

In the name of God who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

This weekend is the anniversary of the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom during which Martin Luther King gave his iconic, "I Have a Dream" speech. In light of this, our Lectionary readings for this week had me thinking about the limits of law. Martin Luther King famously said that, "Judicial decrees may not change the heart, but they can restrain the heartless." He went on to say that, "acknowledging this we must go on to admit that the ultimate solution to the race problem lies in the ability of men to be obedient to the unenforceable. Court orders and federal enforcement agencies will be of inestimable value in achieving desegregation. But desegregation is only a partial, though necessary, step toward the ultimate goal which we seek to realize." That ultimate goal was for the human family to live in genuine care for one another, in respect of each one's dignity, valuing each other as sacred images of God. King said, "Only by producing a nation committed to the inner law of love can this goal be attained."

Our reading from Deuteronomy has Moses encouraging the Israelites to obey all the commandments and statutes that are in the law, and to pass them on to their children and their children's children. This was to help them live in this new land that they were promised; but was it enough? Did this law cause them to love themselves and God in a way that brought them into right relationship with their neighbor? Was it enough, as Deuteronomy said, to be a great nation possessing statutes and ordinances, if that law did not turn you toward your neighbor in compassion?

“But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves... those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act - they will be blessed in their doing.” The letter of James speaks of the perfect law being the law of liberty. I think of Martin Luther King (paraphrasing Harry Emerson Fosdick), talking about obeying the unenforceable. God invites us to live into this new law, this law of love; in this invitation we are given liberty to learn and to fail and to learn and to try again and to learn some more and ultimately to grow into who God desires us to be. But God does not force us to do this; God does not coerce us into right relationship with

God, or loving relationship with our neighbor, or even into healthy relationship with ourselves. God invites, plants within us God's Holy Spirit to lead us, and gives us the life and ministry of Jesus to teach us. Yes, we experience a death that transcends the physical body, losing our very souls when we reject God's invitation; but that is a *consequence* of our rejection, not a punishment. God longs for us to be whole and healed, and God continually invites us into relationship that gives us abundant life that transcends our physical body; and that kind of relationship with God is not a matter of statutes and ordinances. It is a matter of surrendering body, mind and spirit to the unenforceable law of love, the transformational call of God.

"Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile... All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." Jesus is being just a little negative in our Gospel readings. Because, think about it: If we simply follow statutes and ordinances in the way we behave, if they go into us without any effect on who we are and how we think and how we see one another, no statute will make us good. It may make us civil; even worse, it may make us nice; and while that mitigates the harm we do to one

another, it doesn't redeem God's image in us. But If we are transformed, if we allow the Spirit to work in and through us, if in our inmost being we create space for God to listen and speak and do, and write on our hearts the unenforceable law of love, what amazing good can come from within! Martin Luther King went on in that sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan to say, "something must happen so to touch the hearts and souls of men that they will come together because it is natural and right." Jesus called us toward that "something"; Jesus lived and taught that there was more to living a good and just life than obeying the law. Jesus lived and taught that true and abundant life was letting go of the ordinances and statutes that may constrain the heartless, but did not change the heart; instead Jesus called us to have our very hearts remade by the law of love. Jesus called us to be vulnerable to the movement of the Spirit in our lives, so that we are not merely constrained into acceptable behaviour, but freed into the kind of generous, giving, loving life that Jesus patterned for us.

God does not coerce us into loving; that would not be love. God invites us into the unenforceable law that is the deep love of one another that breaks down dividing walls, that sees and honours the image of God in the bodies, minds, and spirits of our sisters and brothers and siblings. Let us not be

merely restrained into decent behaviour; but let us be freed and transformed into the generosity of God's love, so that the ultimate goal, our reconciliation in Christ and our redemption in God's image, may be attained. Amen.