

Forty years ago this summer (in 1975), I was at a crossroads. I'd made a decision that would shape the rest of my life. I'd completed my undergraduate degree, had attended both the Baptist University where my dad taught and the state school where my mom was on the faculty. In August, I'd be moving to Boulder, Colorado to work on my Ph.D. in Anthropology.

At midsummer, I was working on an archaeological excavation in the Caddo River Valley, the foothills of the Ouachita Mountains; three weeks of the summer was taken up by a training dig for amateur archaeologists and another six weeks a field school for college students.

On a rare day off in the land of tiny towns and low water bridges, I found the company of my friend Lessie Taylor, who was probably close to 80 years old at the time. A local, amateur archaeologist who'd grown up in "them hills," Lessie and I had a special bond. She decided that day she wanted to show me the natural wonders of the Ouachita Mountains. She asked me to drive, but before our explorations began she persuaded me to cross over the "dry" Montgomery County line to a "first stop" liquor store. "I'm a gonna get us a pack of them "ponies," Mary K." Ponies were little bottles of beer.

So with our pack of ponies in between us, we drove into back roads of the mountains exploring the beauty; Lessie provided endless commentary "See that spring over there? You want to taste some really fresh water." Or "See that rock quarry over there. Reckon that's where the Indians got the stone to make their spear points and knives?"

After several hours of following old logging roads, I said, "Shouldn't we be heading back?" At which point I realized Lessie, the local, was as turned around as I was. We were lost in the wilderness. Just beyond a patch of woods, we spied two people walking, picking berries. "Mary Kay, Pull on over thar; ask them how we get back to the highway."

I pulled over and a mountain woman approached; I felt like maybe I'd just crossed back into another century. Her clothes were homemade. Her long gray hair covered with a hand-sewn bonnet. She and her husband wore old work boots. And I just froze. So, Lessie leaned over me and asked, "Can y'all tell me how to get back to the highway?" As the woman looked in, her

eyes zeroed in on the beer bottles between us and she asked, “**Do you know Jesus is Lord?**” My hands gripped the wheel till my knuckles turned white. After a moment of complete silence Lessie said, rather indignantly, “Well, of course!”

The mountain woman wasn’t convinced. “Well, I am not so sure about that!” I’m gonna get you some tracts.” She hurried away, calling to her husband to get their religious tracts and Bible out of the truck.

The second she stepped away from the car, Lessie yelled, “What are you waiting for Mary Kay? Gun it!” As I sped away, leaving our mountain folk in a cloud of thick yellow dust, Lessie continued hollering at me, “Just what on earth is wrong with you? You’re the one going to get a Ph.D. and you just sat there like a great big dummy!”

Lessie would’ve been even more outdone if she’d known that my Dad was a Baptist minister and I’d spent three of the four past years as a religion major, preparing for graduate school in theology. Yet, despite all my learning, I couldn’t at that moment reduce my feelings and thoughts about God, Jesus or any aspect of religion into a sound byte. My spirituality wasn’t something I could squeeze onto a bumper sticker. And the scary-sounding “*Lord*” described in the challenge, “*Don’t you know Jesus is Lord?*” didn’t sound like the same Jesus that I did in fact think I knew.

The greatest influence on my understanding of Christianity was formed at a very early age; I had the chance to see the power of Christianity to advocate and propel social justice and social change. I had the opportunity to hear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preach when I was only nine years old. In April, 1963, within days of his release from the Birmingham jail, Dr. King traveled to Little Rock Arkansas. My mom, who’d been organizing interracial meetings to support African American college students who were integrating local colleges, filled her car with my two older sisters, a few students and me to make the journey into Little Rock to hear Dr. King.

When we arrive at the church in Little Rock, the pews were packed. Preaching and singing had begun, but Dr. King hadn’t spoken yet. I looked for him from the back of the church, where we stood alongside many others. And people just kept coming, through the doors, causing a bit of a stir each time a new person walked in. So I just started opening the door for people.

It felt like something I could and should do, and it was completely normal behavior for me. But, for most of the people walking through the doors it was not at all normal. It's quite unlikely that any white person (let alone a little white girl) had never opened the door for them. I didn't yet know the phrase "white privilege". I did know that while my mother had her fears about her involvement in the Civil Rights movement, there were many more people with much greater reason to fear ...every single day of their lives.

Dr. King's sermon that night, "A Knock at Midnight," was based on a parable: a friend knocks on a neighbor's door at midnight asking for three loaves of bread. Midnight was metaphor for the dark areas of life that were in need of the light of social justice. Loaves of bread symbolized our hungering for faith, hope and love. Dr. King said events in the modern world made many feel like they don't belong, where people feel little "more than numbers." He said "*We're living in a world that has become oppressively impersonal.*" (<http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/knock-midnight-0#>)

I've read and listened to that sermon many times since that night. Today, I am particularly struck by the insight of his phrase "oppressively impersonal." The phrase puts together the idea that with oppression in society, with domination of one group over others, comes a loss of personhood.

Many of the lessons and life stories of the prophets, John the Baptist and Jesus pertain to the nature of oppression, power, domination and the struggle for social justice. Our readings today compel us to ask, what do prophets do? What can we learn from them – and the work of modern day prophets such as Dr. King, about our responsibilities as Christians in these turbulent times.

First, prophets speak truth to power. Amos writing in the 8th century BCE vehemently spoke out about economic inequality, where wealth was consolidated in the hands of a few. 2) Prophets are knowledgeable social critics. Their message is based on knowledge of social context, including politics, history, and traditions. 3) Prophets often have deep insider knowledge of the society or religious institutions they are speaking against. John the Baptist, for example, was the son of a priest.

Our reading from Mark's gospel reminds us of the grim reality that prophets are often martyred. The beheading of John the Baptist is among the most heinous stories from the Bible; beyond the sheer horror of beheading, are the capricious reasons his execution. It's clear that John the Baptist spoke truth to power in a way that become threatening to the status quo and his methods were working. His followers were preparing themselves to actively participate in social change. They were looking inward, repenting, and purifying themselves through Baptism.

John the Baptist was executed and Jesus crucified because the message was grounded in love. And nonviolent revolutions based on "love your enemies" work – then and now. It was undermining the Roman domination, just as, in the modern world, we've seen that nonviolent social change, grounded in love, also works.

I answered the phone the night of April 3, 1968 when a student called to tell my mother that Dr. King had been shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee. He was there to help garbage workers. They carried signs that read "I am a Man." Here, we have yet another reminder that with oppression comes denial of personhood.

That same denial of personhood, born out of ignorance and hate, led a young racist to a prayer meeting in Charleston, South Carolina, to the Mother Emanuel church. He wanted to start a race war, but he miscalculated. He'd walked into a community that was living the legacy of Jesus and Dr. King. Our friends in Mother Emmanuel Church help us in answering: how do we as Christians respond to racist rhetoric and violence?

Most important, we don't allow the message of love to be coopted by false prophets who instill fear and hate, fostering ignorance and denying the personhood of others. And, we must embrace, the notion of personhood in our relations with others.

Anthropologist Robert Redfield (1947: 300-301) contrasted the personal ways people interact in "folk societies" with impersonal ways in Western societies. Redfield wrote that, "The most distinguishing characteristic of a folk society is behavior is personal not impersonal ... a person is myself in another form. His qualities and values are inherent in him. And his significance for me is not merely one of utility. A "thing" is that social

object which has no claim on my sympathies, which responds to me mechanically, its value to me exists only in so far as it serves my end.”

Moreover, all admitted to a Folk Society are treated as persons. “One does not deal impersonally – in thing fashion – with any member of the folk society.” And much besides human beings is treated personally. Nature is treated personally. Including the elements, landscapes, animals, plants, trees.”

I am struck by similarities of Folk Societies to the Beloved Community, as explicated by Dr. King. Dr. King taught that desegregation was not an end in and of itself. It was a means to something much greater. He wrote

The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men. (King, 1956, Speech Following Supreme Court Decision on Montgomery Bus Boycott; see <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>).

I know Beloved Communities can be created because I have seen it happen. My work in North Carolina with a Race and Gender Institute helped lead the city of Greensboro, North Carolina - deeply wounded by a massacre of five union organizers at an anti-KKK demonstration – to a city-wide Truth and Reconciliation project on the South African model.

And the good news, the really good news, is we have everything we need here at St. Augustine’s to become a vibrant, powerful Beloved Community. Indeed we are well on our way. The collective knowledge of our congregation, the diverse and extensive array of gifts, the commitment to do good in the local community and the world, to help support one another. We have only to realize that our strength lies in our diversity. And disagreements, conflicts, are to be expected. The Beloved Community provides a model for resolving these conflicts, reconciling our differences and moving forward.

The night before he died, Dr. King said, “I’ve been to the mountaintop. I’ve seen the Promise Land.” Beloved Communities are

at the heart – they are the heart – of the Promise Land. I look forward to continuing the journey of creating a Beloved Community with you here at St. Augustine's.