



Presbyterian Committee on the
Self-Development of People

SERMON

From the Rev. Denise Anderson — Coordinator, Racial & Intercultural Justice; Compassion, Peace & Justice. Anderson was also co-moderator of the 222nd General Assembly (2016).

Mark 2:23–3:6

One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Not One Step Back: King's Unfinished Agenda and Why We Still Can't Wait

I was asked to step into this moment in place of our sister and brother, the Revs. Drs. Liz Theoharis and William Barber. They were scheduled to talk about the **Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival**. As you may know, Jan and I had made PC(USA) engagement with the campaign a major focus of our work during our term. There was a reason for that. At our 222nd General Assembly, we approved **Item 11-03: On Choosing to Be a Church Committed to the Gospel of Matthew 25** from the Presbytery of the Cascades. Its first recommendation was that the PC(USA) "recommit ourselves at the congregational level, the mid council level, and the national levels of our church to locate ourselves with the poor, to advocate with all of our voice for the poor, and to seek opportunities to take risks for and with the poor." At the same time, there was a growing grassroots call to revive the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign ahead of its 50th anniversary. One of those who were calling for that revival was Presbyterian minister and director of the Kairos Center, the Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, whom we heard from at the start of this assembly.

Currently the campaign boasts presences in nearly 40 states around the country. I am pleased to serve on the Maryland Coordinating Committee. We are in the midst of a 40-day season of nonviolent moral fusion direct action with weekly actions and civil disobedience around these foci: Poverty; Systemic Racism; Militarism and the War Economy; Ecological Devastation; and the Distorted Moral Narrative (because you can't talk about one of these things without talking about all of them). During week three of our season, I submitted to arrest as we conducted a die-in inside the Maryland State House in Annapolis to bring attention to the impact of militarism, the war economy, and — by extension — gun violence on the nation and world's poorest. As I shared on my social media about my arrest, I died-in as the daughter of two

veterans who devoted more than two decades each of service to this country.

I died-in because they were poor Americans, and enlisting in the military was one of few options available to them.

I died-in because I once had to rush my veteran mother to the hospital in the middle of the night for an urgent medical issue when her military-sponsored health care wanted her to wait two more weeks to be seen.

I died-in because I'm a former defense contractor who worked side-by-side with people who wore the uniform. I would regularly run into them after hours at McDonald's or Home Depot — their second job. I was being paid more than them and my employer was getting rich while they continued to struggle.

I died-in because D.C.-area veterans are among the best-paid in the country, but can only afford about 20% of the houses on the market. Vets in San Jose can't afford any on the market there.

I died-in because the weapons for which the military has no more use end up in the hands of law enforcement all over the country, usually to be used on the poorest residents.

I died-in because Maryland's gun violence problem is inextricable from its poverty problem.

I died-in for the countless poor citizens corralled into jails on minor, nonviolent offenses only to stay there indefinitely because they can't afford bail.

I died-in for the 2% of active duty military personnel who are on food stamps.

I died-in because the war economy is killing us in more ways than we know.

In conjunction with the Institute for Policy Studies, the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival put out a few months ago an extensive look at poverty today called "The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America 50 Years After the Poor People's Campaign Challenged Racism, Poverty, the War Economy/Militarism and Our National Morality." "The Souls of Poor Folk" traces the 50 years since 1968, when the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and thousands of Americans, alarmed at their government's blindness to human need, launched the Poor People's Campaign. It is an empirical study that paints a startling picture of just how far we have yet to come in the last 50 years. I strongly suggest downloading this disturbing and eye-opening report from poorpeoplescampaign.org. But let me rewind for a second.

About a year before Jan and I became General Assembly co-moderators, I attended an event at Montreat Conference Center called "Dr. King's Unfinished Agenda." This event was hosted as a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's historical and at the time controversial visit and address to Montreat at its Christian Action Conference. At that commemorative event we would hear from Charles Blow, Leonard Pitts, Dr. William Barber, Congressman John Lewis and Bishop Vashti McKenzie in what can only be described as a transformational, inspiring and enlightening experience. We came away from that event reinvigorated and determined to further the cause of justice.

"Dr. King's Unfinished Agenda," however, was but one of a series of 50th anniversary commemorations in the life of MLK I would witness in recent years. I would take my daughter to the National Mall for the 50th anniversary commemoration of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. I would watch from a distance the reenactment of the March from Selma. As we prepared to launch the Poor People's Campaign, a National Call for Moral Revival, we did so with the 50th anniversary of King's original campaign and subsequent assassination in view.

I still fancy myself a young woman. I don't even know what 50 years feels like (I've not even yet experienced what 40 years feels like). But I do know that for some things, 50 years is too damn long to wait for anything.

In his book *Why We Can't Wait*, King talked about the significance of the year 1963 and the apparent awakening of the black community at that time. He posed the rhetorical question of why 1963 specifically would be the year in which we would see what he called the "Negro Revolution" and why the country would

have to come to grips with the sustained direct action we were seeing across the country. Simply put, at that point it had been 100 years since President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

Yesterday we marched to deliver over \$47,000 to bail out people charged with nonviolent offenses who would have otherwise languished in jail until their trial date because they cannot afford bail. But do you know the other significance of that day? Yesterday was Juneteenth. The Emancipation Proclamation was signed by President Lincoln on Jan. 1, 1863, effectively but not functionally abolishing slavery in the Confederate States of America. It wasn't until April 9, 1865, that Gen. Robert E. Lee would surrender to Union forces, ending the Civil War and the slave economy as we knew it. And it still wouldn't be until later that year that the Confederate soldiers still fighting in Texas would learn that the war was over. On June 19, Union general Granger would arrive in Galveston, Texas, and announce the manumission of the slaves there. From then on, the day would be commemorated and given the portmanteau "Juneteenth."

But we must ask the question: Why are our siblings still not free?

The 13th amendment to the constitution was passed by the Senate on Jan. 31, 1865, and abolished slavery "except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." What that means is that, if we wanted to make money off of human bodies, we now had to criminalize those bodies and find reason — any reasons — to incarcerate them. Slavery was abolished, but the slave economy never went anywhere. It just put on new clothes.

What is most egregious about the cash bail system is that the siblings incarcerated within it haven't even been convicted of anything yet. What it does is criminalize poverty, because if you are picked up on a minor offense and can't afford to pay the fine, you are immediately in violation of the law even though it's impossible to get blood from a turnip. That means siblings with already limited means are caged until they can magically come up with funds they definitely can't get while they're locked up, since they're prohibited from working. Again, I ask you, how long are we supposed to wait to get free?

Mass incarceration and the human rights affront that is the cash bail system isn't by any means new. It's simply an old devil in new clothes.

People have a curious tendency to treat old grievances as new menaces. I believe that we for far too long have valued nicety over honesty, and have conflated the absence of conflict with the presence of peace. Then suddenly when someone has the audacity to remind us that we are in fact in their way — that our boot is on their neck, that their space is encroached by us — we act shocked, shaken and turn on them for jolting us out of our sense of contentment. Sometimes we have this curious tendency to bristle when someone simply points out what has always been. As if racism suddenly appeared the moment we got a black president and the dominant culture started getting uneasy. As if Colin Kaepernick wasn't protesting something that hadn't existed for years. As if toxic waste hasn't been dumped in poor, brown and indigenous communities ad infinitum. How long are they supposed to wait to speak up for themselves?

Now, because I am a preacher, I have to consult the text for what I need to say to you today. And I am reminded of a story that, I believe, is one of the most important and most ignored accounts of Jesus' life and teachings. It is Saturday, the sabbath day, and he and his followers are walking through the grainfields. As we humans are wont to do when we're walking long distances, some of them got a bit peckish and began to pluck some of the heads of grain to feed themselves. Oh, but wait! It's the sabbath! You're not supposed to work! I mean, the law is pretty clear on that.

So, the Pharisees challenge him about why they're doing this.

Jesus then takes the opportunity to reframe the understanding of not only the sabbath, but the entire law for a people who had apparently missed the point of both. He uses his ancestor David and recalls the story from 1 Samuel 21 when David was fleeing Saul and begged the priest Ahimelech for bread. All the priest had in his possession was the consecrated bread, but he gave it to David and his men. Ahimelech (and Jesus) understood that consecrated effects become idols when we put more importance in them than in fellow human beings. For whom was the sabbath made? If the sabbath was made as a restorative gift for humans, and yet we fail to restore humans on the sabbath, we dishonor the sabbath.

What's interesting is that Jesus' detractors thought he was going about things the wrong way, and Jesus thought his detractors were going about things the wrong way. And you know what? Both were certainly right in a sense. The Pharisees were right in saying that it was unlawful to work on the sabbath. There is no question about that. But in the end, whose approach fostered healing? Whose approach engendered liberation? The approach that heals the broken, feeds the hungry and liberates those in bondage — that is the right approach because it is the righteous approach.

Friends, Jesus calls us to righteousness, not religiousness.

That might be especially important for us Presbyterians to remember. We fancy ourselves as a people of "decency and order."

Friends, sometimes you can achieve order and miss out on decency.

Sometimes our adherence to order is really an exercise in maintaining our privilege. Privilege is pacifying. Imagine a baby mindlessly enjoying a pacifier. She's quiet, sated and probably unaware that the pacifier is even in her mouth. But try jiggling it. Try disturbing the pacifier's position or wresting it from her toothless mouth. All hell breaks loose. She is inconsolable. She doesn't yet have the tools to address her discomfort.

Too many of us are reluctant to do the work and say the words of justice out of fear of jiggling somebody's pacifier. But listen to me: Let them cry. We can never be the Church God calls us to be if we're too timid and afraid to be uncomfortable.

Our order should never become our idol. Order should never be an end to itself. It is supposed to serve the interests of the community. At its best, our order calls us to remember our ethics. Order should always be both simultaneously followed and interrogated, and if the time comes when order begins to serve itself rather than people, then the people have a responsibility to call order back to itself.

Friends, when have we favored order over decency? When have we expected people to be silent about their pain so as not to disturb our peace? (Don't answer; just think about it.)

King would lament in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" that the biggest obstacle to justice in Birmingham, in America and in the world were those who loved order more than righteousness.

"I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

Jesus was angered at the hard hearts of those in the synagogue — the house of worship — when they were faced with the question of whether or not to heal a man with an injured hand on the sabbath. Their apparent indifference or intractable need to be right rather than useful rendered them silent and ineffective in the face of someone who needed to be healed. That made Jesus angry. It should make us angry.

When you know that since 2010, 23 states have passed racist voter suppression laws, including racist gerrymandering and redistricting, then you know why we still can't wait.

When you know that wages for the bottom 80% of the population have been stagnant since the '70s, and that there is no state or county in the nation where someone earning the federal minimum wage could afford a two-bedroom apartment at market rent, then you know why we still can't wait.

When you know that there are 32 million people who lack health insurance and an estimated 40% of Americans have taken on debt because of medical issues, then you know why we still can't wait.

When you know that the United States accounts for 5% of the world's population, but 25% of the world's prisoners, two-thirds of whom are people of color, then you know why we still can't wait.

When you know that parents and children are being separated as they seek asylum and the powers-that-be not only use the law, but the faith to justify it, then you know why we still can't wait.

When you know that 13.8 million Americans can't afford water, and fossil fuel production and transportation too often threatens the water supplies of the poorest communities, then you know why we still can't wait.

When you know that systemic racism allows us to divorce people of their humanity and is the vehicle by which we exploit people economically and justify wars; when you understand the dog whistles of calling people who cross the border "animals," then you know why we still can't wait.

When you know that the displacement of people in North America and Palestine and the world over is largely motivated by the fact they are living over aquifers that others want to access, then you know why we still can't wait.

When you know the oceans are rising and poor communities are drowning, then you know why we still can't wait.

When you know that we have waited far too long for promises made far too long ago, then you know why we still can't wait.

When you know that the mother of peace is justice, you stop trying to circumvent the mother to get to the child.

Jesus saw injustice and got angry. We should get angry. And yet, in Jesus' anger, he didn't sin. In his anger, he healed. In his anger, he delivered. In his anger, he saved. In his anger, he toppled exploitative economic systems. In his anger, he commanded justice.

Jesus would continue to be a thorn in the side of those who loved order more than people. He would challenge the hypocrisy of his own community. He would heal not just on the sabbath, but any day anyone needed healing. He would proclaim the kingdom of his Father and the forgiveness of sins. He wouldn't condemn; he would liberate. He wouldn't ignore; he would see people right where they were. And yet there were those who would try to distort his message and narrative. They would call him a heretic. They would say he was trying to replace Caesar. They would accuse him of blasphemy. They would demand his crucifixion. They would nail him on a cross and cast lots for his clothes. They would watch him die an agonizing and unjust death. But they would not win!

Three days later he would get up with all power in his hands. He would get up with the power to move forward. And as he moves forward, he moves us forward. As he moves forward, he empowers us to move forward.

"Forward together; not one step back."