

Sermon: The King's Speech
Text: Matthew 4:12-23
Date: January 23, 2010
Context: WWPCCC
Race Relations Sunday
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*From that time Jesus began to proclaim,
"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*

Matthew 4:12

If you haven't seen it yet, let me commend to you *The King's Speech*, the new movie starring Colin Firth as Prince Albert of England. The film tells the story of Prince Albert's reluctant ascension to the throne, and his eventual coronation as King George the VI.

The Prince's problem, and the focus of the movie, is his speech. His literal speech, for in short, he stutters. Stammering over your every word is doubtless embarrassing and frustrating under the most ordinary circumstances. But for a monarch whose country is on the verge of war, and whose words and leadership are thus expected to inspire an entire nation, stammering was surely a curse of biblical proportions.

Before his coronation, the prince hired a speech therapist to help him overcome this debilitating condition, a Mr. Lionel Logue, played brilliantly by the great Geoffrey Rush.

I promise not to give any crucial plot points away, but in one of the more telling scenes of the film, Mr. Logue invites Prince Albert – "Bertie" as he calls him – to don a pair of headphones. Mr. Logue then turns up the volume on his newfangled gramophone so loudly that Bertie literally cannot hear himself speak.

And then the wise speech therapist invites the frustrated prince to read a passage from Shakespeare out loud. Bertie believes he has made a complete mess of it and throws the manuscript away in frustration well before he's

finished. But though he cannot hear himself, he has in fact read the entire passage flawlessly.

Turns out his voice was inside of him all the while. The trick, as Lionel Logue wisely understood, was simply setting it free.

Which brings us to the story of another King. Today we are observing Race Relations Sunday, as the day is officially known on the Presbyterian Church calendar.

In unofficial terms, we're celebrating Martin Luther King Sunday, a day when we commemorate the towering achievements of Dr. King in overcoming the yawning racial divide in this country.

I suspect that for Dr. King, finding his voice was never so difficult as it was for Prince Albert. In fact I would not be surprised to know that young Martin had the gift of speech from the day he spoke his first word.

Not that his life was easy, mind you. On his rise to greatness, Martin Luther King did not have to overcome a speech impediment, only the vast and formidable array of impediments that served to keep young black men in their place at that time.

Lucky for us, in the process of overcoming those barriers, Dr. King uttered some of the most memorable words in the history of this country, including these familiar words from what might also be called the King's speech:

I say to you today, my friends . . . I have a dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

At the time Dr. King proclaimed those words, his dream was just that, a dream. But it rested on something substantial and true, the sure knowledge that the arc

of history was bending in the direction of that dream, bending, as it always does, towards justice.

In the years since Dr. King gave this historic speech, we have certainly made progress in realizing his dream. We are moving closer to the day when color and race will lose their power to divide us, and we can get on with the business of living as one human family.

We're still not there yet, of course. I think of the last election cycle, when Cong. John Lewis was spit on. And I think of all the anger directed at our president not because of his policy positions but because of the color of his skin.

But still the arc of history continues to bend toward justice, and toward a fully inclusive society. I know this because we saw it on display, strangely enough, in one of the most painful moments in our recent past.

Speaking about the shootings in Arizona, PBS commentator Mark Shields put it this way, "This is America, where a white Catholic male Republican judge was murdered on his way to greet a Democratic Jewish woman member of Congress, who was his friend. Her life was saved initially by a 20-year-old Mexican-American gay college student, and eventually by a Korean American combat surgeon, and this all was eulogized by our African American President."

Indeed, this is America, circa 2011. For some of us, this diverse mix of citizens and activists, staffers and professionals, perfectly embodies Dr. King's dream.

And not just King's dream, but an even older vision than that; a vision which inspired everything Dr. King worked for and believed in, a vision of an all-inclusive realm of love and peace and justice first articulated 2000 years ago. Deemed the Beloved Community by Brother Martin, most of us know it by its original name: the Kingdom, or the Realm, of God.

For make no mistake, the wonderfully diverse scrum of citizens and staffers and professionals that saved Gabby Giffords life were doing exactly the same things Jesus expected of the disciples whom he called in the story we read today, the things he continues to expect his followers to do, things fundamental to building that kingdom:

Resisting and even overcoming violence, making peace in the aftermath, tending to the wounded and healing those who have been broken.

But here's the rub. For many of our friends and neighbors, this new America does not feel like the fulfillment of a dream. Rather adjusting to all this untamable and unfamiliar diversity is like living in a waking nightmare where everything loved and familiar is gone or different.

People who have lived in this country for decades, who have been surrounded for most of that time by neighbors who look just like them, suddenly feel alienated. They feel isolated and threatened and vulnerable. Mostly they feel angry and they are making that anger known on the country's airwaves, on its streets and even in its churches.

And so despite all our progress, in some ways it feels like the wheel has turned full circle and that it's 1968 all over again. Then it was those liberal hippies who mistrusted government and seemed to feel outraged about everything, and who took their anger to the streets.

Today it's our more well dressed, shorter haired, more conservative friends and neighbors who feel like Washington is the enemy and that everything around them is out of kilter.

And so it is that our country is loudly and painfully and sometimes even violently divided. You wish you could do something to fix it. To make things better, more peaceful.

But you're just sure your voice is not loud enough to make a difference. It cannot carry over the din.

And you know something. You're right. Your voice isn't loud enough. But you don't have to be a king or a world class orator to make a difference. You just have to overcome your fears.

Prince Albert's greatest achievement was not overcoming his speech impediment, for in truth he never did completely conquer it. His greatest achievement was overcoming his fear that his voice, his gifts, were inadequate to the task given to him by his calling.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," Jesus proclaims, just before he calls his first disciples.

Maybe the sin from which we must all turn, of which we must repent, is the belief that the Kingdom is not near. Or that we can do little or nothing to help build it out in the here and now.

So if speaking out isn't your thing. That's okay. The instruments of peace and justice are still available to you.

Ask Wangari Maathai. A native of Kenya, Maathai was surrounded growing up by a host of intractable problems – the culturally condoned subjugation of women. Widespread unemployment. The relentless exploitation of the beautiful Kenyan environment, visited on the landscape not by big corporations so much as by individual women forced to harvest firewood to feed their cook stoves at home.

Any one of these problems would likely strike most of us as too big to do anything about. But politics in Kenya made these individual challenges even harder to resolve. And not our kind of politics where people no longer talk to you but at you, or through you or above you.

Rather the kind of politics in which to advocate for change is to put your life at risk. Where asking why woman can't have the vote is likely to result in being run off the road by a bus.

So no one would have blamed Wangari Matthai for just quietly going about her business. But one day she had a dream about how to address all of these problems in a single stroke. She would plant trees. More specifically she would organize groups of women to plant trees.

In so doing these women would combat deforestation, restore their main source of fuel for cooking, generate income, and stop soil erosion. Beyond that, these marginalized gained in this process a sense of their own power, and a sense of solidarity. And nothing in Kenya would ever be the same again, and not just because of the 40 million trees the women have planted.

In recognition for her efforts, Wangarii was awarded the Nobel Prize for peace in 2004.

Now, what difference does this make to us here today? The truth is that none of us are likely to win a Nobel Peace Prize.

The point is that everything Ms. Mathaai has achieved, all of that social and political change, all of that movement toward justice and towards God's

kingdom, all of that came from a seed. You, yes *you*, can make peace and do justice one tree at a time. One flower at a time. One child, one life, at a time.

You have the instruments of peace at hand, literally. I'll ask you to indulge me for a moment, and raise your right hand. Now look at that hand. What you are looking at is an instrument of peace and of justice.

In two weeks our Presbytery will vote on so-called Amendment A. This is yet another vote to remove the perennially divisive amendment from our Book of Order that excludes our gay and lesbian members from ordained ministry.

Some weeks ago, the Presbytery of the James in central Virginia met for this same vote. Not surprisingly, given the predominately rural character of that Presbytery, its members have consistently voted against all the efforts to remove Amendment B, sometimes by wide margins.

And so on the day of this vote, I'm told that a number of ministers and elders from more progressive churches left at lunch time, before the vote was taken. The tally that day? 152 votes against; 152 votes for. A tie. One vote, one hand, would have made the difference, would have helped bend the arc of history toward justice in our denomination.

Now, I can appreciate what you might be thinking right about now. *I don't come to church for politics preacher*. I do understand that, but if that is still your view, even after our years together, then I have failed you as a preacher.

I have failed to help you understand what it means to be Church, big C. I have failed to communicate the vision of the prophets, including Martin Luther King, Jr. Or to help us all understand the vision of the One who continues to call us to be disciples, the One whom we follow.

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?

Repent for the kingdom of God is . . . at . . . hand!

I hope you believe that!

Amen!