

MLK Service
Shawnee Presbyterian
January 19, 2015

1.

We have gathered here in this worship service this morning
to remember the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
in a post-Ferguson moment in time.
“Ferguson,” the name which falls to the ground as one more bitter fruit,
one more strange fruit from a tree in need of massive tending.
We have gathered here because we do not want any more of our babies to be hurt.
We do not want any more of our babies to get killed.
Ferguson, New York, Florida, and on and on, the list is so very long.
We have gathered here,
though we know there will be more undeserved slain,
though we know that this is not the end and the journey is long,
we have gathered here to summon our spirits and join our lives,
to do what we can that no more should die,
to do what we can that fear and injustice should not rule our lives,
to do what we and this world be transformed one day at a time.

I'd like to begin with a story.
It's a story about a young man named Zak Ebrahim.¹

Zak was born in 1983 in Pittsburgh.
His father was an Egyptian engineer; his mother was a grade school teacher.
And in Zak's words he had a happy early childhood.

But things started to change when he was around 7.
They were in New York metropolitan area by that time.

On November 5, 1990 a man walked into a hotel in Manhattan
and murdered a Rabbi Meir Kahane, the leader of the Jewish Defense League.
The man was El-Sayyid Nosier . . . Zak Ebrahim's father.

Nosier was initially found not guilty of the murder.
Yet three years later in 1993, El-Sayyid Nosier participated in the bombing of the World Trade Centers,
a bombing that resulted in the deaths of 6 people with over 1000 others injured.
Nosair would eventually be found guilty for his involvement and received a life sentence.

But there is the another story that is woven into this story.
It is the story of a boy, Zak, who loved his father,
who was protected from and misled about the actions of his father,
a story about a boy who believed what all of his father's friends were telling him:
that his father was a hero.
These were the men the boy looked up to in the innocence of his childhood; the ones he called “uncle.”

This is the story of a boy who, like all children, naturally trusted his world
and was being taught to believe in the principles and worldview of violence and dogmatism.

¹ This story is taken from a TED Radio Hour broadcast on September 19, 2014.

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Today 25 years later Zak is a peace activist.
Over the course of his young life he underwent a transformation,
a transformation that was forged by a re-evaluation of the way he saw his father's belief system.

Zak says, "Growing up in a bigoted household, I wasn't prepared for the real world."
As a boy he had been taught his father's world view and values,
the bigotry of forming judgments on people based on — in his words — the
"arbitrary measurements like a person's race or religion. . . .
That's what indoctrination is:
authority figures telling you that the world is one way."

You accept it.

Yet as a teen one summer he had an opportunity to participate in a UN youth event.
He became friends with another boy who, over the course of a few days,
he learned, was, in fact, Jewish.
Later working at an amusement park he got to meet some gay performers
and experienced them as some of the kindest people he had ever met.
These two experiences were with people he had been taught to condemn.

Zak said, "I don't know what it is like to be gay,
but I am well-acquainted with what it is like to be judged by something
that is beyond my ability to control."

But it was one day that he had a conversation with his mother that changed his life.
He went to talk with her about how his world view was starting to change.
He didn't know if he could anymore believe in the discriminations and bigotry
of his father's world, in particular.

He recounts the conversation in this way:

"She looked at me with the weary eyes of someone
who had experienced enough dogmatism to last a lifetime and said,
'I am tired of hating people.'
In that instant I realized how much negative energy it takes
to hold all that hatred inside of you."

In that conversation "she gave me permission to go out in the world and experience people
for who they were rather than try to fit them into some category or box."

"I am tired of hating people."
I am tired of hating people.
We are tired of hating people.

2.

In this service of memory to Dr. King and re-dedication to the vision
of the beloved community and nonviolence,
I would like to highlight 3 elements of Zak Ebrahim's story,
that I believe are three elements of our own stories and Dr. King's as well
in this post-Ferguson time.

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The three elements are these:

- that we are not born to hate, but born to care;
- that we must choose not to hate and act on fear,
but choose to care, to be generous in spirit, and choose for nonviolence;
- that we must cross boundaries.

3.

The first is a claim of faith to a greater grace:

we are not born to hate, but born to care.

We are born as sisters and brothers into God's world
with all of God's creatures and with all creation.

It is our claim that before we are anyone's, we are God's.

Before we do anything, we are God's.

Before we learn to divide up this world and learn to cry, we are God's.

Before we learn to hate, we are given a nature to care.

And before we learn to mistrust, we are born trusting.

This is God's world — not ours — a bequest to all of life:

one indivisible garment of mutual destiny and care.

We are born — as all life is — sacred, holy, vulnerable,
and with the capacity and nature to care.

And we stand as proof today

that the violence of this world or the justifications to hate that this world too often demands
are not inherent in anyone's religion or race or ethnicity or one's family of origin.

A deeper, eternal, unquenchable, inherent love flows through all life.

It is more than a birthright; it is our very essence.

4.

Yet, secondly,

the world teaches us quickly, bruises us quickly, and then we bruise others.

The world teaches us effectively to doubt our capacity to love

before the apparent power of the world's machinery and messages of division.

Our world too often seems to indoctrinate us to fear and violence and apathy.

And we become almost always at some points in our lives,

unwitting accomplices and microphones

for the messages of fear, mistrust, and senseless violence.

How have you been indoctrinated?

to doubt your capacity to love and care for yourself?

to doubt your capacity to care for another?

to doubt the power of love over a knee-jerk abuse of force over another person or
group of people?

How have we been indoctrinated to accept the false divisions?

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Zak Ebrahim's mother said, "I am tired of hating people."

Dr. King said almost the same thing:

"I've seen too much hate to want to hate
[E]very time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear."

We, too, must become too tired to hate and mistrust.
We must feel their burdens,
And then we can make a choice to care,
a moment-by-moment choice to no longer accept the indoctrination,
to no longer accept the internalized bigotries.
And then in that moment to make a choice for generosity of spirit,
and then to make a choice to cultivate that generosity.

Dr. King said it so eloquently:

"Somehow we must be able to stand up before our most bitter opponents as say:
'We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering.
We will meet your physical force with soul force."

That is the choice.

Surely, grace is mightily involved, but it is also
our choosing for generosity of spirit,
our choosing to care, and
our choosing for a nonviolent and proactive response to suffering.

6.

Thirdly and lastly, in that choosing to say
No to the world's indoctrination and Yes to life
is that the mandate to cross boundaries.
We must get out of our bubbles.
We must go beyond our horizons.
We have all been given the permission to go out in the world
and experience people for who they are
rather than try to fit them into some category or box.

We must live the beloved kingdom by being with other people,
not just reading about it.
We must break out of our comfort zones
that too easily put us to sleep.
This message is more to dominant culture, but really it is true for us all:
we must break out of the darkness of fear of others
into the sunlight of meeting them and working together.

West Louisville, South Louisville, East Louisville,
Mexicans and Anglos and African-Americans,
straight, gay, bisexual, transgender,
we all must cross the illusory boundaries we have set up.

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And that is mainly on dominant culture to do,
the wealthy and the powerful and the white must not simply travel to another place,
but cross the more challenging boundaries of getting to know other people
in their own neighborhoods.

7.

We are not born to hate, but born to care;
We must not choose to hate and act on fear,
but choose to care, to be generous in spirit, and choose for nonviolence;
And we must cross boundaries.

For we have been given a great permission and invitation to
hear not just the single note of our own experience,
but the jazz of others.

Amen.

Rev. Phil Lloyd-Sidle
Sowers of Justice Network
January 19, 2015