

Series: Words & Deeds Part 1: “They Matter”
“Commissioned Into The World God So Loves”
Jeremiah 20:7-13
Psalm 69:7-10, 16-18
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, writes, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”¹ Whatever the color of one’s skin, socio economic status, political party affiliation, white-collar or blue-collar employment, unemployed, gender identity, single or married, we’re all caught up in a network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. What is good for one is good for all, in that humanity is engaged in a common destiny. When we attempt to separate ourselves from others based on difference, we are weakening the network of mutuality and the single garment of destiny. Separation from others and God is not God’s plan.

I became a Christian in the 8th grade. I placed my faith in Jesus Christ and then began the journey of ongoing conversion. I acknowledged then and still do today that the journey is filled with the choice to live a life of cheap grace or costly grace. It has been a clarifying journey, one which continues to grow my experience of God’s commission to go into the world God so loves.

Jeremiah 20:7-13, Psalm 69:7-10, 16-18, Romans 6:1b-11, and Matthew 10:24-39 assert that no matter how unpopular Christians become for doing justice in word and deed, we cannot resist being faithful.

Paul, in Romans 6:1b-11, makes three points for our consideration. First, it is impossible to overcome sin through our own efforts. Trying to “kick the habit,” if you will, only leads to

¹Cited in Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 4.

weak resignation or defeat. It renders our walk with Jesus anything but dynamic. Overcoming sin is a lifelong process. Second, what was impossible outside of Christ is possible in Christ. The total Christ event is actualized at baptism. This is true for an infant whose parent's present her in full confidence that at the age of responsibility she will claim God's promises as her own or an adult who professes faith with the sign of water sealing the reality of salvation. Baptism demonstrates up front or as a response that we participate with, are united to, and have our identity in Christ. There is new life in Jesus. And third, we have responsibility to acknowledge the "already, but not yet" of our salvation. We must appropriate and enact our new identity.

This is where believing God's promises about who we are and to whom we belong comes into play. We discover God's perspective about who we are in our worshipping, learning, connecting, serving, and giving. We integrate our new identity with words and deeds of costly grace. Harold Masback, pastor of The Congregational Church in New Canaan, Connecticut writes, "Since being precedes doing, better being may now naturally issue forth in better doing."² The good news of the gospel is this: the faithfulness of Jesus makes justification possible for all who believe in and follow Jesus.

In Matthew 10:24-39, we learn that Jesus calls his followers to be courageous in order to continue the mission for which he was sent. That mission is to expose darkness to the light. Do not forget that Matthew's community was a group of social misfits, outcasts, predominantly poor, and feeling discounted. Yes, this community was "the least of these." From God's perspective, the poor and dispensable are invaluable. Jesus' mission does not bring peace until it intersects the chaos. It is into this chaos that the church must lean. We must speak and do justice, not protecting the privilege and power of injustice. The text in Matthew is clear that persecution,

²Harold E. Masback III in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 163.

family discord, and the destruction of social ties are the norm. These forms of chaos beckon Christians to speak and do hope, peace, joy and love, anticipating the Second Coming of Jesus.³

When we ponder our baptism there is much for which to be grateful. It is our baptism, whether as infants or adults, we claim God's promises of salvation. We affirm the refrain of one of our commissioned hymns as our own this season of Pentecost, "Spirit, grow your fruit within me, pruning me of selfish strife. May your virtues so define me that those watching see but Christ."⁴ The Holy Spirit elicits faith in each one of us and from there gratitude exudes from our very beings. By faith in Jesus Christ, we are reconciled to God and one another.

Be reminded that the time following Jesus' ascension until his Second Coming is the context for fulfilling the Great Commission. Christians are not to take on personal crosses of "victimization," oppression, or self-loss. We are to be witnesses of the good news of Jesus in troubling times. Yes, we are to resolve and live with conflict, in and through authentic relationship with those who are different than ourselves. Injustice claimed and transformed to justice is the visible sign of personal and social conversion to Jesus and kingdom of God principles.

Affirm your union with Jesus Christ. Enter into that mystery. Jesus is alive in us and lives his life in and through us for the sake of others. Brenda Salter McNeil, the author of *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, writes, "Reconciliation is an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance, and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to reflect

³In the three paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Song-Mi Suzie Park, Mark Ramsey, W. Scott Haldeman, Efrain Agosto, Wyndy Corbin-Reuschling, Sonia E. Waters, and Denise Thorpe in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 3* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 85-89, 89-90, 91-93, 94-96, 96-97, 98-100, and 100-101.

⁴Chris Anderson, *May They See Christ*. The refrain in the hymn commissioned by Geneva Presbyterian Church, May 2017.

God's original intention for all creation to flourish.”⁵ Yes, make the story of “the other” a part of your story and theirs. Journey together, in reconciliation, to fully experience your baptism. It is sin and our reluctance to take sin seriously that cheapens grace.

Jesus is speaking of being his presence, love, life, and power to whomever we come into contact. That is what a follower of Jesus does. And suffering is part of what a follower of Jesus experiences. When danger and suffering is near, stand firm on the presence and power of God. You are commissioned for this journey into the world that God so loves. You are becoming more fully a child of God for the common good of God's children. Amen.

*This sermon was preached on Sunday, 25 June 2023
by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California*

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⁵Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, 14.