

## At First Baptist KenGar

Kirby Lawrence Hill  
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
Matthew 5:21-24

### GETTING ALL THE WAY THERE

Let me express gratitude for the decision to renew the practice of Warner Memorial and the KenGar congregations worshipping together. I have found our joint worship and other projects a true experience of the spirit of love and grace. Minister Henson, I am thankful to be with you and with both the KenGar and Warner congregations today. The first church I served after getting out of seminary was in Memphis, Tennessee. When I first went there, it was sixteen years after Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination there on April 4, 1968, shot down while he was standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel waiting to go to dinner at Rev. Billy Kyles' house. That old motel building is now a deeply moving civil rights museum. While I lived there, the transformation of that building from being just a place of anger and sadness to a place of learning and inspiration was a great initiative to further the march for civil rights.

Another building of significance in Dr. King's history with Memphis is the sanctuary of Mason Temple, where he gave his last public words the night before he was murdered. He was in Memphis in support of some vulnerable people, sanitation workers who were on strike against a city government that had been unresponsive to the issues of poor pay and dangerous working conditions. These were indeed the working poor and Dr. King wanted broad support for their struggle for dignity. The speech is often referred to as the 'mountaintop speech,' because after he mentioned threats on his life that he had received, he concluded the speech saying, "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

Those words were powerful that night and became even more so after Dr. King's death. The mountaintop reference goes back to the story of Moses, who had led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, and had led them through forty years of being in the wilderness, during which time the Hebrew law including the Ten Commandments had been given. Towards the end of his life, Moses would lead the people just to the eastern edge of the Promised Land and from the top of Mount Nebo he would look over the Jordan River to see where his people would, by God's grace, take up residence. Moses knows he won't get to accompany his people into the Promised Land, so with some of the last public words before his death, he urges them to choose what would lead to the fullness of life for them within that land. After being in a place of wilderness for so long, the prospect of living in a land that was fertile and could more easily provide for the physical needs of the people was an attractive thing. But Moses was interested in more than just how the people would reach the geography of the Promised Land. He wanted them to journey all the way to the promise of God they could find by living a certain way, with a certain spirit within the land.

Now in Dr. King's speech from that night, in the imagery he used, the destination of the Promised Land was full civil rights for all people. Clearly, we've made a bit of progress, but we still haven't gotten all the way to that destination. We still need to keep moving in that direction. But even if there were to be the attainment of full civil rights, there would be more to do to experience the deep richness of life God desires for the human

community. In our passage from Matthew, we hear a small part of Jesus' mountaintop speech that gets called the Sermon on the Mount. As a part of it, he mentions one of the Ten Commandments that forbid murdering someone, which in our day certainly prohibits shooting someone down whether they are standing on a balcony or kneeling in the streets. We see the hellishness that such killing leads to and we see why God has given the Hebrew law as a gift, as a way to move toward God's gift of a richness of life, with the desire for community for all of God's beloved. But then Jesus goes on to say, just refraining from killing a person is not enough. If there is anger and brokenness in the relationship, then that is something else that needs to be done.

There is a story told of a man who had done an exceedingly good deed, and an angel was sent to him to tell him that God wanted to grant him a request as a reward for his good deed. However, God's heart was troubled by the hostility that the man had long harbored against someone else. So the angel was told to offer the man whatever reward he would choose with the caveat that the reward would be given twofold to his enemy. The man pondered the request talking to himself: "Perhaps a bag of gold? No, I can't do that, for then my enemy would have two bags of gold. Perhaps a huge farm with crops and livestock? No, because my enemy would have a farm twice as large. Perhaps I could ask for long life? I won't choose that either because I can't stand the prospect of my enemy dancing on my grave." Finally, the angel said it was time for him to decide. Troubled, the man continued to weigh blessing versus enmity, enmity versus blessing. In the end, unable to free himself from his own bitterness in order to accept God's gracious gift, he announced his choice to the angel, "Make me blind in one eye," knowing that this choice would plunge his enemy into total darkness.<sup>2</sup> The man didn't kill his enemy. He didn't literally break the Ten Commandments. But he certainly was not in touch with the spirit of what God desires for us within a community. God wants more for us than relationships based on enmity and bitterness. Jesus raised the bar higher, saying not only that murder is unacceptable, but that relationships defined by anger or rage are less than the glorious intent God desires for us.

That doesn't mean there isn't reason for anger at times. There is indication that Jesus himself got angry when commandments were used as reasons to block the way toward healing and wholeness. He was told, "It's the Sabbath, a day of rest, Jesus - you can't heal this man today." Jesus got angry about the law being used to further brokenness instead of to bring about wholeness. So he healed the man. He actually violated the letter of the law to live out the spirit of the law. Now in our context, it becomes quite confusing when the spirit of a law is one of bitterness so that the application of that law leads to brokenness instead of the wellbeing of all within the community. It can be a similar kind of challenge as to when there were Jim Crow laws put in place out of a bitter spirit. In such a situation, God wouldn't have us live by the letter or by the spirit of such a law. We are going to have to seek a different Spirit in these times.

Time and again, Jesus tied together the vertical relationship with God with the horizontal relationship with people. Here in this passage, he said someone's relationship with God couldn't be right if their relationship with a sister or brother was impaired. He called upon his followers to seek reconciliation in that human relationship, as part of the quest for a positive relationship with God. We live in contentious times. There are a lot of people angry with one another. We've got to figure out our destination, where we are headed as followers of Jesus Christ. With regards to what he says about murder and anger, it is a good goal to work toward the end to unjustified killings of people by police. And sadly the numbers clearly tell us that a preponderance of those killings are of people of color. But we long for even more than an end to the killings. Jesus calls us to go further than that to work beyond the anger to take steps that are possible toward building positive relationships between law enforcement officials and the communities they are to serve.

We live in contentious times – a lot of people are very angry with one another. We're going to have to work for public policy that is based on a spirit of the desire for the wholeness of life for all the people in the land, which includes seeking to protect those who find themselves most vulnerable. And when there is rancor, when there is anger that we may have toward those with whom we disagree, then we will be called to demonstrate a spirit

defined by love and grace, not by hatred and bitterness. That same spirit will need to guide our actions toward those who are most vulnerable and toward those with whom we may vehemently disagree. It is not to be hatred and bitterness toward one group and love and grace toward another. As followers of Jesus, we are called to exhibit a spirit of love and grace toward all people. That's the choosing of life and wholeness that Moses spoke of, that's the wholeness and choosing of life even by laying down his life that Jesus demonstrated. The goal is to take up residence in God's will, to live guided by God's Spirit – that's the Promised Land. As we move toward that destination, I dare say that we will join Moses and Jesus and Martin in seeing with our own eyes the very glory of the coming of the Lord.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

<sup>2</sup> A story told by Rev. Eileen Lindner. I do not know if it is originally from her or not.