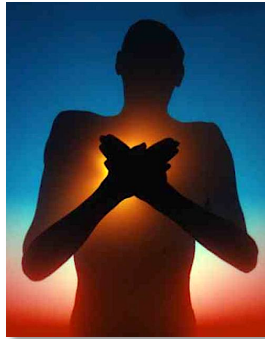


“Seeing the Light With Your Heart”

January 15, 2023

Rev. Bill Eichhorn



Readings

I want to believe that the imperfections are nothing – that the light is everything.

~ Mary Oliver

The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

~ John 1:5

The Light which shines in the eye
is really the light of the heart.
The light which fills the heart
is the light of God.

~ Rumi

It was four-thirty in the morning on March 25, 1965. Light rain fell on the twenty-five seminary students and faculty from Eden Seminary gathered on the tarmac of Lambert Airport in St. Louis, Missouri. Professor Walter Brueggemann offered a brief prayer before the group climbed the stairs to board a DC-3 that would take us to Montgomery, Alabama. Five days earlier, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had led three thousand civil right advocates across the infamous Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. It marked the beginning of the march to Montgomery, just a few days after “Bloody Sunday,” when local police and Alabama State Police attacked a peaceful protest with billy clubs and tear gas.

Of the three thousand marchers who crossed the bridge that Sunday, only three hundred were allowed to continue the fifty-mile trek to Montgomery. In light of this restriction, Dr. King invited religious leaders and seminary students from across the country to join the marchers on the last day as they entered Montgomery. At the request of students and faculty, Eden Seminary chartered a DC-3 to fly twenty-five of us to Montgomery.

As planeload after planeload landed, bright yellow school buses ferried religious leaders from the airport to Montgomery's westside residential neighborhood where we joined the march and sang our way toward the center of the city. Alabama Governor George Wallace refused to mobilize the National Guard to provide security; however, President Lyndon Johnson federalized eighteen hundred members of the Alabama National Guard, and they lined Dexter Avenue to the state capital. Some of the marchers had put daisies in the gun barrels of the guards' M-1 rifles they held at attention. In a crowd numbering twenty-five thousand, we walked past the red brick Dexter Avenue Baptist Church Dr. King had pastored, and into the plaza before the capital, where the Confederate flag flew atop its gleaming white dome.

Guest speakers like Dr. Ralph Abernathy told us that all the efforts to prevent the march from reaching the capital had failed, and that the day marked a major victory. Then Dr. King stepped to the podium, and in that eloquent preacher's voice, delivered one of his most memorable speeches.

We are on the move now. The burning of our churches will not deter us. We are on the move now. The beating and killing of our clergy and young people will not deter us. We are on the move now...

His words stirred the crowd. Scattered "amens" were heard as he continued:

So as we go away this afternoon, let us go away more than ever before committed to the struggle and committed to nonviolence. I must admit to you there are still difficulties ahead ... I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?"

From the marchers came, "How long, Martin? How long?" Raising his voice, he spoke in melodious choruses building to a rousing climax.

*How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.
How long? Not long, because you shall reap what you sow.
How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.
How long? Not long, because mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord...
Our God is marching on.*

With those closing words, a thundering ovation erupted, filling the plaza.

It had been a long day. People were tired and hungry. But after the ovation subsided, no one left. People joined hands and began singing "We Shall Overcome." Federal Marshalls, who feared an attempt on Dr. King's life, escorted him from the stage, but we kept singing. It was a moment to be held, a moment to be long remembered. Later, our seminary contingent found our way to a nearby Baptist church where members served us huge helpings of gratitude, as well as fried chicken, black beans and collard greens. Our return flight to St. Louis ran into a thunderstorm, filling the cabin with flashes of lightening and setting the old DC-3 to pitching and rolling. The captain landed in Memphis where we waited for the storm to pass. The storm served to remind us of Dr. King's words, "I must admit to you there are still difficulties ahead."

The next day proved to be a chilling reminder of the suffering and struggle that did indeed lie ahead. A white housewife from Detroit, Viola Gregg Liuzzo, who had come to Selma in support of the movement, was shot and killed by a carload of Klan night riders as she and a young black SCLC volunteer were transporting marchers back to Selma. Yes, more deaths and difficulties lay ahead for the civil rights movement, but on August 6, 1965, President Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act with its sweeping reforms that did away with decades of voter suppression for African Americans. The march from Selma to Montgomery was a turning point in the struggle for those rights – the same rights that are under siege today. My friends, the work for justice goes on.

In a revealing article entitled “The Looming Revolt Over Homelessness” in a recent edition of *The Atlantic* magazine, the author argues that the most relevant factors in the homelessness crisis are rent prices and vacancy rates, not high levels of drug use, mental illness or poverty:

...when we have a dire shortage of affordable housing, it’s all but guaranteed that a certain number of people will become homeless.

Millions of Americans live on a precarious financial cliff, and all it takes is a divorce, a job loss, domestic violence, or a medical crisis to force them over the edge into homelessness.

Earlier today we heard from Louise Trudeau how the Tamalpais Pacific organization supports efforts to provide more low and moderate housing in Marin. While California has passed significant legislation in the past three years to increase our low and moderate housing units and to hold local governments accountable for doing their share of creating such housing, local homeowner groups have multiplied here and across the state to block such housing in their neighborhoods. Our participation in Tam Pacific, the Marin Interfaith Council, and the Marin Organizing Committee provides avenues for us to voice our support for efforts to create affordable housing and to educate our elected officials. For ten years, we sheltered men who were homeless here in our sanctuary. We provide financial support for the Street Chaplaincy and Homeward Bound. Going forward, I hope we can explore ways to expand our advocacy for affordable housing.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life and prophetic ministry have long been an inspiration for me. He taught me what it means to have faith. The great Persian poet Rumi said: “Faith is seeing the light with your heart, when all our eyes see is darkness.” Dr. King saw the darkness of racism and violence in our country, but that was never all he saw. From the light in his heart, he saw the promised land. From the light in his heart, he gave voice to a dream about a democratic, multiracial, multi-cultural America with justice and well-being for all. Martin Luther King Jr.’s imagination, courage and stamina came from a heart filled with the light of God.

