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Hokuloa United Church of Christ

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John 4:1-26

This time every year, as we remember the work and life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I thumb back through his writings and speeches. I have been drawn to Dr. King, in part, because he was a minister of the Gospel and often spoke and wrote from the pulpit, but also to other ministers of the gospel. In his last speech, titled, "I see the Promised Land," given in 1968 to those involved in and organizing the Memphis Sanitation Strike, he said:

MLK Quote: "I see the Promised Land"

I want to take some time today to talk more specifically about conflict and the church. Our senses seem to be heightened at the current moment around ongoing conflicts. Last week, I received a handful of texts from pastors around the world - Northern Ireland, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Israel. The texts came through saying that their prayers are with us in the United States in the midst of the eruption of violence. It was not missed on me that these were from areas of the globe that have experienced their own challenges with violent conflict.

Tomorrow, we also remember the work and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King was committed to Christian nonviolence - he would write about his pilgrimage to nonviolence this way: "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Ghandi furnished the method." But for those who have studied Ghandi's resistance movement, one would see that in his final years of life, in working to bring Hindus and Muslims together, he woke up every morning and read the Sermon on the Mount. I would say the stories in the Gospels offer a way of being, a particular posture, in how to engage conflict. And no story is more apparent in this recognition in the nonviolent love of Jesus than the Story of the Samaritan woman at the well.

John 4:1-26

We all know that Jews and Samaritans hated each other, but my guess is that few of us actually know the depth to which these two people groups considered the 'other' an enemy. Their story is a story of separation, superiority, and dehumanization. The backstory of John 4 is remarkable. Samaria lies to the north of Judea, with its capital city and center of religious life in Jerusalem. After Israel split into two Kingdoms - Israel

and Judah - the Assyrians conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel, including Samaria. If you weren't taken captive, killed, or forced into exile, you remained in the land, poor and struggling to piece your life back together. The Samaritans who remained began to intermarry with pagan settlers. Thus, the beginning of ethnic differences emerged between Samaritans and the Jews in the South.

After the Babylonians conquered Judah, and then allowed them to return to the rebuild Jerusalem, the Samaritans offered to help rebuild the Temple. But because of the influx of pagan influence in their communities and in their blood, Jews in Jerusalem refused their help. Essentially saying, we do not want your help, you stay up there and we'll stay down here. At this point, Samaritans began to develop and practice a variation of Jewish worship. They held on to the Pentateuch, but rejected all other books and then built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim, where Abraham and Isaac had worshipped. They proclaimed that this is where the Lord dwells, rather than in Jerusalem. A Religious point of tension thus emerged between Jews and Samaritans.

Finally, the Greeks began to use the area of Samaria as a home base to rule their empire. Many Jews absolutely hated being subjected to military and cultural oppression, and they hated the Samaritans even more for being associated with their oppressors. Thus, the animosity among Jews and Samaritans took on a political tension.

Now in the middle of each of these ethnic, religious, and political difference markers, violence began to bubble up. In 128 BCE, Jews from Judea invaded Samaria and destroyed their temple. A few years before Jesus was born, Samaritans came down to Jerusalem and defiled the Temple at Passover by scattering bones throughout. Samaritans were known to hide out on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem to attack Jewish travelers. Some Samaritans would enlist in the Roman Army just so that they could legally abuse their Jewish neighbors. The Jews and Samaritans didn't just hate each other, they were enemies that wanted the 'other' dead. Hence, we get James and John in Luke 9:54 begging Jesus to call down fire from heaven and destroy Samaria.

This is the context of Jesus entering into enemy territory. Most Jews thought it too perilous, too fraught with danger, too risky to take the shortcut through Samaria. They instead, chose separation. Walk around Samaria, through Perea, on the other side of the Jordan River, to get to Galilee. What was once a 2-3 day journey, would now take 5 days.

This context gives credence to the creation of an enemy. We create enemies; an enemy grows within our hearts and minds and ramifies into our social interactions with one another. Some of how we create an enemy can happen solely within our own

imagination, other times it occurs through a long and protracted conflict with violent outbreaks. Both contexts follow the same basic structure of creating an Enemy.

1). Separation. As John tells the story of Jesus' thirst at the well, he alludes to the animosity between Jews and Samaritans through the words of the Samaritan woman, who seems quite startled that this Jewish man would break such social etiquette. Not only could you be killed just by being here, but you are now talking to a woman! And quite matter of factly, the author simply says, "For Jews do not associate with Samaritans." The first marker of enemy construction is separation.

This separation holds a mental and spiritual component that most often manifests in geographical separation (like going through Perea instead of Samaria). In many ways, an enemy becomes an essential component of one's identity. Rather than noticing the sameness we share, we only choose to see the differences between us. These differences are attached to judgmental and negative projections that manifest in perceived threats. In subtle ways, naming an enemy reinforces our own identity and self-understanding. We begin to define ourselves by what we are not. In most cases, we add a moral component infused with spiritual value. We are right; they are wrong. John Paul Lederach, from whom I'm relying a great deal, simply writes, "We must learn how to develop a positive identity of self and group that is not based on criticizing or feeling superior to another person or group."

But Jesus chooses something different. Rather than going around Samaria, rather than allowing fear of the Samaritan road to dictate his actions, he took a creative risk. Instead of separation and distance, Jesus chose nearness and proximity. In short, Jesus chose incarnation. We read in Roman 5 that "when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to God through Jesus Christ." God did not consider separation from humanity a legitimate way to show God's love. Rather, God chose fellowship, nearness, communion. Here at the well in John chapter 4, Jesus shows us exactly how to live as reconciling agents.

Antidote: space of encounter (the well)

2). Superiority. Once we have psychologically and spiritually separated ourselves from others, we have already created an atmosphere of superiority. We are not only different, we are better. We hold the moral high ground, they are the degenerates. Superiority powers up. It builds itself up. Only a superior people can justify the desecration of a temple. Only a superior people can lash out violently against an enemy. It is the opposite of humility; it is the opposite of the bent-down incarnate Christ. Lederach notes that Superiority is the story of the incarnation in reverse. Rather than entering into

someone's very life, superiority raises one above the other. In this way, we lose sight of our commonality as humans and simultaneously hoist ourselves higher in a will to control.

But again, John chapter 4 gives us a different way. How Jesus enters into Samaria matters. How Jesus goes about his conversation is important. John paints a picture of Jesus not as a powerful zealot leading a rebellion (which some Jews projected onto Jesus, even his own disciples), but rather as a tired, thirsty, unarmed, vulnerable pilgrim. Jesus needs hospitality; and so his first words express his vulnerable nature. "Will you give me a drink," Jesus asks. Jesus' vulnerable state disarms this woman and effectively transcends the cycle of violence that plagues Jewish/Samaritan relationships. Rather than superiority, Jesus chooses humility.

3). Dehumanization. Once one creates separated distance from the 'other' and establishes a superior relationship within the collective memory of the individual and community, dehumanization is the next and last construction that solidifies enemy creation. Throughout the Jewish/Samaritan animosity, insults were continually lobbed, efforts to dehumanize. Rather than referring to the Samaritans as a nation, Jews collectively called them a 'herd.' A widely held Jewish proverb simply stated that "a piece of bread given by a Samaritan is more unclean than swine's flesh." In this way, the Samaritans are viewed not as human beings, but as animals. In order to build an enemy, one must rob the other of their humanity.

#### Differentiation - Separation - Superiority - Dehumanization

Differentiation	Web of Relationships
Separation	Space of Encounter
Superiority	Humility (Active Listening)
Dehumanization	Created Equal

Jesus chooses to gather with those who are different, chooses humility, and recognizes the Image of God in everyone he meets. In this way he breaks through mechanisms that create enemies.

Dr. King noticed the power of love in his fight for justice. In 1957, Dr. King talked to room full of young adults and talked about the power of nonviolent love utilized in the Montgomery boycott. He said: MLK Quote from "The Power of Nonviolence."

Dr. King knew very well the power of group identity and the way we humans not only create enemies but how that leads toward violent conflict. And while the posture of Jesus could be considered a form of peacebuilding - that is building relationships of trust across differences that strengthen communities - what happens when violence erupts? What does Justice and peace require when Dr. King is stabbed in 1958, arrested in 1963, murdered in 1968? What does justice and peace require in the midst of mass incarceration, when the population of Native Hawaiians is 19% but account for 37% of the incarceration rate? What does justice and peace look like after a violent white mob of insurrectionists break into the Capitol building, leaving five dead in their wake?

How can the church be accountable to its past? How can we as a community move forward in the wake of harm?

In Isaiah 61 the prophet proclaims that the Lord loves justice, and hates robbery and wrongdoing. One of the central themes of Scripture revolves around the concept of shalom. Shalom is one of those concepts used over and over in the scripture. It's a big umbrella term that connotes wholeness, harmony, welfare, safety, fullness, rest, completeness, prosperity, and health. It deals with human relationships, both individual, communal, and political. But it also includes relationships to the land, animals, and waters. The Hebrew Scriptures called this Shalom, Jesus called it the Kingdom of God, and Dr. King called it the Beloved Community. The social parameters of the Shalom community revolve around justice. This is the same passage that Jesus quotes when he preaches in his hometown of Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners set free. He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of the Lord has come" (Luke 4). Jesus, in his first sermon, tells his neighbors that in him the year of Jubilee has come. The Jubilee becomes a tangible mark of shalom for the community. Debts are forgiven, prisoners are set free, and land is redistributed. In other words, within God's very design for this world is a social element of just relationships for people, animals, and the land. A Shalom community actively resists generational poverty, foreign oppression, slavery to debtors, farming practices that deplete the land, air, and water, and redistributes wealth to ensure that the disempowered are not trampled to death.

Walter Brueggemann shares that the central vision and substance of the biblical witness revolves around the theological construct of Shalom. The Sabbath Practice, the Jubilee Year, the Kingdom of God, and the Torah are all pointing toward the same story of God's vision that creation itself, and everything in it, is created for oneness - community

- harmony with God and one another. The story points toward restoration of broken relationships. The Gospel itself is restorative.

My daughter's name is Justice. And I remember when we first shared her names with our friends, neighbors, our church. And a common response was that we wanted her to be lawyer or judge. In our context, we often think of justice in terms of a legal system. But our criminal legal system is interested in whether or not a person has broken laws, rather than broken relationships. Justice is about relationships and how the strength and health of those relationships work to build community trust and safety. We are conditioned to think and behave like justice is mostly about the laws that govern us, the halls that punish us, or the police that arrest/protect us. But such thinking robs the community of its role in justice making and turns it over to the state apparatus. The work of justice involves the whole community, including churches. And for many churches, the work of community accountability requires deep introspection and active amends. The field of restorative justice has focused on the harm that relationships experience in the wake of violence or crime.

Restorative Justice asks questions like: what needs are created because of the harm done (particularly the needs of the one harmed), what obligations become necessary to move toward healing, and what does accountability look like?

Accountability is a crucial question in overcoming harm and moving toward healing. And creating communities of accountability is a necessary component for post-conflict societies. Accountability then requires, "truth-telling, acknowledgement of the harm done and its impact, expressing remorse, and offering reparative action."

Finally, the church is a community marked by shalom - as a witness and sign of God's kingdom come. If this is so, if the church is a sign of God's Kingdom, a marker in history of how God desires our relationships to be, then we must prioritize the work of peace and reconciliation in our community. The idea of witness means someone has "seen" something. When our communities and neighbors look at the work we do, see our values practiced, it reflects onto God. If they see brokenness and discord, then we no longer act as a sign of God's Kingdom come. But if we practice what happens at the Lord's table, during communion, then the world sees Jesus present and active.

MLK Quote: "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech"