

God's Call to Martin Luther King And God's Call to Women

In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Women. And for the next 20 years, there was much cross-fertilization of support and strategy between the Suffrage Movement and the Abolition Movement. And then, the federal government set up a divide and conquer strategy. Either black men could vote or women could vote, not both. And they fell for it. The two groups became divided. I think that today, the civil rights movement and the feminist movement, both in church and secular society, have much to learn from each other.

Martin Luther King's call to ministry was lifelong. His call to bring justice to African Americans and ultimately to all of God's people came during the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott. This boycott was intended to last a day. It lasted a year. During that time, King was arrested, his home was bombed and he was subjected to personal abuse. When it was over, King emerged as a leader of black Americans.

It was probably here that Martin's call to justice through non-violence became urgent, powerful and irresistible. By 1963, the movement escalated and in Birmingham, Alabama, it caught the attention of the entire world. King inspired adults and children to massive protests. He called it the coalition of conscience. Adults as well as children were targeted by police who used high pressure water hoses and police dogs to break up the protest. There were numerous arrests.

At that point the bail bondsmen was prevented from accessing bond money. This meant that those in jail would stay there indefinitely. On Good Friday, King was expected to join the march and subsequently be imprisoned.

The story behind the story goes like this. Since bail money was cut off, King was pressured to stay out of jail to raise money. Martin felt that he needed to fulfill his commitment and join those imprisoned. He struggled with this decision. His father told him that during the Easter Holy Days, Martin's place was with his family and his faith community. In turmoil and confusion, Martin went into his room to pray. The struggle within him was so intense, that he broke into a sweat. Finally around midnight, God spoke to Martin saying, go and join those who suffer for righteousness, join those who suffer for justice. With peace in his soul, Martin exited the room, dressed in jeans, obviously not ready for Good Friday services. And all who saw him knew that he would spend Easter weekend in jail.

God kept calling Martin and Martin kept responding, yes. That call, led him to search for freedom and justice for his people and ultimately for all people. That urgent call involved risk, for himself and his family as well as for those being oppressed by the evils of segregation. It meant the possibility of pain. It meant the possibility of suffering and imprisonment. It meant the possibility of death. And yet, God kept calling Martin and Martin kept responding, yes.

That Easter weekend Martin confronted those possibilities in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" written to a group of complacent clergy who advised King on patient waiting and on not disturbing the peace.

In the letter, Martin said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" He said that the call to patient waiting almost always meant never. (Sound familiar?) King said "Perhaps it is easier for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say 'wait'. But there comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair."

The quote that Fr Roy read in the beginning of this talk was most powerfully used by Martin in 1965 during the march from Selma to Montgomery. More than 500 marchers began walking. They made it only six blocks when the Alabama State troopers and local police attacked them with billy clubs and tear gas, turning them back and sending 17 to the hospital.

Two days later, Dr. King led a second symbolic march to the bridge where the first attack happened. That evening segregationists beat three ministers. Selma's public hospital refused to treat Rev. James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister from Boston. He had to be driven two hours to Birmingham where he died.

Two weeks after Bloody Sunday, Dr. King assured the activists and community members that they should not despair. He said,

"I know" you are asking today, "How long will it take?"....

"I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth crushed to earth will rise again.

"How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.

"How long? Not long, because you shall reap what you sow....

"How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

And God kept calling Martin and Martin kept responding, yes.

There is much, for which women in the Roman Catholic Church, called to priestly ordination, can be grateful to Martin Luther King. In naming the pain of African Americans, he seems to be naming our pain. How many times have women been advised of patient waiting? How many times have we been told the lies of why women cannot be ordained? One need only look at the reasoning behind this ban, down through the ages, to see how sexist it is.

Thomas Aquinas said that women can't be ordained because women are defective men. Later, it was because women don't image God directly; they merely image God through men. Then, it was said that women do not image Christ, even though we take on Christ in Baptism. Recently, the reason was because women are the wrong matter. That is, water is the correct matter for baptism. Wheat is the correct matter for Eucharist and male is the correct matter for ordination. Currently the argument is that Jesus chose only men as apostles, notwithstanding Paul's definition of Apostle as one who had seen the risen Lord, including Mary of Magdala and the 500. We have been told that Jesus never ordained women. Well Jesus never ordained anyone.

And we, who believe in justice ask, "How long must we wait Lord!

And God answers, not long!

We have been told that women don't receive a real call. And that we, who are ordained, in full apostolic succession, are merely attempting ordination and for that attempt, we have been excommunicated. How long can we put up with this belittling language? How long can we put up with the advice of patient waiting? How long can we be told that it is we who are disturbing the peace? Martin Luther King said that true peace is not merely the absence of tension. It is the presence of justice.

Martin's call was to speak truth to power. He said that the call to speak is a call of agony. He spoke not only through his words but also through his actions. Women, and men in solidarity with women, also speak truth to power through our words and actions.

Let me tell you a bit about our call to ordination. Sometimes that call is urgent, powerful, irresistible and life long. There is pain involved in not being able to fulfill that call. I have witnessed the pain and tears of many women who are called to ordained priesthood and are not able to fulfill it. It is not unlike the pain of a still birth.

Sometimes our call is nagging and will not go away. It truly is the hound of heaven. There is a sense of incompleteness. No matter how we avoid and deny that call, it keeps coming back. Sometimes our call involves the sudden realization that God's people are naming our call to priesthood, as a way of serving the people of God. This call makes sense to us and helps to bring about the beloved community, as Martin called it so often. And we ask, how long? And God responds, not long.

I think that the call of women has been especially important and strong in the last twenty years. God is saying to us, as God said to Martin, go and join those who suffer for righteousness, join those who suffer for justice. God is saying to us, go, heal my people, go, heal my church. And we ordained Roman Catholic Women Priests, have said yes! Just as Martin risked going to jail that Easter weekend, we have risked losing jobs, contracts with publishing houses, contracts with retreats houses, our station in life, financial security, our community and the good will of some church leaders, as well as our friends and family.

I have seen all of this. And God keeps calling us and we keep responding yes! And we recognize that in this struggle, in this encounter, God is present. And we recognize that, in this movement for justice for women in the church, in this coalition of conscience, God is present. We also recognize that ultimately what we all seek is God and that God is in charge. We pray, we discern, we listen for the voice of God and when God calls, we say yes! And we do not despair because we have turned over our lives to God. And we know that if God is in charge, there will be justice. How Long? Not Long!

And so we pray in gratitude for those who have responded yes to their call. We pray for justice in our church. We pray for healing of the people of God and for healing within the Roman Catholic Church. We pray that women will be recognized as valued and capable of receiving a call from God. Lead us to our calling O God! Lead us to the encounter in which we find you, O Jesus! Lead us to the One we seek, O Spirit!

Amen.

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January 21, 2012