

# Humanitarian Faith

sermon digest

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Luke 13:10-17

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Tomorrow is MLK Day, a national holiday, honoring the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. This black Baptist pastor who never served political office has a place on the national calendar along with presidents of the United States. His impact on American culture undoubtedly equals or exceeds most presidents. His civil rights reformation rivals the significance of his namesake, Martin Luther, father of Protestantism. What an amazing thirty-nine-year life!

MLK Day is unusual for its equal importance in churches and synagogues to secular, political, and social organizations. King's vocation as a pastor along with the powerful faith perspective he brought to racial reformation confronted the conscience of his Christian brothers and sisters in white churches across the nation. The Wikipedia article on King remembers the great man as a "pastor, activist, humanitarian, and leader" and notes that his principle of "nonviolent civil disobedience" was "based on his Christian beliefs."

MLK Day reminds us of the importance of the Christian values taught and exemplified by Jesus and, with some embarrassment for Christians, in the teachings of Gandhi. I am personally grateful that I was coming of age in my pastoral vocation during the rise of King's ministry. I experienced the crossing of a wide, deep chasm in my faith. Far from conflicting with worship or the importance of faith in God, the civil rights movement crossed that chasm between faith and practice, between God and humanity. A behind-the-scenes debate was raging in my denomination about getting involved in secular, social issues. We sometimes cited Jesus in the Gospels about the importance of providing extravagant gifts for Jesus over caring for the poor. Don't we always have the poor around? A popular missions professor in my seminary called social missions "passing out wash rags." I recall the dismay of Dr. Sam Rankin, who had invested his career in medical missions in China. His denomination dismissed the importance of healing ministry and required that all missionaries be devoted to religious conversion.

**What would Jesus do?** The healing of the crippled woman is found only in Luke, but the primary issue raised by this act of healing is found throughout the four Gospels. Jesus healed the woman on sacred ground, at a synagogue, and in sacred time, on the Sabbath. Jesus seems to have made a practice of healing on the Sabbath—a big deal in the Gospels and perhaps a major issue leading to his arrest and crucifixion. By doing the work of healing on the Sabbath, Jesus was accused of desecrating the Sabbath, a sacred day of rest and refreshment and, one might note, the centerpiece of Jewish faith.

Ask any Jew of the first century about the importance of Sabbath to Jewish religion, and you might come away with a better understanding of the offense with Jesus in the Gospels. However, if you pose the same question to contemporary rabbis, you will find more sympathy than opposition to Jesus' understanding of the Sabbath.

Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein (*How Firm a Foundation*, p.62ff) affirms the Jewish Sabbath as the most significant Jewish contribution to the experience of religion, the only ritual mentioned in the Ten Commandments and qualified by rabbis as "equal to all of the commandments put together." But he also affirms the teaching of Jesus: "Shabbat laws, stringent though they may be, are a reflection of God's love and concern for man" (p. 68). We are reminded of the word of Jesus, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath (Mark 2:27)."

But the story of healing the crippled woman is less about the Sabbath than it is the value of one broken, human, female life. When the leader of the synagogue expressed indignation with Jesus for healing the woman on a Sabbath, Jesus observed that common practice allows for watering an ox or a donkey on the Sabbath and questioned: "ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" Aware that women were undervalued in the culture, Luke seems intent on raising female importance. In the next chapter, he tells a similar story of healing a man on the Sabbath. The issue was not about the importance of Sabbath or the distinction of gender. The issue was the value of persons over the importance of religious institutions like the Sabbath. According to Luke, Jesus was busy "passing out wash rags"; Jesus care about the physical plight of persons. To be sure, he was devoted to the God of

creation and calling people to the spiritual life. Because of his devotion to God, he was committed to a mission of providing for the physical, material welfare of persons.

**You don't have to choose between God and persons.** Jesus did not give up Judaism in order to heal on the Sabbath. Neither did King have to abandon his Christian faith or leave the Christian ministry in order to become an advocate of social justice. Jesus was closer to the teachings of the Old Testament Prophets than any of his critics. Critic of social injustice, Amos (5:24) provided the statement that came to be equated with the mission of King: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." Walter Brueggemann (*The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 28ff) attributed the social awakening in Judaism to a rebellion against Solomon and his economic expansion. Never before had such affluence been known in Judaism. Solomon expanded the territorial boundaries, the power and influence, along with the domination and control of the population. The political economics of Solomon led to a great divide between the haves and have-nots. The rich got richer as the poor went from little to nothing. Sound familiar? In the U.S., between 1981 and 2012, the people at the top one percent of wealth more than doubled their share of total pre-tax income. They now account for about twenty percent of the nation's earnings.

All the while, preachers of the "prosperity gospel" assure us that this is God's way of taking care of the world. "God wants you to be rich" has become the message of a dozen or so popular evangelists on the media circuit; but if you look closely at the facts, God must want the rich to be rich. Everyone else has just missed the boat. Social and economic inequality are not the product of the divine order for the universe. If we listen to the Prophets, God has a definite preference for people who are oppressed and forced to live at the bottom of the pile.

So Jesus was not anti-Sabbath or anti-Jew. He was a powerful advocate of the kind of ministry that had been proposed by Jewish Prophets long before he was born. In the very best sense of the word, Jesus was a humanitarian humanist.

Humanism has gotten a bad rap in history. A product of the Enlightenment, humanism was adopted by secular people as an alternative to religion that often was inhumane and uncaring. A foundation stone of Calvinism that justified a theological determinism was the total depravity of humanity. Since people are basically evil, none of us deserve salvation. The Elect are the chosen ones of God based on criteria known only to God. It is not because some of us are better than others. Election is the capricious choosing of God. Thus, the Elect do not need to be overly concerned about the "others." It is all up to God. When this theology was applied to missions and social ministries by churches, it is no wonder that an alternative humanism emerged.

**Authentic religion attends to human need.** The Epistle of James has been attributed to James the brother of Jesus. Among the New Testament scriptures, James holds closer to the Synoptic Gospels on social ministry than any of Paul's letters. James called for Christians to be "doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." He defined pure religion: "to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Among the neglected and abandoned souls of the time, orphans and widows represented the least, the lost, and the last among the classes of people. James defined faith by "works," by acting in compassion toward people, especially toward economic and social outcasts. Reading James, we are made aware of how early the Christian social gospel began to fall into neglect in the history of Christianity.

Along with Jesus and Gandhi, the Baptist minister-theologian Walter Rauschenbush was identified as a major influence on the thought and action of King. In *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), Rauschenbusch wrote that "Whoever uncouples the religious and the social life has not understood Jesus. Whoever sets any bounds for the reconstructive power of the religious life over the social relations and institutions of men, to that extent denies the faith of the Master." He believed that the individual Christian bears a social responsibility. In his *Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917), he wrote, for John the Baptist, the baptism was "not a ritual act of individual salvation but an act of dedication to a religious and social movement." Concerning the social depth and breadth of Christ's atoning work: "Jesus did not in any real sense bear the sin of some ancient Briton who beat up his wife in B. C. 56, or of some mountaineer in Tennessee who got drunk in A. D. 1917. But he did in a very real sense bear the weight of the public sins of organized society, and they in turn are causally

connected with all private sins."

If we are to be disciples, followers of Jesus, by very definition we must hold to a humanitarian faith. Far from facing people with a choice between the worship of God and the social plight of persons, Jesus viewed the two laws, loving God with all that we are and loving our neighbor as ourselves, as companions; the "Shema Israel" and the "Golden Rule" were two sides of the same coin, or better understood in the teaching of Jesus, two sides of the same faith.