

How Long? Not Long!

January 16th, 2011

"Above the generations," wrote William Channing Gannett, "the lonely prophets' rise. While truth flings dawn and daystar within their glowing eyes. And other eyes beholding are kindled from that light. And dawn becomes the morning the darkness put to flight." Surely, Martin King was such a prophet. He stood above his generation and kindled a flame which still lights our way. But there is a problem with prophecy. It too often points toward a tomorrow so distant and so different from today that we lose hope along the way. "How long?" he asked. "Not long!" he answered.

How long will we wait and work until "...wounded justice...will be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of humanity?" He's pointing toward what Jesus called the coming Kingdom, toward that state of being and becoming which King himself called the Beloved Community. "Not long," he says because he knows the Beloved Community is within you. Right here, right now and that's true. And that's not true. You and I may well have broken past the bondage of our prejudice but systemic realities far less visible than the overt exercise of segregation still largely rule the day. Even though race has no biological basis racism is still real. We have not yet overcome.

We have no choice but to live within the ambiguity inherent in the tension between the spiritual mandate that we live as though the Kingdom has already come and the obvious reality that it most certainly has not. All we have to do is think about the increasing disparity between rich and poor in this and in many other so-called developed countries and of the degree to which those disparities follow the old fault-lines of race and we will see how far we have yet to go. So we learn to live as though we're already there even as we try our best to keep on moving forward.

Raymond Carver's little poem "Last Fragments" helps to point the way.

*"And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth. "*

Isn't that what we all want? Isn't that what everyone wants whether they know it or not. "To call ourselves beloved, to feel ourselves beloved on the earth." The Beloved Community points to a society in which people know themselves beloved with or without the external trappings of success. In order to move toward such a society we will need to find a new balance between

free market forces and the notion that there are some things that should not be bought or sold, some things which by their nature, should be held in common.

In early 13th century England, the commoners, many of whom had recently returned from the grueling obligations of the Crusades, began to demand protection from the arbitrary authority of the King. These demands originally fell into five “rights” they felt essential to their livelihood. They wanted pasturage in order to feed their animals, piscary, the freedom to fish, turbary, the right to cut turf for burning, estovers, the use of wood for fuel and for building and the right to glean the fields following the harvest. The Great Charter of the Forest issued in 1217 two years after the Magna Carta declares that “Every free man shall have the honey that is found within his woods.” The Magna Carta itself guaranteed that every widow “shall have her reasonable estovers in common” so as to never lack for food, fuel or shelter. These “rights,” first became the law of the land in 1225. A version from 1297 entitled “The Great Charter of the Liberties of England and of the Liberties of the Forest” is still, in its entirety, found among the statutes of England and of Wales. These rights and parallel statements in other cultures around the world, were, in effect, the social welfare system of the pre-modern world.

Now the world has changed. The Enclosure Acts of 18th century England, the Industrial Revolution and the steady decline in family farms has unraveled the old understanding of the Commons as land held in common and regulated by custom. In our day, almost anything can be privately owned. The concept of the commons has all but disappeared. Not only the land but “air rights” can be bought and sold and across the globe the cost of infrastructure is forcing the privatization of water. Where will it all end?

Over the past week, in the wake of the violence in Tucson, I’ve been paying close attention to the public conversation. I appreciate and support the calls for respectful dialog and for eliminating the use of violent imagery in political discourse. As usual there are two overly simplified positions. Either the killings were the work of a deranged, mentally ill individual or else they were motivated by irresponsible, vitriolic politicians. The truth is, of course, far more complex. We do need to redouble our efforts to practice the disciplines of citizenship. But we also need to recognize that Jared Lee Loughner needed a level of intervention and then of care he did not receive in part for lack of an effective social safety net. I’m not naïve. I know there will always be those so badly damaged, so disturbed they can’t be helped. And they will do terrible things. That fact, though true, is no excuse for the degree to which our country has turned away from those who most need her protection.

Those of us who “must, like lovers, insist on or create the consciousness of others”, need to develop some powerful questions the answers to which, though never final, will help us find our way. We need a perpetual calendar for justice to remind us to ask these essential, powerful questions over and over again. One of the key questions is this. What in the commons now? What do we hold in common and how will we protect it? I harbor no romantic attachment to agrarian understandings of the Common. But I am fascinated to find that many of the most thoughtful, visionary organizers on the planet are working to revive the concept. Lewis Hyde’s new book Common as Air is a brilliant foray into questions of intellectual property

and the nature of the evolution of ideas and local writer and organizer Jay Walljasper has just published a marvelous anthology All That We Share: a Field Guide to the Commons, which includes “Fifty-one (Mostly) Simple Ways to Spark a Commons Revolution.”

Jay divides his suggestions into the following categories: Personal Life including “Challenge the prevailing myth that all problems have private, individualized solutions and “introduce your children to the commons. Let them see you enjoying it and working with others to sustain it; Community Life: Walk, bike or take transit whenever you can. It’s good for the environment but also for you. You meet very few people behind the wheel of your car.”and “Conduct an inventory of local commons. Publicize your findings and offer suggestions for celebrating and improving these community assets: Money and the Economy- “Form a neighborhood exchange to share everything from lawn mowers to child care and home repairs to vehicles” and ‘Purchase fair trade, organic, and locally made goods from small producers as much as you can; Social Change- “Join campaigns opposing cutbacks in public assets such as transit, schools, libraries, parks, social services, police and fire protection, arts programs and more”and “Learn from everywhere. What can Germany teach us about health care? India about wellness? Africa about community solidarity? Indigenous people about the commons itself? What bright ideas could be borrowed from a nearby neighborhood or town”; Environment- “Pick up litter that is not yours” and “Form a study group to explore what can be done to promote sustainability in your community”; Information and Culture- “Demand that school children should not become a captive audience for marketing campaigns” and “Conceive a public art project for your community”; and finally Commons Consciousness- “Think of yourself as a commoner and share your enthusiasm” and “Spread some hope around. Explain how commons-based solutions can remedy today’s pressing problems.” There are many more.

Could it be that this Medieval understand that there are things in this world that must be held in common is the best approach to finding our way to a more just, more sustainable future?

A second key question to ask over and over again is, how do the women fare? We know that the status of women is the clearest benchmark of social progress. Ask as Wendell Berry asks in his “Mad Farmer’s Liberation Front” *Will this satisfy a woman satisfied to bear a child? Will this disturb the sleep of a woman near to giving birth?*

Just as the Beloved Community is both a destination and a way of being, justice is a path we walk together. The greatest lesson we have yet to learn from Martin Luther King is that what Gandhi called Satyagraha or soul-force is not simply the absence of violence. Non-violence is a stern and formal discipline. It takes practice. It is active not passive. It asks a great deal of us. It asks us to be close enough to those we imagine to be our enemies that we are able to turn the other cheek. It is the work of love in community. It asks that we ask ourselves and each other and all the neighbors we have yet to know, over and over again, Where to? What next? How long? Not long! May it be so and Amen.

Readings for 1/16/11

Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands: we have no right to assume otherwise. If we, who must like lovers, insist on or create the consciousness of others- do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, achieve our country, and change the history of the world.

adapted from The Fire Next Time James Baldwin

Liberty Needs Glasses -- Tupac Shakur

excuse me but lady liberty needs glasses

and so does mrs justice by her side

both the broads r blind as bats

stumbling thru the system

justice bumbled into mutulu and

trippin on geronimo pratt

but stepped right over oliver

and his crooked partner ronnie

justice stubbed her big toe on mandela

and liberty was misquoted by the indians

slavery was a learning phase

forgotten with out a verdict

while justice is on a rampage

4 endangered surviving black males

i mean really if anyone really valued life

and cared about the masses

theyd take em both 2 pen optical

and get 2 pair of glasses

from "Our God is Marching On"

Martin Luther King Jr.

Montgomery, Alabama

March 25th, 1965

I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?"
Somebody's asking, "How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?" Somebody's asking, "When will wounded justice, lying prostrate on the streets of Selma and Birmingham and communities all over the South, be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men?" Somebody's asking, "When will the radiant star of hope be plunged against the nocturnal bosom of this lonely night, plucked from weary souls with chains of fear and the manacles of death? How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?"

I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, (*No sir*) because "truth crushed to earth will rise again."

How long? Not long, because "no lie can live forever."

How long? Not long, because "you shall reap what you sow."

How long? Not long:

Truth forever on the scaffold,

Wrong forever on the throne,

Yet that scaffold sways the future,

And, behind the dim unknown,

Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. How long? Not long, because:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword; His truth is marching on. He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat; He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat

O, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant my feet!

Our God is marching on. Glory, hallelujah! Glory, hallelujah!
Glory, hallelujah! Glory, hallelujah!

His truth is marching on.