

Knitting of a Vision
January 22, 2023
1 Corinthians 1:1-18; Matthew 4:12-23
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Having just celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day this week I have been thinking a lot about what motivates someone to become involved in societal activism. Activism means “a collective effort to create change from the grassroots.” Most people don’t necessarily consider themselves activist, but if you have ever called or written a congress person, made consumer decisions based on the ethical practices of a company, signed a petition for or against a piece of legislation or simply voted in an election you are participating in forms of activism. We see and experience all kinds of injustice and oppression in the world. The work of social change begins with a belief that we are called to and could affect change with enough people involved. Activism involves “reclaiming one’s own agency in deciding what kind of world they want to live in. Activism helps us bridge the gap between what needs to be done and what our governments are willing to do so that we and others can live dignified lives.”

So, I have been wondering what triggers or tips a person from passive complacency, to active advocacy for change. I looked at some of the women named in the litany from last week to see what may have been the trigger for them.

Winona LaDuke, an Anishinaabe Native American, got involved in activism after becoming a school principal on the White Earth Reservation in Northern Minnesota. She did not grow up on a reservation, but upon seeing the hardships of her people at White Earth she started advocating for the needs of the residents including jobs, environmental rights and honoring the treaties for native land. She said, “Change will come. As always, it is just a matter of who determines what that change will be.”

Dolores Huerta became an activist for education and later labor rights for migrant workers after seeing the malnourished children in her southern California school and

knowing of the hardships her father endured as a farm laborer. She said, "Giving kids clothes and food is one thing, but it's much more important to teach them that other people besides themselves are important, and that the best thing they can do with their lives is to use them in the service of other people."

Fannie Lou Hamer was a woman who believed in the power of voting and attended a meeting to learn how to register to vote in Mississippi. She and other brave people attempted to register and ended up being arrested and brutally beaten. This was her first public act of self-determination and it launched a lifetime of activism.

When faced with injustice inflicted upon yourself or members of your community it is hard to stay silent and remain passive. Some seek to address the inequity with charity, meeting the immediate needs, while others may take up advocating for change through activism. One meets the immediate need, while the other seeks long term change.

One parable I have heard shows the importance of both charity and activism in the work we do. There is a longer version of this parable but here is the crux of it. "Two people are walking by a river when they notice babies floating down the river. One starts grabbing the babies out of the river, while the other runs upstream. The first asks, "Where are you going?! We must save these babies," and the other replies, "I'm going to see who's throwing babies in the river." Meeting the immediate need is often charitable acts, while Advocacy work seeks to address the causes and reduce the need for charity in the first place.

Activism may include raising awareness or gathering more resources to find a resolve. It may include protesting or marches to put pressure on those who hold power so change can happen. It may require taking legislative action or demanding justice from the court systems. It may involve speaking up at public events to advocate for those without a voice. It may involve using our economic power or influence to affect change. Above all else, it takes time, a lot of time and resources. As Martin Luther King Jr put it. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

That was on my mind when I read the Gospel passage and saw something new. I noticed it says that Jesus began to preach when John was imprisoned. And Jesus first message was “Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.” I wonder if John’s unjust imprisonment was Jesus’ tipping point to start preaching too. The message of Repentance that John and Jesus are preaching is really a call to change. Change that is both personal and institutional. The message was appealing to the common person but also to leaders. We see John call out leaders to perform fruits worthy of repentance. In Luke he also calls out the corrupt practices of tax collectors and soldiers also. John’s words were clear that ALL are called to righteousness and acts of equity for all. We know this today with our need to be more ecologically just we reduce, reuse, and recycle but unless our government and big business also practice the three Rs our efforts to protect the planet will be ineffective. It is both personal and institutional change.

Jesus calls this kind of change repentance in the text. The words repent or repentance in the New Testament comes from the word, “metanoia” in Greek. Metanoia can mean to change one’s mind or thinking. It can also mean to stop and go in another direction. We get our English word metamorphosis from it which in English means transformation. This call to transformation is so fundamental and revolutionary to the message of Christ that we hear terms like Born Again or a New Creation in Christ to describe how transformative it is.

James Glentworth Butler in his Topical Analysis of the Bible wrote that the word Metanoia in the New Testament occurs more than 50 times. Butler says that it is one of the most significant and inspirational words of the New Testament.

According to Butler “Metanoia literally means a change of mind, but it is deeper than that. This is a change in the trend and action of the whole inner nature, intellectual, affectional, and moral center of the person.” Science has helped us understand and transform our actions to save lives and care better for the planet time and time again. We are still learning about generational trauma and the impact of four hundred years of

slavery and colonization has had upon our Black and Native American communities. We need to take seriously the need for us to face our own internalized racism and understand systems of power that have an unjust impact on certain groups of people and society.

Paul talks about this transformation as something that occurs in the mind first. Romans 12:2 “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Paul understands the work of Christ as a transformative re-ordering of the world to a moral truth of love and justice found in Christ. In our passage from first Corinthians, we see Paul calling the church back to the transformative work of the Gospel. This arguing among them is sign of then being caught up in the worldly ways of power and influence instead of practicing the gift of love and servanthood toward one another.

I find Paul’s admonition to the church helpful for us today also. He says, “be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose.” He is calling the church to turn away from their petty arguments and to be woven, knitted, connected by the common call, vision, and purpose give to us through the Gospel. That Gospel is a call to the world to repent of our selfish and oppressive ways and be transformed by seeking love, justice, and reconciliation with our neighbors.

As a congregation we can take some insights from these passages this morning to consider what is the transformative work God is calling us to. Are there things in our own lives that we need to have a change of heart about? Are we being called to be that voice in the wilderness for the disenfranchised and downtrodden? How can we weave together our various interests to create a rich tapestry of faith for others to be apart of? What squabbles and petty fighting are standing in our way of true unity in Christ? Can we find the courage to change our mindset and be unified in Christ to be a force for real change to the glory of God? Let us be about the work of the Gospel together.