

**“Unity Under Pressure”**  
**1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany**  
**January 22, 2017**

Smarting from a mid-term election defeat in November of 1966, Dr. King gathered together the 75 staff members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement to retreat off the coast of South Carolina to rest, retrain, and regroup. It didn't go well. “Dr. King we love you,” one staff member said, “but I'm gonna be frank. Hosea Williams is our leader.” Hosea Williams for his part had his own suspicions against another one of King's lieutenants, James Bevel, and his new recruit, Jesse Jackson. Another civil rights worker complained that the only time he or she had been forced to put nonviolence into practice, was after being hit by another staff member. The movement was turning on itself.<sup>1</sup> Thank you for telling the story, Taylor Branch, in your history of *America in the King Years*. We need to know the story.

King, reflecting on these growing wounds and inner divisions did his best to hold the movement together. “In a revolution when hope diminishes,” King told that gathering of beleaguered, infighting disciples of Jesus, “bitter hatred develops toward the very people who build up the hope, because in building up the hope they were not able to deliver the promises.”

What I want you to notice is that as this faithful band of mostly Christians experienced a backlash from external forces attacking everything they had struggled to achieve, their internal relationships were tested, stressed, and threatened. Those internal relationships were threatened at precisely the time when peace-lovers, justice seekers, and love revolutionaries needed those relationships the most.

I wonder if Paul saw a similar dynamic playing out at the church in Corinth. Corinth was one of the first churches that Paul himself founded. As a major intersection in modern day Greece on a tiny isthmus between the Ionian and Adriatic Seas, it was a class-rich society, and the church, to its credit, reflected the class diversity of the region. But despite the Gospel that the church preached, the one where there is neither male and female, Jew or Greek, slave and free – those distinctions caused tension within the church. They tore at the fabric of the church. They threatened the unity of their witness. Those external forces impacted their internal relationships. “In building up the hope, they were not able to deliver the promises.” And so Paul wrote these words to the Corinthians:

**10** Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. **11** For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, (New York: Simon and Schuster), 2006, pp. 552-556.

**12** What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." **13** Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? **14** I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, **15** so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. **16** (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) **17** For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

Unity in the church is a tricky thing. I don't think we do it very well in the church, probably because we're not doing very well at it in the culture at large. We look for something to tie us together in sports teams, or patriotism, or politics or values. We look for rituals or practices or creeds to tie us together with their rules or discipline. We look for particular forms of culture to tie us together. We look for *someone* to tie us together with oratory or anger.

It's that last one that seems to be so dangerous and not just in the public arena – but in the church arena, too. Some of you are saying "I belong to Paul" the Apostles writes. "Others of you are saying I belong to Apollos." Apollos was a great orator, like Paul a Jew who believed Jewish was the Messiah. Still others of you are saying "I belong to Cephas," Peter's Aramaic name. Paul even acknowledges that some who claim "I belong to Christ" are still fomenting division under the pretense of faithfulness. Just because I appeal to Jesus doesn't mean that I am acting faithfully.

No one person can unify the church, Paul says. Not Paul, not Apollos, not Cephas. *Appeals* to Christ are not what unify the church, either. Appeals are exhortations that we make. Arguments that we construct. It's not our arguments or our efforts that make it possible for me to find communion with people I'd otherwise be disconnected from because of race, or class, or social group, or gender, or orientation, or rank. It is Christ who has unified the church already. The one who has broken down the dividing wall between God and human beings and the walls we erect between us. Not appeals to Christ, but only Christ. Not leaders who speak about Christ, but only Christ.

This is true faith. Not faith in what someone says about Jesus, but faith in God's ability and God's choice to bring us together. Faith in God's reconciling action that we see clearly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

And that faith is threatened in these foreboding times. Faith that God can overcome divisions between peoples of the world who always seem ready to choose war. Faith that God can overcome the stark inequity and separation between people of different races in our land. Faith that God can overcome the growing chasm between the superrich and the rest of us. Faith that God can bring together people across the hardening ideologies of people here and abroad.

Faith in what scripture calls the Kingdom of heaven – that kingdom that Jesus came proclaiming – a different realm of understanding and peace and justice between and among neighbors, granted by a God of generosity and forgiveness who was willing to suffer to make it so. That faith is being threatened.

And I know that faith might sound like something you don't think you need or want. I know some of you want marching orders, others of you are ready to direct those orders – get out in the streets. Resist! Talk strategy before it's too late.

I share your urgency. But if we look to the Christians we admire – the Civil Rights leaders – the prominent men and the overlooked but critical women – Fannie Lou Hamer, Dorothy Height, Daisy Bates, Pauli Murray, Diane Nash; or the leaders of the resistance to Nazism in the German Confessional Churches – Bonhoeffer and Niemoller and Barth and their colleagues; or the leaders of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. or the leaders of the early church – Paul and Chloe and her people. If you know their story then you see that faith is everything.

True faith is the fuel and the shield and the heart that you need for engaging the world in these times without ending up burned out or cynical, or tearing down the very people you need to be shoulder to shoulder with you in the trenches. “This is where tremendous decision takes place;” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “whether we Christians have enough strength to witness before the world that we are not dreamers with our heads in the clouds. . .that our faith really is not opium that keeps us content with an unjust world. Instead and *precisely because* our minds are set on things above, we are that much more stubborn and purposeful in protesting here on earth.”<sup>2</sup>

Stubborn and purposeful. Stubbornly attached to the world as it should be, but purposeful in the steps we take together to obtain it. Stubborn in our welcome of the stranger, our conviction that all human beings are created in the image of God, and purposeful in the choices we make to witness that this is true. Stubborn and purposeful.

That’s who Jesus is in the Gospel reading today. He gets word that John’s been put in prison and the very next action he takes is to pick up where John the Baptist left off. “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near” he says, which is exactly what John said before him.” Stubborn and purposeful.

The challenge for the church is can we be stubborn and purposeful together, on the same team? “We need organizations,” Dr. King wrote, “that are permeated with mutual trust, incorruptibility and militancy. Without this spirit we may have numbers but they will add up to zero. We need organizations that are responsible, efficient and alert. . .if we realized how indispensable [this is] to our struggle, we will create it as we managed to create underground railroads, protest groups, self-help societies and the churches that have always been our refuge, our source of hope and our source of action.”<sup>3</sup>

The churches – our source of hope and our source of action. That hope that is so dangerous because bitter hatred develops toward people who raise it but can’t deliver on the promises. That action that has to be stubborn in its refusal to cease at setbacks that do and will come. That faith that we must preach, cherish, and pass

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer quoted in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, Ferdinand Schlingensiefen, (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), pp. 111-12 quote in Allen Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope: Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company), 2014, 27.

<sup>3</sup> “Where Do We Go from Here,” Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, James M. Washington, editor, (New York: HarperCollins), 1986, p. 614.

onto new generations so that they can live in the midst of empire and fear and war and cynicism with joy that comes from somewhere other than circumstance.

Less than two weeks after the Twin Towers fell, I knelt on the concrete floor of our home church in NC and felt the weight of the hands of elders on my head, my shoulders, my back. Our newborn daughter –our first child- was 2 months old and I agonized in those times over the choices I had to make to do my part to give her world that had a chance for peace. Yesterday as she and I marched among half a million people mostly women in Washington, DC. I couldn't help but reflect on how clarifying September 11 had become for me. Clarifying not of all that is evil in the world but of the good that God can call forth from millions. Clarifying of the calls that God issues in the midst of the worst possible circumstances and of the deep presence of the God who issues them. Watching her navigate us through the tightly packed in crowds leading her old man by the hand, I realized how misdirected my earlier dreams for her had been. It's not the kingdom I should have wanted to give to her, but a hunger for it. A hope for it. A trust in its truth and in the God who wants to give it to us all.

To those stepping into leadership in this church. The hands that are about to be laid on your are just as heavy, these days are no less foreboding of what is yet to come. But those hands represent our community's hope for the Gospel. A hope that is passed from generation to generation. A precious gift that we have to keep sharing with each other.

It's the only way I've ever been able to contend with powers and principalities who sometimes don't even see the human suffering they leave in their wake. It's the only way I can endure anxiety and fear that I feel right now in our land and yes in this body. It's the only way I can live without giving up on dreams for a land without racism, a people without fear, a city without murder, a world without war and poverty. That faith that keeps me stubborn and purposeful even and especially in trying times.