“Justice and Equality”

Sunday, August 10, 2025 *Rev. Dr. John Wahl* *Amos 5:21-24*

It is difficult to read Amos 5:24 without hearing Martin Luther King’s prophetic voice. “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (5:24).

Justice refers to fairness, attention to the needs of the poor, an end to oppression, a legal system that protects the rights of all people. Righteousness connotes healthy relationships, a sense of commonality, a recognition of God as the one who has formed the people into a community, a respect for the bonds among the people. The image of justice rolling down like waters calls for justice to happen immediately, like a sudden deluge. The poor and marginalized should not have to wait for justice. Justice must happen now, with the urgency of a storm. The ever-flowing stream calls for a steady supply. The community should sustain justice. Justice should remain available just as a stream provides a reliable source of water.

The Old Testament prophet Amos directed his words to those in Israel who worshipped, who made the sacrifices, sang the songs. It is a common theme among the prophets: God resists religious expressions that separate orthodoxy (right beliefs) from orthopraxy (right actions). Isaiah complains about Sabbath observances disconnected from care for the needy (Isaiah 58). Joel calls for God’s people to rend their hearts, not their garments (Joel 2:13). Micah reminds us of what God’s final requirements are: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

In highly charged emotional language, Amos declares that God “hates” and “rejects” every aspect of Israelite ritual: the solemn festivals, offerings of sacrifice, even musical sounds of rejoicing and thanksgiving for Gods’ mighty acts of salvation. The text does not state that God’s rejection relates to idolatry or insincerity; the issue is the disjunction between worship and life. If the people do all of the right things in worship, but their daily lives are not characterized by justice and righteousness, the lack of the latter results in God’s rejection of the former.

Martin Luther King Jr. was born January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. Originally, his name was Michael Luther King Jr. (after his father Michael Sr. who adopted the name Martin Luther King Sr. in honor of the German Protestant religious leader Martin Luther). Martin Jr. attended Morehouse College and then Crozer Theological Seminary near Chester, Pennsylvania. During his theological education, King explored the

principles of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, the social justice movement and existentialism.

> *Having been raised in a rather strict fundamentalist tradition*, King writes, *I was occasionally shocked as my intellectual journey carried me through new and sometimes complex doctrinal lands. But despite the shock the pilgrimage was always stimulating, and it gave me a new appreciation for objective appraisal and critical analysis.* (Pilgrimage to Nonviolence)

First exposed to the concept of nonviolent resistance in Henry David Thoreau's *On Civil Disobedience* while at Morehouse, King later discovered a powerful exemplar of the method's possibilities through his research into the life of Mahatma Gandhi. "It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence," King says, "that I discovered the method for social reform."

King's first leadership role in the Civil Rights Movement was during the Montgomery Bus Boycott: a 381-day protest aimed at integrating the Alabama city's public transit system; one of the largest and most successful mass movements against racial segregation in history.

King, himself, recalls:

> *I could never accept the fact of having to go to the back of the bus or sit in the segregated section of a train. The first time that I was seated behind a curtain in a dining car, I felt as if the curtain had been dropped on my selfhood.* (Pilgrimage to Nonviolence)

The effort began on December 1, 1955, when Rosa Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus to go home after work. As more passengers boarded, several white men were left standing, so the bus driver demanded that Parks and several other African Americans give up their seats. Three other black passengers reluctantly did, but Parks remained seated. The driver asked her again to give up her seat, and again, she refused. Parks was arrested and booked for violating the City Code. At her trial a week later, in a 30-minute hearing, Parks was found guilty.

In his first speech as the group's president, King declared:

> *We have no alternative but to protest. For many years, we have shown an amazing patience. We have sometimes given our white brothers the feeling that we liked the way we were being treated. But we come here tonight to be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice.*

Here is short video reflecting on the lasting impact of Rosa Parks made within the Civil Rights Movement.

(Insert video)

Reflecting on this time, King wrote:

> *The experience in Montgomery did more to clarify my thinking than all the books that I had read. As the days unfolded I became more and more convinced of the power of nonviolence. Living through the actual experience of the protest, nonviolence became more than a method to which I gave intellectual assent; it became a commitment to a way of life. Many issues I had not cleared up intellectually concerning nonviolence were now solved in the sphere of practical action.* (Stride Toward Freedom, the Montgomery Story)

I was born in 1969, one year after Martin Luther King was assassinated. By the time I entered Middle School, it had been a generation since Rosa Parks had been arrested. When, there, I learned her story, it had been seasoned enough to be safe for textbooks. Mrs. Parks was held up as an accidental hero: a seemingly powerless little old lady who made a spontaneous decision not to give up her seat on a bus in 1955 and changed the world with her courage.

Earlier this year, our Presbytery brought musician and peace activist David Lamotte to town for a concert and seminar based on his book *Worldchanging 101*. During the session, he had us rearrange our chairs to simulate what it would have been like to sit on that Montgomery city bus on the evening of December 1, 1955. To begin with, that "little old lady" was 42 years old. By the time she was arrested, she had already been a civil rights activist for 12 years. She was the secretary for the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP and had traveled to a training camp at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee the summer before she was arrested where she spent 10 days taking classes on voting rights and social activism. Her decision was not a spur-of-the-moment revelation or flash of courage, but rather the result of years of training and practice.

Rosa Parks was not arrested that fateful evening for refusing to stand up so that a white man could have her seat. It's even worse than that. She was arrested for refusing to stand up so that a white man could be spared the indignity of sitting across the aisle from a black woman.

There was not a set white section and black section on Montgomery city buses. There was a sign indicating "whites only" that would be moved back, row by row, as more whites got on. The people sitting in that row were required to rise and stand at the

back so that, in frequent cases, one white person could sit in a row by himself or herself. (Worldchanging 101)

"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). In the story that many of us have been taught, the life of Rosa Parks consists of one day nearly seventy-years ago – December 1, 1955. As it turns out, her arrest was not the first, nor the last, decision point in her journey.

As King writes:

> *The nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. Finally, it reaches the opponent and so stirs his conscience that reconciliation becomes a reality.* (Stride Toward Freedom, A Montgomery Story)

These Holy Disruptors of the Civil Rights Movement – like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks – may have been icons, but they were not individual actors or accidental heroes. No, they were, instead, part of widespread and longstanding civil rights organizations that prepared for and remained committed to the principle of nonviolent resistance: integrating their belief in the power of Christ's love with actions to create powerful change for justice and equality.

As King says,

> *The way of acquiescence leads to moral and spiritual suicide. The way of violence leads to bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. But the way of nonviolence leads to redemption and the creation of the beloved community.* (My Trip to the Land of Gandhi)

For the remaining years of his cut-too-short life, King frequently cited this concept of the "Beloved Community" – a world in which a shared spirit of compassion would bring an end to the evils of racism, poverty, inequity, and violence. This was the end goal of his activist efforts; the enactment of which would finally bring about the vision of Amos: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (5:24) May God inspire us to act as we believe; and so live out the love made known to us through Christ, our Lord. Amen.