

Sermon 6-28-20
Paul Purdue preaching

Even the Smallest Good Heals the World

I don't know when my mother gave me this doll, but I am pretty sure I was the only boy on my block with a black power doll. I wish y'all could have known my mother. Joann Sims Purdue taught in the most economically challenged school in our town. She was hired by an old school black principal, Mr. Stephens, who Mom loved but who soon retired. Over the next 30 years, Mom saw a string of rookie principals do well and get moved to suburban schools. Twice Mom turned down opportunities to follow one of her principals to a higher achieving suburban school. A system that pulls better talent to better schools denies equal opportunity to all students. It is classist and racist. Nothing silently infuriated my mother more than when sharing a story about a classroom behavior problem, some suburbanite would lean in and quietly whisper, "Are they black?" Mom would pause, rub her chin, feign ignorance, and reply, "Let me think." Letting the awkward pause linger, she finally would say aloud, "Is Billy black? Let me think... humm... what does that matter?" Half of her class came from Appalachia living in what was called "Irish Town".

Occasionally, Mom's reflections on her childrens' homes stunned our dinner table into silence, but most days Mom pressed on with a graceful cheerfulness. I once asked her, "Why don't you go to an easier school?" Mom paused, "I light my candle in this little corner God has given to me and try to make a difference." Mother Teresa told her nuns, "Cheerfulness should be one of the main points of our religious life. A cheerful giver is a great giver. Cheerfulness is a sign of a generous and humble person, who, forgetting all things, even herself, tries to please God in all she does for others. Cheerfulness is often a cloak which covers and hides a life of sacrifice, generosity and communion with God." (Total Surrender 44) Mother Teresa believed people caught in poverty deserved her genuine love, smiles, and good cheer.

Mom once spoke truth directly to the school board power, but most of her faith and justice work was quieter. When a rookie principal banned distracting holiday parties, Mom pulled the stuffing from her homemade pumpkin outfit and fashioned it into a skirt. Mom walked cheerfully into the principal's office with 24 orange bags of candy - the necessary ingredients for her subtraction homework. Almost everyone laughed. Her principal did not. Mom said, "Please, call Central Office and let me know if I need to change. If I do, I will be filing a union grievance." At dinner Mom recounted her victory dance surrounded by sugared up fourth graders, who she knew might not get to go trick or treating. Having once seen my very Baptist Mom's foot left feet drawn by laughing students into a hip-hop dance line, I can imagine Mom dancing badly to Kool & the Gang's, "Celebrate", "Come on, we are going to celebrate your party with you." "Whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, I tell you, they will never lose the reward." This verse always reminds me of Mom. Light your candle. Listen. Defend people who are poor. Risk being vulnerable. Plant seeds of hope, equality, and humanity along your path. Good cheer may grow as a reward.

"And whoever gives, even a cup of cold water... I tell you, they will never lose the reward." I have always loved this verse. Maybe once upon a time for the promise of eternal rewards, but it seems to hold a cosmic promise that God is working behind the scenes to multiply and bless our good efforts. God is an eternal multiplier of good, not allowing the reward to fade away. A bottle handed out at a march might help reshape the world. A silly orange dress might help some new principal understand the inequity of even Halloween. God's character resounds with grace, compassion, mercy, equality, and love. Like God, the good we do ripples goodness across eternity... never losing the reward. God's very Spirit grows in all who follow Christ: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

(Galatians 5:22) Do you hear God's gracious multiplying (abounding in mercy) effect in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount?

Blessed are those whose empathy challenges their hope; they belong to Christ Kin-dom.

Blessed are you who are grieving, you will be comforted.

Blessed are the humble, you will remake the earth.

Blessed are those hungering for things to be right, God will satisfy your longing

Blessed are those who show mercy, you already inhabit divine mercy.

Blessed are those with uncluttered hearts, they will see God.

Blessed are the peace-makers, one day, you will be called God's children.

Blessed are you who are harassed for taking a stand, that is the way of the prophets

Blessed are you when people call you names; be of good cheer, your name is great in heaven.

Oh, beloved, you are the light of the world. Evil and injustice can't quench holy light.

Light your candle, let it shine in the public square.

Trust that one day new monuments will arise, as folks praise God for your good works.

The promise "whoever gives even a cup of cold water...will never lose the reward" comes after Christ sends us out to open healthcare clinics, cast evil from people's minds, and announce God's kin-dom on earth as in heaven. Jesus warns us to watch out for people for the cost of truth-telling is high. Jesus promises you lack enough funding, you will eat strange meals, sleep in church basements, and open offices in spare bedrooms. The Gospel of liberation may even cost your life. Jesus' work is political; you will suffer for it. Shout it from the rooftops and in the public square. The Good News challenges systems. The Kin-dom is not about private faith but the public good. So at times you may feel "like sheep encircled by wolves"... you may think that everyone hates you and be assured close allies will betray you... "you will be dragged before the church councils, dragged to church trials, and even arrested." Dr. King was arrested for parading without a permit. A foolish legislature will consider making chalk use a crime. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for the Gospel will find it.

When you are arrested, resisted, or castigated, "shake it off- shake, shake, shake it off- shake the dust off your sandals." God multiplies the good. Even a water bottle handed to a marcher ripples across eternity. Take courage, God like a mother has counted the hairs on your head. God grieves with the sparrows who fly into a window. You are of infinite sacred worth. So persist, press on, pray, organize, march. Hum amid the hopelessness, "We are not alone, we are not afraid, we shall all be free...one day somehow, oh deep in my heart. I do believe. We shall overcome, we shall overcome, We shall overcome; some day."

They can't touch your soul. One day things that were hidden inside systems and behind closed doors will be revealed. Indeed, Jesus says that one day we will give an account of even our idle words. (Matthew 12:36) (Is part of this what Erikson calls the last stage life: integrity vs. despair?) Don't be afraid. Love wins. Keep marching. Keep handing out water bottles. Keep giving away your life. The old is passing away. New monuments will arise.

The march will take too long. The change is coming too slow. It asks too much of the oppressed. The oppressor will get away with too much. On Easter, Jesus celebrates with friends. Christ does not lead a revenge tour haunting Ciaphas, Pilate, or Herod. Easter ripples forgiveness, resurrection, and mercy across eternity. Yet, the fight for justice and love never loses its reward. We have such a long way to go. Video from phones and body cameras is forcing us to see what marginalized people have long known. Just this week more unspeakable injustice, once hidden, is now revealed by video.

Yet, with persistence we can raise new monuments. Today, even oppressors proof text Dr. King. Who could have imagined 56 years ago when people marched on Washington for jobs and freedom that a 30-foot tall statue of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., would emerge on the Washington Mall? A monument does not mean things are right yet, but we can rejoice to know

quotes from 14 sermons and speeches are carved into a 450-foot long limestone wall. So let us light our candles again. Let freedom ring again. Shout truth from the rooftops. Tell it in the public square. Let us live into these words we failed to heed 60 years ago:

- "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Letter from Birmingham, AL jail, April 16, 1963.
- "We are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs 'down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.'" December 5, 1955.
- "I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits." Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Oslo, Norway, 1964.
- "Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a better person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in." March for Integrated Schools, April 18, 1959.
- "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice." Stride Toward Freedom, 1958.
- "We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Washington National Cathedral, March 31, 1968.

Let us keep marching in faith, believing that God is gracious, compassionate, merciful, abounding in and multiplying goodness. May God multiply the light of our candles as we listen, learn, grieve and speak. Fire up those emails. Put your marching shoes on. Keep the chalk out. Teach the children well. Fight for everyone 's opportunity. Persist. Ice down those water bottles. Whistle freedom songs. Shout it from the rooftops. Let goodness ripple across eternity. Plant seeds. May justice and love never lose their reward. Amen.

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