

“Opening Up in Shutdown Times”

Second Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 62:1-5; I Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

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January 20, 2019

From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 20, 2019, Second Sunday after Epiphany, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday, dedicated to Theodore William Kruk on his baptismal day, to Martin, Fred, all my friends and heroes in the movement & always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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As we carefully stepped into church this morning, we did so in this midst of a huge winter storm hitting the midsection of our nation. This storm has shutdown many roads and caused distress to millions of people. The shutdowns experienced by winter storm “Harper” come at a time that our government shutdown enters its second month this week.

As the US government shutdown moves into day 30, more and more people are negatively affected. Government employees are going without pay hurting more and more families daily. Other workers are working without pay – though the promise of back pay has been made. Programs that assist hungry people in our country and around the world are grinding to a halt. Food and drug safety inspections are not taking place. Lines are growing longer at airport security checkpoints. National parks are closed. Significant scientific research has been suspended. Investigations of some fatal accidents have been put on hold. Farmers are not receiving their loans. These are but a few of the effects of the shutdown.

As the crisis deepens, churches, synagogues and mosques are responding—as they do every day—by feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless, but our religious communities cannot replace the programs that exist because all of us contribute through our taxes and through governmental structures we have developed over the years.

Beyond religious communities, we celebrate world renown chef Joses Andres of the World Central Kitchen, who has gained fame for his healthy meal and food support following major natural disasters, is feeding 5,000-6,500 meals daily to federal workers on the streets of Washington DC. He is imploring others to do the same across the country. Others are stepping

up as well to help with food drives and “go fund me” accounts opening across the country.

Nevertheless, all of these charitable acts don't really address the crisis itself. What can be done for the women, men and children whose families across the country— and largely away from DC in isolated parts of our nation — are now in their second pay cycles with no income? As we are reading in the papers and on-line, this shutdown is also affecting thousands of businesses and workers who do business with the government as well. Between winter storms and the intransigence of our President and congressional leaders to work out a deal, we are shutdown in serious ways this morning. How are we, as citizens and people of faith, dealing with this?

How can we deal with these shutdowns this Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend?

First, using economic and organized power to leverage problem solving or keeping promises is not new. Using economic boycotts and leveraging power is a common principle of organizing throughout our history. The President is attempting to leverage his signature to solve the shutdown with his deep desire to fulfill his campaign promise to build a wall on our southern border with Mexico. Others are using this moment to

leverage power for other needs of refugee families and DACA citizens across the country.

Such leveraging power for change is what the civil rights movement was actually doing in the late 1950's and 1960's. Dr. King and others were trying to cash a "promissory note" that had been unaddressed since the founding of nation. They were seeking to receive the freedom promised when the Revolutionary War and the Civil War were won and Black soldiers and civilians aided or led in the cause – proof of their patriotic American freedom fighting presence and spirit.

The leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) used their power to organize people for change. That is actually what BREAD does too on a local level. We are trying to use people power to make change here and now in Columbus and Franklin County.

There is one major difference between now and then – especially in relation to the current "shutdown." The Civil Rights leaders had clear principles that guided the movement. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963, Dr. King explained to the moderate white Christian pastors, who questioned his techniques and strategies, that there were four steps his movement used for non-violent social change.

He wrote: In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: *collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action.* We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham.

There can be no gainsaying the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good-faith negotiation.

To apply these principles to our current situation, we have to determine the **facts of actual threat and need for a wall.**

What are the facts? Is there is a real threat to our national security at the southern border for which only a wall is the answer? I would have to say the facts and evidence for a wall are not there. However, if you believe differently and can prove the case factually, we would move to the second step.

You **negotiate** with your opponent. You seek to present your case and “make a deal” if possible. So far, I have not seen either

the case nor the negotiations needed to resolve the crisis. So, we end up with a “stand-off.” Neither side is willing to negotiate. With such an impasse, you move to the third step – **self-purification**.

This is where our current “shutdown” completely breaks down. There is no self-purification from leaders and followers in this current stand-off. Instead, both sides are sacrificing others, and not themselves, in carrying out their plans. In fact, both sides seek to vilify and pulverize their opponents through social media and frontal attacks. This shows – in my mind – a crisis of leadership on all sides. The President and his staff; the Congress and their staffs have not given up their salaries. They have all used the suffering of others to carry out their plan. Troubling all the way around. There is no self-purification to be found in this shutdown.

Furthermore, the direct action carried out has no evidence of Christian values – laying down our lives for our friends (and or enemies). The sacrifice of others is never an acceptable form of negotiating and seeking resolution to a crisis. There is a dearth of leadership throughout our government. The leaders of our government have sacrificed the men, women, and children they have been elected to work with and have abrogated the public trust. Perhaps they should all resign and we should start over again.

Meanwhile, we still have children and parents separated from one another and held in detention at our southern border. These are men, women, and children who came to us seeking protection and sanctuary in almost all their cases. We found out this week that the numbers are greater than we knew and the problems and abuses are deeper and worse than we imagined.

Today, I have printed over 150 copies of Dr. King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." I want all us to take time to read this letter which was originally written on toilet paper in an isolated cell and smuggled out and put together by pastors and friends who visited Dr. King during his April 1963 confinement. This is one of the most important letters written since Paul's letters in the New Testament spelled out the way to live a Christian life. Today, we should consider the power of Dr. King's spirit and words. As we face difficult days in our nation, we should remember the deep faithfulness and social determination for justice and peace which Dr. King provided and promoted. It was in this letter that Dr. King said, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

"For years now, I have heard the word 'wait.' This 'Wait' has almost always meant, 'Never.'"

"Justice too long delayed is justice denied."

“There are just and unjust laws. I agree with St. Augustine that ‘unjust law is no law at all.’”

Dr. King points out that in demanding that Blacks wait for change, the moderate whites who say to slow down and wait speak of this not being the right time. He speaks brilliantly about Time. He writes, “Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that people of ill will have used time much more effectively than people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people... We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right.”

On this day when storms are raging, winds are blowing and shutdowns are ever present, we need to use our time effectively and creatively. We need to move forward in the ways of peace and reconciliation. We cannot wait any longer. For some of us here, we have waited too long to see justice prevail. Now is the time to turn this around.

May God’s peace be with you. Amen.

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