we now call the Prince of Peace, the one whose first words after his resurrection are *"Peace be with you,"* spoken, by the way, to the same disciples he addresses today, according to the Gospel of John. How are we to reconcile the Jesus of Peace with the one who said, *"I have not come to bring peace, but a sword"?*

Without having time for a deep dive, I believe it's most consistent with our understanding of Christ and the text to believe that he is employing hyperbole here. In all that follows, with his language of love and division and choices, Jesus is arguably over-dramatizing in order to urge our scrutiny of all that we normally consider sacred. The sword suggests the seriousness of the challenge, as well as the courage and strength of character often required for us to separate ourselves from that which only has the appearances of the good life or good religion so that we may find and cling to what is truly good, holy, just and loving.

Dr. King was arguably the consummate advocate of non-violence, but he seems to have internalized the meaning of Jesus here when he picked up the sword of his pen in the Birmingham jail and, foraging for scraps of paper otherwise withheld from him, wrote to eight pious white pastors:

"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see ... that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.'"

When Jesus prophesies today that 'one's foes will be members of one's own household, I mainly feel the divided parts within me. I'd like to believe, for instance, that I would have taken to the streets with Dr. King. I also know – and can't in good conscience conceal from myself or from you – the divided part of me that would have joined the eight white pastors in what they believed was a faithful Call to Unity. Along these lines, today I'm also replaying in my head the Vestry conversations that we seem to have had every June about whether or not we will fly the Pride flag in front of the church on this one Sunday, and why or why not, inevitably considering those who would be either heartened or offended, whatever the decision.

I wonder about other divisions, not only amongst us but within each of us. In many such cases I can imagine Jesus standing at the door with a sword, stirring up trouble, not for the sake of trouble but so that you and I might do our best to persevere, to continue to struggle and choose, with prayers that we, joining those first disciples, will be faithful in revealing and conveying the kingdom of God.

We say and believe that Jesus has given each of us a share in his mission and a even a dose of divine authority. Imagine for a moment that he has also given us a sword. Holding it and taking it to heart, we look out over all that is broken and wrong and tragic and hypocritical and unjust in our world. Where, for God's sake, will we wield our sword? *Amen.*