

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Jan 18th 2016

Today is Rev. / Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in the United States. A day to celebrate the life of Dr. King, an American civil rights leader who was assassinated, to reflect back and see how far we have come, but sadly to continue to anguish with all that is yet to come. Each day the news shows just how far we have to go in the United States and our world.

Those who made New Year's resolutions know that old habits die hard. Unjust systems seem to die even harder.

Today's gospel (MK 2:18-22) includes the verses,

“Likewise, no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins are ruined. Rather, new wine is poured into fresh wineskins.”

Fifty years ago, Rev./Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was preaching on today's gospel reading. His sermon which is still all too relevant can be found here. He invited the congregation at Ebenezer Baptist church to find personally, communally and globally a change of habit, that included intellectual, emotional and spiritual change. Such an integral change is the only way to sustain the change of habit we seek. He continues beyond this personal change, to apply the same principles to destroying a social evil, righting an unjust practice in our world. For Dr. King, and for Jesus, faith was personal, communal, and to be lived out in the world.

This reflection and recent conversations with friends have helped me to hone the commitment I made throughout the Advent, Christmas and New Year seasons, to strengthen and renew space in my heart, in my life for God to freely flow. The example of new wine which will ferment, push against its container, shaping it in a new way gives me hope. What wants to change in me so much that it can't be contained by my old thoughts or actions? How can I help bring about such a needed change in our world?

I hope to cultivate compassion for self and for others this year. I hope this effervescence is like grapes turning to wine, taking something good and making it amazing. I pray that our collective compassion will continue to care for those left out in the cold – those seeking shelter and safety around the world. I hope that the outrage we feel for discrimination, racism and other social sins will rise to those responsible for and capable of making meaningful change in our social systems.

Christ is the new wine, able to transform us in ways yet unknown or sometimes unimaginable. If we try to contain this radical way of life to the routines, behaviors and thoughts of our previous life, or to those of our society, all can be lost. We need new structures, new ways of doing things to be able to fully image Christ to those most in need in our world. As Dr. King invited his congregation, our changes must be personal, communal and societal.

Pope Francis in his address to the joint session of congress mentioned three exemplary people, among them, Dr. King.

"I think of the march which Martin Luther King led from Selma to Montgomery 50 years ago as part of the campaign to fulfill his 'dream' of full civil and political rights for African Americans."

"That dream continues to inspire us all. I am happy that America continues to be, for many, a land of 'dreams.' Dreams which lead to action, to participation, to commitment. Dreams which awaken what is deepest and truest in the life of a people."

Kelly Orbik-Creighton University's Schlegel Center for Service and Justice