
It Is Always Time To Do Something Right

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 16 – Year C

On April 12, 1963, a group of Alabama clergymen issued a statement about recent Civil Rights demonstrations. They began by reiterating their earlier appeal, issued in January, “for Law and Order and Common Sense’ in dealing with racial problems in Alabama.” “We recognize,” they continued, “the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.” [\[ii\]](#)

“Wait,” in other words, “until a better time; wait until we’re all ready for the changes you’re seeking; and in the meantime, abide by law and order and ‘common sense,’ as we define it—even though this law includes Jim Crow, and this order includes segregation.”

Martin Luther King, Jr., who’d been confined by this same “law and order” to a Birmingham jail, fired back a response. The command to “wait,” he answered, “rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity.” “Those who are already free,” he answered, “do not get to set the time table for another man’s freedom.” And “remember,” he answered, “that ‘those who have not suffered ... from the disease of segregation’ rarely consider civil-rights activism ‘well-timed.’” [\[iii\]](#)

“Human progress,” he continued, “never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that it is always time to do something right.” [\[iv\]](#)

So King pressed on, with his untimely and unwise and inconvenient pursuit of justice now, for all people.

Almost two thousand years earlier, another of God’s co-workers was accused by another religious leader of being unwise, untimely, and out of order.

It all started on the Sabbath—that sacred day that Yahweh had commanded the Israelites to observe and keep holy, by not doing any work on it—neither them, their children, their slaves, nor the resident aliens in their towns. Sabbath was to be a day to worship and rest in God. But it was also a day to free others to worship and rest, too. It was so important that a system of rules and customs developed around it, to protect it and to keep people from messing up.

On the date in question, Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. And he saw a woman who had been crippled—the Greek word is “bound”—by a spirit, for eighteen years. Jesus immediately interrupted his sermon to call her over; and bending down to look her in the eye, since she couldn’t stand up straight, he healed her and set her free.

But “wait!” the synagogue leader protests. “There are six days on which to do work—and this is NOT one of them. She should’ve come on the proper day to be healed; and Jesus should’ve waited for the proper time to heal her.”

I suspect that underneath his objections is discomfort with the image of brokenness, isolation, and need that has just entered his sanctuary. Underneath lurks a desire to stay in control, to avoid unbidden encounters, to justify himself—and his eighteen-year disregard for this fellow human being.

Jesus' reply is a bit harsher than King's: "You hypocrites! If you unbind your animals on the Sabbath to eat and drink, shouldn't this woman be unbound on *this day*?" The Sabbath is for *unbinding*, after all!

With this, Jesus challenges the religious leader to be unbound, too: unbound from his presuppositions, his need to prove himself, his substitution of right works for right relationship. Jesus challenges all of them to stop hiding behind propriety, and to open their eyes and hearts to what God's doing, and what *this* moment demands.

Now, it's pretty easy for us to judge the synagogue leader who judged Jesus; or the clergy who judged King; or even some of our contemporaries, who judge others based on the letter of the Law, not its spirit. But don't we also use rules and principles to control the mystery of others, of the present moment, and of God? How do we, too, mistake our current peace and order for real justice? How do we, too, put faith in our own systems, instead of in the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit?

For one, this is how prejudice and stereotypes work. And all of us have them! They give us the illusion of control—the illusion of understanding others without the discomfort of getting to know them first.

It's also what gives such power to those favorite southern words, "That's just not how we do things around here"—words that resist any attempt to change, or any agent of change, in a community or family system.

Finally, the desire for control can lead us to reduce ethics to an abstract, absolute code of right and wrong, to be applied blindly and universally, thus ensuring us against error or guilt.

Allow me to embarrass myself with an example. As a teen, I feared homeless people, because I had no real contact with them. Ignorant of the unjust systems that bound them, I blamed them for their plight. I avoided them altogether.

Later, as it dawned on me that my faith actually called me to compassion, I made a policy for myself of always having something to give: money, a food card. Then, when I began to make homeless friends, many struggling with addiction, and I saw how harmful my careless handouts could be, I developed a new policy: never give money or other goods directly.

Do you see the pattern? And the problem? My "policies," worked out in the abstract, blocked me from seeing and responding to the person in front of me. They protected my sense of self-righteousness, while justifying my refusal to do the risky, new thing that this day demanded of me.

We *do* need structures for our communal life, of course, and principles and practices to help us navigate life and our relations with one another. But we also need to be aware that these same rules and principles can be twisted to legitimate intolerance^[v]—to reinforce an unjust status quo and delay uncomfortable change. We need to be aware that our customs and preconceived judgments can become barriers to the guidance of the Spirit—and to relationships that challenge us and just might change us.

Ultimately, there's no escaping our responsibility to the present moment, or to the real human being in front of us. And there's no escaping our ultimate dependence on God. King said, "It is always time to do something right." May God give us the wisdom to know what that right thing is, and the gumption to do it.

[i] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963.

[ii] "Letter to Martin Luther King, Jr.," from a "Group of Clergymen," April 12, 1963.

[iii] All of the quotations in this paragraph are from King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

[iv] Ibid.

[v] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 32.

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