

January 15, 2012
Martin Luther King Jr. Day

Sermons

from a church with a conscience



“If . . .”

by

The Reverend Dr. Robert J. Campbell

The Church of the Covenant
Presbyterian Church (USA)
11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org

What would it mean at this critical moment in human affairs did we in the churches show growing graces and services! A church with a conscience out in front of its age and outdistancing its own best past, in a sense of responsibility for an entire world, in its stand for economic justice, in its demand for, and illustration of, mutual honor and fellowship among races – a church with members whose convictions and characters were ahead of their contemporaries, so that it pulled them forward and lifted them Godward! Then both we on the inside and those on the outside would be in no doubt that Christ is alive and in the midst of His churches and is using them to guide and inspire the world.

Henry Sloane Coffin,
preaching at the Church of the Covenant,
June 11, 1944

“If”

John 15:1-5

Colossians 3:12-17

Text: Exodus 19:5 “Therefore, IF you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession”

Back in 1970, a friend of mine in Kansas City and I (in Pittsburgh) started inner city ecumenical ministries around the same time. They may be the only ones still in existence because of their amoebic quality to adapt to the needs around them and the willingness of their church base to do what it takes to stay in ministry. That colleague wrote a book titled, *If...a big word with the poor*. (1) His point is well taken: “if” we can make it to the end of the month, “if” we get a job, “if the car keeps running, and on it goes the world over for the poor, regardless of circumstance or language.

Likewise, “if” we reach way back into our faith history to Moses, God says that the status of those who choose to follow depends on an enormous “if.” “‘If’ you obey my voice and keep my covenant you shall be a blessing” Come then forward in time to King David and God again says, “‘if’ your heirs take heed and walk before me in faithfulness.”(1 Kings 2:4) and still later God says to David’s son Solomon, “As for you, ‘if’ you walk before me as your father did.”(1 Kings 9:4) (2) It was and it is a big “if” in the lives of all who would follow the God of creation, or to paraphrase St Paul, that “unseen God whom you seek to name.”

But how to do that? Go back to another place and that same God says to Abraham, “death or life, curse or blessing, choose.” Then God adds, “‘if’ you choose wisely I will make you a blessing.” At which point we need to be clear, God does not say “I will give you a blessing.” The whole point is that those who choose to follow will be made a blessing.

I suspect most of us say what we might call a blessing at meal time. We are thankful for the food and the farmers and the cook and all that we have. We ask for God’s care over those we love. We recognize that we are recipients of grace. It is a way to remind ourselves, with some regularity, that we are

God's people and therefore we acknowledge something greater than our own efforts. That's a good thing but it's not the same thing as "being" a blessing.

So think of it this way: we sometimes say at the conclusion of worship services that old standard "May the Lord bless you and keep you, and may God's favors shine upon you and be gracious unto you." It's called a benediction and it is more to the point. Those words, more than any dictionary, tell the meaning of the blessing we are talking about. It is meant to be a powerful act; it's a charge to radiate reconciliation to the whole divided world. It is the establishment of a trust that will enable not only our well-being but that of all whom we encounter until we meet again. People who choose to follow God, to walk in God's ways, are to be a benediction to all so that every person might find meaning and rest, peace, acceptance and hope in their lives. Leaving behind the doors of worship, we are to be God's gift.

I dare say, the names we called forth this morning from the dark recesses of our amnesiac minds and others remaining unmentioned, were just such a blessing, along with many of you still walking this planet who have been and continue to be a blessing. But the road is long and the journey is not finished. We have not arrived and "if" is still a monumental word.

Moreover, the very idea of God's blessing to others outside the church is rarely on most congregations' radar screens. As one Nobel Laureate put it, "most people are good until they become religious." Or as another scientific mind recently quipped, "Religion has had a major impact; basically it stopped people from thinking and answers get laid down as dogma." This should warn everyone that when people of faith stop thinking, they are easy prey for demagogues.

Persons of vision like Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, but not only those names in our history books, ordinary people as well had a vision of a better world. Today the divisions of our land and every land cut across race, ethnic, religious, and a myriad other lines but the vision remains requiring new hands put to the plow of acceptance, freedom and hope.

So this is the question: are we going to be blessings for our time? And if so, then I suspect St. Paul offers the best advice on how to be sure that we become that. We can do so by simply putting on kindness and humility, qualities we see precious little of these days in religious circles. We will need to bear one another's troubles, forgive each other as we have been forgiven, and then clothe ourselves in love. Can you imagine such a world? Yet, there we have it; being a blessing should be nothing short of the manner of our presence.

Maybe one of the reasons there is such a great growth of secularism is religious people fight among themselves so much. Since the beginning of time we have yet to learn that it is disastrous to disrespect those with differing points of view. Many think that we are now moving toward a time of increasing religious warfare that will perhaps end the world as we know it. In fact, there are more than enough who would use fear to foster their own futures by playing on the divisions among people who, in one voice or another, call upon the same Creator God.

Yet the big "if" remains the balancing word where people are increasingly marginalized. The "ifs" of misery and hope live in the same communities of our world as the forces of self-interest, market-driven economics, greed, Madison Avenue hype, and shoddy entertainment. Brutality and terror ooze their way over all the corners of the earth, leading people eventually to the haunting question, "Who are we and where are our roots?" As peoples' identities are reduced and ancient traditions are forgotten, they often turn to shallow fundamentalism. The downside is the emergence of "religious identity politics." Faith based affirmations that identify at the expense of others, make great fodder for the growth of more fear along old fault lines. This requires people of faith to ask, just how do we rise above bigotry, prejudice, violence, and hatred in the manner of those before us who were committed to non-violent ways? I would suggest this morning, that is now a challenge equal to the civil rights days of apartheid and segregation.

Such a world is not an impossible dream. As St. Paul reminds us Christians, "Whatever we do we should do in the name of the Lord Jesus." Tall orders, but uttered for a reason. Our world is pretty much the same as it was in

Paul's time, even in the time of Jesus: sordid, secular, and shabby. So, to be a blessing first we need to remember that Jesus didn't change the world, he changed people. He made it possible for them to live in their world in new ways. Paul might well be the best example. He saw an upstart Christian movement as a threat; saw Jesus as a sham; so he brutalized those who were different. But he became a new individual. His understanding of faith both enabled and ennobled him.

Jesus said, "Abide in me and I will abide in you. Just as a branch cut off can produce nothing, neither can you." To which Paul added "through him all things are possible." Which means that in our world full of hatred, intolerance, and bigotry of all kinds, people of faith still can make the difference.

Do you remember going out the door as a youngster on one of those first days of freedom and your mother or grandmother saying, "You remember now, everything you do reflects on me."? It often made for a tough evening, but that's what we're talking about. In a world filled with "if" we are summoned to cast our influence where we work, and learn, and live and wherever we go and whatever we do, because we do it "in the name of Jesus." What we do always reflects!

And when we feel the road is too long and the way too hard, perhaps we need to remember some of those hymns, as Colossians suggests, and that so comforted and carried Martin. Or better yet, remember the words that really began as a poem by James Russell Lowell, "Once to every man (person) and nation, comes the moment to decide." These are our moments to decide! Harry Emerson Fosdick understood that even the church was not always what she should be so he prayed, "God of grace and God of glory on these people pour your power. Crown thy ancient churches story, bring her bud to glorious flower, grant us wisdom grant us courage for the living of this hour," this time.

And I dare say to this congregation; take that a step further. Reaching back to our own long history, was it not Fosdick's contemporary Henry Sloan Coffin who asked from this pulpit, what would it mean "if" a church were to take

responsibility for economic justice and demand mutual honor among races. To which I add, take responsibility for all people regardless of faith tradition, gender, sexual orientation or anything else that paints one of God's creations as different. So let us take that step, further adding our hymn and prayer, "Come Covenant, stand and be counted, " because in the end it's a matter of "if", and "if" is a big word for us all.

- 1) Donald C. Bakely
- 2) Walter Brueggemann



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Convinced of God's grace, the Church of the Covenant strives to be a caring and compassionate congregation, welcoming all people regardless of age, race, national origin, marital status, gender, affectional orientation, and mental or physical ability.