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Epiphany 2 M. L. King Jr. Sunday

KING, ISAIAH AND THE KKK

"Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life. Love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it." ... Martin Luther King Jr.

Most aggression and violence proceed from perceiving fellow human beings, (nations, religions, and political, racial or ethnic groups) as "the other". "The other" might be defined as someone or some group of people who are not like "me" or not like "us". It is a short step from "not like us" to "less than us". If this way of seeing becomes dominant for a moment or for a lifetime, aggression comes naturally. Aggression most likely reflects the failure of love of self.

During the Second World War, the nation of Japan was taught to view peoples of other countries as "the other", and therefore, as inferior. Likewise in Nazi Germany. America's enemies were also presented as "the other". We rounded up Japanese-Americans, confiscated their property and put them in long-term detention centers. During the Cold War, Communists and their supporters were viewed as "the other" and, therefore, the enemy. The perceived threat of the spread of Communism in Indochina, "the domino theory", led to American aggression on a massive scale. Abu Graib is a recent example of what happens when the demon of seeing human beings as "the other" is unleashed.

In the aftermath of the tragic and shocking shootings in Tucson, we are once again painfully aware that no nation or individual is immune to the tendency to de-humanize and aggress. If we check in with ourselves honestly, we might find a strong desire to demonize the shooter to the point where we can find nothing identifiably "human" in him, thereby justifying revenge. The cycle goes on. On the other hand, we also know of heroic and self-sacrificing actions of the noblest kind at the shooting. We have heard accounts of the goodness and love that is our common and blessed potential. The crisis has given our country a rare window of opportunity for national self-reflection and assessment. Where will we go from here?

As we honor Martin Luther King, Jr. today, we celebrate a higher aspect of our nature: that is, the deep aspiration and holy courage to refuse to see individuals or groups as "the other". When "the other" ceases to be "the other", then we see that we are the same. This is a simple concept that takes a lifetime of spiritual and moral effort. Perhaps some reach this stage of enlightenment effortlessly. For myself, it is a constant struggle with my lesser nature having the upper hand much of the time. However, I do believe we all share a basic goodness, and that we are all made in God's image. I trust this to be true because in those moments when I experience this awareness I feel most alive, empathic and connected. Then aggression becomes virtually impossible. Peace begins with loving our neighbors and ourselves.

King understood the power of love. He knew the terrible destruction of racist hatred, but turned the paradigm upside down by teaching and practicing non-violence. His models were

Gandhi and Jesus. In the Civil Rights movement, King and many others sought to reverse the violence and aggression of white America towards black America. I believe that King understood that seeing a person or group as inferior leads to psychological or physical brutality. He used every peaceful means to repudiate this formula. It is no surprise that his grasp of our common humanity led him to oppose U. S. policy in Viet Nam. I suspect that he understood that the North Vietnamese were just as human as blacks, whites and all national and racial groups. While he aroused the ire of many who thought he should restrict his mission to civil rights, his opposition to the war in Indochina was a natural outgrowth and extension of his deep faith in equality. King's spiritual journey very naturally led him to leave behind the boundaries of his initial constituency and to see human life in even broader and more inclusive ways. His calling and mission grew. Jesus' own journey, we recall, started out with a mission to the Jews but expanded later to include the Gentiles. It seems there was no "other" in his sight.

Let's turn now to today's remarkable lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, often referred to as "Second Isaiah". Though written 2500 years ago, these verses still have astounding spiritual power. God says, "*You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.*" The response from "Israel" indicates dejection over failing to live up to the assigned calling. "*But I said, 'I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.'*" When have you felt that you labored in vain and betrayed your calling? Isaiah's sense of futility and powerlessness is followed by a profession of faith. "*Yet, surely my cause is with the Lord.*" In other words, "even though I have fallen way short of the mission you gave me, I still pledge my self to you".

What comes next is a surprise. God does not say, "*There, there, don't worry about it, I forgive you.*" Before hearing how God responds, keep in mind that at the time every nation had its own god, a national deity. Unless it happened through conquest, for a god's power to extend beyond a nation's borders was unheard of. Israel had Yahweh and Yahweh's job was to look out for the Hebrew people. Period.

Here is God's surprising response to the prophet's expression of failure. "*It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Israel and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation shall reach to the ends of the earth.*" Get up onto your feet, forget about the past, and understand what your new mission and calling are now. God's new vision goes way beyond the fierce nationalism of the past and the restoration of Israel. It is not about patriotic gods or pious patriots. The vision speaks of embracing universal salvation. "A light to the nations". A light does not win over by force or violence. "A dimly burning wick it will not quench." It is a gentle form of persuasion and inspiration that Israel and we are called to explore. "Salvation" is the counter to oppression, exploitation, despair and violence. It is the power of love where there is no "other". Israel's God long ago set this amazing standard.

A remarkable, true story came to me recently. In 1991, Cantor Michael Weisser and his family were subjected to threats from Larry Trapp, the Grand Dragon of the KKK in Lincoln, Nebraska, where the Weissers had just moved. They received ugly and intimidating phone calls and packages of hate mail with anti-Jewish and anti-black material arrived. Michael and Julie Weisser knew the harassment was coming from Trapp but had no way to prove it.

Eventually, they decided to confront him. After listening to a 10 minute taped diatribe about how evil Jews and blacks were on Trapp's answering machine, Michael left a message, *"Larry, you'd better think about all this hatred you're doing, that you're involved in, because you're going to have to deal with God one day, and it's not going to be easy."*

Larry was disabled and needed a wheel chair to get around.

Weisser just kept leaving messages until one day finally Larry picked up the phone in anger, *"What do you want?"*, he said. *"You're harassing me."*

Weisser recounts that he was very calm and quiet. *"I knew he had a hard time getting around and thought he might need a ride to the grocery store."* So he offered to pick Larry up. Trapp became completely quiet and all the anger went out of his voice when he said, "I've got that taken care of, but thanks for asking."

After a period of time, Larry called the Weissers and said, *"I want to get out of this, and I don't know how."* In an interview, Weisser recalls, *"I asked if he had dinner and I would bring something over and we'd have a bite to eat and talk about it. I told Julie what had happened and she said, 'I'll bet Larry Trapp is as apprehensive about us as we are about him. I think we ought to bring him a peace offering.' She found a silver ring and we went over there. As we walked in I touched his hand and he burst into tears. He didn't know we were bringing the ring, and he had two silver swastika rings on, one on each hand. He took off the rings and said, 'I want you to take these; they just symbolize hatred and evil, and I want them out of my life.' Julie gave him the other ring and put it on his finger."*

The journey of Larry, Julie and Michael towards healing took extraordinary courage. In the end, there was no "other". Rings of love, like the one Julie gave Larry, are the birthright and promise of each of us.

Isaiah 49:1-7

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. ²He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. ³And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." ⁴But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God." ⁵And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength— ⁶he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

⁷Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."