

**Sermon:** *A Pointillist Miracle*  
**Text:** I John 4:7-12  
**Context:** WWPC  
Martin Luther King Sunday  
**Date:** January 15, 2012

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*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.*

I John 4:7

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Last Sunday evening, the Asheville Listening Project hosted its first gathering of 2012. Most of you have read a brief description of the ALP in the bulletin or newsletter.

But in case that name is new to you, the Asheville Listening Project is a coalition of individuals united in the belief that by listening to one another's stories, we can build relationships across lines that often segregate our community and our country.

And we believe that in building these relationships, we can build a better world.

To do this, we focus each gathering around a specific question. We ask participants to congregate around small tables and we then invite each person answer the question in whatever way seems right to them.

And then we listen to one another.

In anticipation of the MLK holiday, at last Sunday's gathering we invited participants to address the question, What is my dream for my community, and what is my role in realizing that dream? In a progressive town like Asheville, one might assume that we're pretty far along in realizing Dr. King's dream for America, his dream of the beloved community, his dream of a country where everyone is treated equally and is valued for the content of their character and not the color of their skin.

But this is evidently not the case. At table after table, we heard the same response. *My dream for Asheville is that we can become a more inclusive community. My dream for Asheville is that we can become a less segregated community.*

Even in a town that prides itself on its inclusivity Dr. King's dream still feels far off. So if a progressive community like Asheville is still divided by race and class, that raises a larger question in my mind.

What's wrong with the world, fundamentally? And can anything be done about it, really?

I didn't set out to find an answer to that question between last Sunday and now. But I did encounter someone who was at least asking that same question. His name is Tom Shadyac. And he's about the last person you'd think would care about such things.

You see, Tom Shadyac is something of a Hollywood big wig. He made a fortune directing such high-brow films as *Ace Ventura* and *The Nutty Professor*.

But two things happened to Mr. Shadyac that changed his life and his perspective. First he sustained a traumatic head injury in a bike wreck that left him feeling vulnerable and depressed. And then, to keep those feelings at bay he did what most Americans do when they're feeling vulnerable and depressed. He went on a shopping spree.

At his income level that meant buying mansions. After he inked the paperwork on a 17,000 square foot estate, Tom Shadyac stepped onto his property for the first time and realized to his great dismay that he felt no happier.

His culture had taught him that competition and consumption are the keys to successful and meaningful life, but these values betrayed him. And so he began to take a closer look at the world at large.

And what he saw – poverty, hunger, war—what he saw left him wondering, what's wrong with the world and what if anything can be done about it? He records his attempt to find an answer to these questions in a new documentary film called *I Am*, which I commend it to you.

But of course Tom Shadyac is not the first person to ask this question. Many generations of theologians and social theorists have asked the same question.

And on the theological side, at least, most of them have come up with essentially the same answer, that we are a fallen race and fundamentally sinful; that when you get down to the smallest unit of human behavior you get only selfishness. Indeed, a best-selling book arguing that very point appeared just a few years ago called, *The Selfish Gene*.

But, as Mr. Shadyac documents in his new film, science itself is slowly starting to tell a different story about human nature. And you might be amazed to know that the first scientist to start telling this story was no less than Charles Darwin.

In Darwin's first book, *The Descent of Man*, he used the phrase "the survival of the fittest" twice, but he used the word "love" 95 times. Yes, nature is "red in tooth and claw." Competition for survival is definitely a law of nature. But Darwin rightly observed that we humans have no fangs. We're not particularly fast or strong.

But what we can do is cooperate. We can form loving, supportive communities that serve to protect us and nurture our young. In Darwin's view it was this ability, call it love, that gives us our evolutionary advantage.

In South Africa, the local people have a word for this advantage. It's called "Ubuntu." It's the idea that each of us owes our existence to a community; that without a union between two people there is no life. And starting from when we learn to walk, we learn what it is to be human from others.

And so the idea of ubuntu is that we are because we belong. We are built for community genetically, socially, developmentally. And now science is discovering that we're even built for community cosmologically.

Remember "quantum entanglement"? We touched on this idea some months ago right here in worship. But in case you need a refresher, quantum entanglement is basically the theory that relationship itself is the building block of the material world.

Physicists working at the quantum level have shown that two atoms at very great distance from one another somehow seem to be in relationship. What happens to one instantly affects the behavior of the other. And so it may be that relationship itself is the glue that holds this whole show together.

Martin Luther King knew this. He knew that the command to love God, our neighbors and ourselves, and even our enemies, was not a pious formula for an unattainable utopia, but an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization.

He knew that we are built for love and that it's love that will cure us. And love that will save us. We get glimpses every now and then of the this very truth. Just this morning our own Barbara Griswold sent me the following snippet which appeared at the end of an article about the survivors of the recent Italian cruise ship disaster.

*Islanders on Giglio opened up their homes and businesses to accommodate the sudden rush of survivors.*

*Rossana Bafigi, who runs a newsstand, said she was really moved by the reaction of the passengers.*

*She showed a note left by one Italian family that said, "We want to repay you for the disturbance. Please call us, we took milk and biscuits for the children. Claudia."*

*At Mass on Sunday morning in Giglio's main church, which opened its doors to the evacuees Friday night, altar boys and girls brought up to the altar a life vest, a rope, a rescue helmet, a plastic tarp and some bread.*

*Don Lorenzo, the parish priest, told the faithful that he wanted to make this admittedly "different" offering to God as a memory of what had transpired.*

*He said each [item] carried powerful symbolic meaning for what happened on Friday night: the bread that multiplied to feed the survivors, the rope that pulled people to safety, the life vest and helmet that protected them, and the plastic tarp that kept cold bodies warm. "Our community, our island will never be the same," he said.*

We saw this same phenomenon on vivid display during the 9/11 terror attacks, how businessmen dressed in \$2000 suits and \$500 shoes reached down to lift ash-covered survivors—complete strangers—to safety. And we've have seen it time and time again since then, how love comes pouring out of people in times of emergency.

So, it struck me, maybe that's the key. If only we could begin to realize, as Dr. King did, that racism is an emergency, we would all be more willing to join together to defeat it.

If we could agree that the growing disparity of wealth around the globe is an emergency, that illiteracy is an emergency, that world hunger is an emergency, then we might begin to realize Dr. King's dream of a beloved community right here on earth, as it is in heaven.

I know. It's never going to happen. It's just a dream. Or is it?

Think back for a moment to that famous day in Washington. Thousands of people gathered on the Mall. No, hundreds of thousands, a proverbial sea of humanity stretching from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capital.

If you were there, or if you were watching, you could feel the thrill in the air, the sense that history was about to be made. Because of course the man who was about to speak was a black man. A brilliant orator, probably the most brilliant of his generation, he stood on the steps of the United States Capital, and gave the kind of speech only he could give.

*My fellow citizens: I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors.*

*This is the meaning of our liberty and our creed, why men and women and children of every race and every faith can join in celebration across this magnificent mall. And why a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath.*

That man of course was Barack Obama and that oath was to serve as the President of the United States.

Mr. Obama's father could not drink from the same water fountains as white children. In many states throughout the country the union between his black father and his white mother, a union that would give us our current president, was against the law.

How did we get to this point? How did such huge change happen in the span of one lifetime?

It happened one step at a time, one act at a time, one gesture, one word, one decision, one vote at a time, like one of those pointillist paintings where 10,000 tiny individual dots creates a spectacular and beautiful image that is far greater than the sum of its tiny component parts.

After a spiritual crisis Hollywood director Tom Shadyac asked what's wrong with this world and can anything be done about it.

We all know what's wrong with the world. Racism, poverty and hunger still abound. Whether these are caused by human sinfulness or by ignorance or indifference, it doesn't really matter.

The only question that matters is can anything be done about these things? Can we ever hope to solve them? Can Dr. King's dream ever be fully realized.

I believe it can be, and I believe it will be.

I believe that you and you and you and you and me and all of us doers and all of us dreamers working together, doing what each of us can, I believe that we change the world, one act at a time, one gesture, one word, one decision, one vote, one life at a time, a grand pointillist miracle, unfolding right before our eyes.

Amen.