

The Spirit: The Gift of God
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1 Corinthians 2:1-13, 16 and Isaiah 58
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Alberta Williams was born in 1904 in Atlanta, Georgia just a few years after the Plessy vs. Ferguson ruling of the Supreme Court that legalized segregation and upheld Jim Crow law. Born to Jennie and the Rev. Adam Williams, Alberta was the only surviving child of three. Alberta learned from her parents, that everyone was equal in the eyes of God and that we all had a role to play in achieving equality on earth. From the moment that Alberta was born she was told that faith would guide and empower her to speak up for what she believed in. She learned to play several instruments including the organ, sang in the choir and attended school, aspiring to become a teacher one day. In the midst of the segregated south Alberta witnessed her parents as living examples of resistance in the name of humanity and God's eternal love. In 1906 race riots in Atlanta broke out when white mobs killed and attacked many black people. Despite the great danger to him and his young family, Rev. Williams spoke out against the attacks and other such injustices and became a leader of early boycotts and protests. The Williams used their ministry to build up the dignity and self-worth of their members, supported the black community and spoke out against the mistreatment of others.

Alberta's church took seriously the words of Isaiah 58, "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. Share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin.” They were proclaiming the good news of the Cross of Christ to liberate all people, especially formerly enslaved people from the bondages of sin into a new life of liberty and justice, in the face of white supremacy, the KKK, and Jim Crow laws. Alberta, like her parents and fellow church members, believed in the power of God’s spirit to overcome the power of evil in the world that was determined to oppress them once again. She and her community understood the countercultural teachings of Paul when he talked about the wisdom of the world vs. the wisdom of God. Alberta knew the calling of God on her life was to infuse these truths into the hearts of the next generation. She was also the church organist and choir leader who helped them lift up every voice and sing the songs of liberty. Alberta faithfully fulfilled her calling, raising up her children and the children of the church including her son Martin Luther King Jr.. When Martin heard the call to the ministry, Alberta was there to train him and remind him of the legacy of his father and grandfather.

This story of Alberta Williams King and her impact upon her son Martin Luther King Jr and our nation is found in the book *The Three Mothers* by Anna Malaika Tubbs. This book recounts not only the long struggle for racial equality that we are still striving for today. It also shows us the generational work of mothers, fathers and grandparents in shaping the principles and values of the upcoming generations. Alberta’s spirituality and principles of life, dignity, and love were evident in all her children, especially Martin Luther King Jr, as he rose up to fill the shoes of his grandfather and father in struggle for civil rights and the beloved community.

It is a struggle that we see time and again in history and in scripture. We have witnessed this struggle even within Paul’s work with the church in

Corinth as he seeks to transform their worldview to understanding of God's kingdom of spirit and the power of love. Paul says in today's reading: "My speech and my proclamation were made not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. . . . We speak God's wisdom, a hidden mystery, which God decreed before the ages for our glory and which none of the rulers of this age understood, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

Paul sought to establish a firm foundation of transformative faith in Corinth and raise up future leaders that would carry forward the mantle of God's spirit and power of love to change the world for the better. It is a legacy of faith that we still proclaim today. That the power of God's love is greater than hate.

Alberta died in 1991, at the age of 87, while leading worship at the organ at Ebenezer Baptist church at the hand of a assassin. The church that her family founded, her father, husband and two son's ministered at and stands as a beacon of justice in the world today. Her latter years were spent raising younger generations of leaders to carry on the struggle for Justice, Peace and Equality.

Still today we see renewed attempts to tear down the progress gained by the civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. We, as a predominately white congregation, may feel tempted to stay quiet, to pretend that this is not our struggle also. May we heed the words of Elie Wiesel who said, "I promised to never be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." It is not enough to just love our Black and Brown neighbors we

must also seek justice for them and others. We need to be repairers of the breach, as Isaiah calls it. We too must stand in the gap and defend the weak and downtrodden. We too need to raise up the next generation to carry on the struggle for justice like Alberta did.

In 2002 East Church made a declaration of faith to be an Open and Affirming church that included racial equality. Hear these words from our Open and Affirming statement:

“We acknowledge that, historically, many Christian churches and societies have excluded people for a variety of unjust reasons. Among these are race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, economic class, physical or mental abilities.

We affirm that all people are embraced with the family of God
As we journey together as a community of faith, we are called by God to seek justice for all people. We, therefore, call ourselves to make a continuing effort toward inclusiveness, standing against all forms of discrimination. Therefore, we declare ourselves to be an Open and Affirming congregation.”

As we begin Black History Month and celebrate the inspiring lives of famous and not so famous people in our history. Let us renew our declaration to seek justice for all people and see the interconnected bonds of faith that we share with others who seek perfect love, the love of God for the world. Let us continue the pursuit of forming a more perfect union, the beloved community of God.