

Lift Every Voice and Sing **January 16, 2011**

Children--and I say children because you are the ones I *really* want to talk to today, although of course I hope the adults will listen in--I want to begin this homily by quoting again a line from Martin Luther King, Jr. that Karen read earlier. Karen read, and Dr. King said, "The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness." Let me read it again: "The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness." That's a lot to understand, especially if you're only four or five or six years old. And you know what, it's a lot to understand if you're 44 or 55 or 66, or even older. But even if you don't understand it right away, I want you to hear those words, because as you grow up, I hope you will explore them and seek to understand their meaning for yourselves.

In the meantime, for now, I believe what Dr. King means by that statement is, kindness and love leads to more kindness and love. Meanness and fighting leads to more meanness and fighting.

So which makes more sense for us to practice? I have never liked it when people are mean to me, or when people seek to hurt me. So, as someone on the receiving end, I very clearly know that I would rather have kindness and love. The only catch is, I can't just expect to *receive* love and

kindness. I have to practice *giving* love and kindness--even when someone is being mean to me or wants to fight with me!

That's where it can get kind of hard. You might know what this is like, if you have brothers or sisters, or if there is someone at school who is just *not nice* to you no matter what. When someone is not nice to us, we feel this hurt inside, and sometimes we feel this energy rise up inside ourselves which we might call anger, and that anger feels really easy to use in such a way that we fight back. We fight back because we hope our anger will be stronger than the other person's anger, and that we will win.

But even if we do win, what is it that we win? And where do love and kindness go when we win that way? I am not saying anger is a feeling you should not feel. It's natural. It's OK. It's a way to raise our awareness that something is wrong, that we must act.

So what if, once we become aware of our anger, instead of lashing out, we work to use that awareness to say, "Aha! Now is a time to act from a place of kindness and love, both for the other person *and* for myself. No matter how mean and hurtful that person is, I am going to lift my voice and sing. I'm going to believe that the power of kindness and love is greater than the power of meanness and fighting."

Why believe that? Remember what Dr. King says, that the "aftermath of nonviolence is beloved community," while "the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness." Bitterness. What is that? Has anyone here ever tasted

something that is very bitter? Imagine you've just tasted something bitter. Make a face that reflects that bitter taste. Keep that face. Now everyone look around. When we have a lot of bitterness in our lives, because we have experienced hurt and meanness--because we have experienced violence--often times that is how we can end up looking. And we don't just *look* like that. We *feel* like that. And the more meanness we experience, either by giving it or receiving it, or both, the more bitter we can become.

So even if it may feel good and empowering in the moment to strike back in anger when someone is being mean to us, far too often the aftermath--the aftertaste, the after-feeling--is a feeling of bitterness.

What Martin Luther King, Jr. taught--and what he learned from others before him--is that there is a way we can resist violence without acting in violence. And that is, if we do not stoop down to meet others in meanness and fighting, but rise up in love for ourselves and for others, we can win over the very people who have tried to hurt us. We do so by making them see that both we and they are naturally deserving of kindness and love. Because when we don't fight back in violence, the other person sees, "Hey, this isn't working. They're not fighting back. If they don't fight back, how am I supposed to be able to feel like I'm in the right, with something to protect, and they're in the wrong?" After a while, the other person sees, "Yuck, I don't like the way I'm acting. It's making me look bad, and it's making me feel bad."

Of course, in a world as big as ours, it's often a lot more complicated than just that. Because a lot of times it's not one person treating one other person badly, but a whole bunch of people treating a whole bunch of other people badly. There are whole *systems* of meanness. And the weird thing is, we might not even realize we're a part of that system until we really, really stop and ask ourselves some serious questions. For instance, why, one year after the earthquake, are the people of Haiti still hurting so very badly? Why does our country repeatedly spend so much more on the military than we do on education? Why, despite horrible violence, are people still wanting loose gun laws? Why are there so many homeless people seeking food and help alongside the roads that we drive every single day?

Dr. King says, "true compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice that produces beggars needs restructuring." In other words, if we are truly loving enough in our hearts that we see the pain of that person standing on the street, hoping for food, we not only give him or her food, we seek to understand what got them there, and to see how we can work to get them back off street, and prevent others from ending up there as well.

Yes, I do occasionally buy a sandwich for someone, or a cup of coffee. And for a moment we both feel better. For a moment, that person is not hungry or cold. But let's not pat ourselves on the back for too long, lest

we forget that once we drive away, that person is still on the street, still not knowing where the next meal is going to come from, still lonely, still unhappy that this is where their life has brought them.

We *are* caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. None of us get to walk away from the rest of us and never ever see the hurt that is in the world again. We can try. And we can do a really good job of trying. But even if we hide deep down in our computers or our televisions or our nice soft fluffy beds or our favorite sports teams or what have you, none of that will change the world out there, or make it go away. What will change the world is our love, our *acts* of love, even when--perhaps *especially* when--love is not coming our way. If you see suffering in the world, answer it with love. If you see suffering in yourself, answer it with love. One way you can do so is dedicate *some* time tomorrow to some act of community service. Feed someone. Write a letter to your senator. Pick up some trash. Help around the house. Give a stranger a kind hello. Tell someone who is mean to you, "you are loved." I promise, it will really throw them off. Whatever action you take, today, tomorrow, and all the days of your life, may you act in the spirit of love, and may your actions reflect the spirit and the legacy of one great man and many, many great people who dedicated their lives to make this world a better, more loving place to live. In thanks to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Amen.