

January 18, 2015
John 20:19-23
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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*The Preacher and The Teacher :
Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thich Nhat Hanh*

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Some time ago I decided that on Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend I wanted to talk about Dr. King's encounter with Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh as an example of how open and respectful engagement with people of other faith traditions can help us to engage our own tradition more deeply.

At the time I thought I might use today's scripture because of its central image of the risen Christ breathing the Holy Spirit into the disciples. This text has become particularly important to me through my own encounter with Hindu and Buddhist practices of meditation and yoga. I have learned to pay attention to breath and to appreciate its deep connection to my experience of God's Spirit. This text has helped me to see how attention to breath/spirit is part of my own tradition.

Yet, as I studied the text again this week I was tempted to not use it because of a problematic phrase that says the disciples were behind closed doors "for fear of the Jews." In the context of the gospel of John the tension expressed

is within the Jewish community itself, between those who are followers of Jesus and those who are not. It would probably be more appropriate to translate the passage "for fear of the Jewish authorities," because the disciples themselves were Jews.

Yet, it is exactly these kinds of words and the corresponding religious tension that undergirds too much of the world's violence for thousands of years. In fact from church history we know that the Christian church, at times, has wrongly used passages such as this to justify its own anti-Semitism.

These days, in the recent terrorist events in Paris, we see again how hateful terrorists - and there are such people in all traditions - masquerade as religious believers to justify their actions. And it gets dangerous for everyone.

The other day, the president of France asked for religious tolerance, and indeed we do need religious tolerance. However, we have more to offer each other than simply tolerance. We can actually learn from each other. Ironically, it is sometimes our engagement with the

traditions and practices of other religions that help us to engage our own heritage more deeply.

SERMON

Martin Luther King, Jr., a Christian, understood himself to be a preacher. In his letter from the Birmingham Jail he wrote, *"Before I was a civil rights leader, I was a preacher of the Gospel. This was my first calling and it still remains my greatest commitment."*

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist monk, is a teacher. In fact his disciples generally refer to him as Thay (meaning Teacher). He has traveled the world for decades teaching mindfulness practices. He was born in Vietnam but has lived in France as a long time exile, due to his Vietnam War protests. He is 89 years old. Last November he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and is recovering slowly.

Martin Luther King preached "keep your eyes on the prize." Thich Nhat Hanh teaches "breathe, smile, go slowly." Both of these men have been prominent witnesses for the power of non-violence to bring about change. King's focus was on social change to free the individual. Thich Naht Hanh's focus is on internal personal change to free the society. They have both prayed and acted for peace and the world has been blessed by their ministries.

Many of us have heard of how Ghandi's teachings influenced King's commitment to non-violence. Today I want to talk about how King's encounter with Thich Nhat Hanh emboldened King to expand his horizons in calling for non-violent change.

But first, let's hear the words King spoke to a Bowdoin student after King spoke from this very pulpit on May 6, 1964, the same year he received the Nobel Peace Prize.

King had been invited by Bowdoin's Political Forum, a non-partisan student organization, to speak about civil rights. Because the expected crowd was too large for Pickard Theater on campus the event was held here at FPC. Reports are that there were more than 1,100 people here, which is more than an overflow crowd. Fire code today is 750. So, I'm not quite sure what to think of that number. Let's just say the place was really full.

In the speech King said, "If democracy is to live, then segregation must die. Segregation is a cancer in the body politic..." (You can listen to the whole speech on the Bowdoin College website during this month.) Because Maine was even more homogenous then than it is now, it is not surprising that one student who was here that day (Wayne Burton) reported that after the speech he asked King what all that King was saying had to do with him. King replied, "If your conscience stops at the border of Maine

then you are less than who you should be.” (Bowdoin College website)

I suspect these words came back to haunt King when two years later he met Thich Nhat Hanh. They had only one face-to-face meeting in which Naht Hanh asked ML King to speak out against the war in Vietnam. I imagine that Naht Hanh spoke passionately about his homeland his concern for the people there.

At the time, the Vietnam War was a political quicksand. Many of King’s contacts advised him against saying anything. However, I can imagine him saying to himself, “if your conscience stops at the border of the United States then you are less than who you should be.”

After this encounter King apparently came to the conviction that his conscience could not stop at the U.S. border. Several months later (April 4, 1967) King entered another UCC church, Riverside Church in New York, and delivered a speech called ‘Beyond Vietnam’ in which he strongly denounced U.S. involvement in Vietnam. He spoke about the injustice of the war, especially for poor people in Vietnam and poor people in the U.S. Increasingly King was focusing his attention on the poor wherever they were. That day he made the provocative statement that “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

Later that same year King publicly nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the 1967 Nobel Peace Prize saying "I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of [this prize] than this gentle monk from Vietnam. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to [ecumenism](#), to world brotherhood, to humanity".

Two people of different races, different cultures, different religions - both of whom experienced great suffering among their people - were united in their commitment to peace. They blessed each other’s lives and the world.

The world is always in need of prophets for peace. In terms of the statistics on deaths by violence the world is increasingly peaceful, even though the evening news doesn’t give us that impression. However, the acts of violence are no longer enacted so much by nation states as by groups of individuals, often hiding their hatred behind a religious mask.

In response to the lethal attacks on the staff of the satirical French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* there has been an outpouring of support, expressed as

Je suis Charlie. I am Charlie.

We grieve for those who died and for those who live in increased fear of attack. Let us also grieve for those whose faith has been hijacked by the terrorists.

We find ourselves these days in nuanced conversations about the complex character of public speech. Satire is a powerful, and even dangerous, means of communication. It can be helpful in exposing religious hypocrisy and political oppression. Yet it is often crude and highly offensive. *Charlie Hebdo* critiqued all religious traditions and even religion itself. However, such satire does not justify physical retaliation. In our own Christian tradition we recognize that we are called to respond to hate with compassion. It's that simple and that incredibly difficult.

There is one person in this story whom we should not forget. He is Ahmed Marabet, the Muslim police officer who died trying to protect the staff of *Charlie*. In response to Ahmed's story, a Belgian columnist, Dyab Abou Jahjah, who is also a Muslim, recently tweeted,

I am not Charlie, I am Ahmed the dead cop. Charlie ridiculed my faith and culture and I died defending his right to do so. Je suis Ahmed.

I suspect Martin Luther King Jr. and Thich Nhat Hanh would join us in saying,
Peace be to Ahmed.