

## What Walls Need to Come Tumbling Down? -- A sermon in honor of Black History Month.

It's been a challenging month. We have uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Tunisia, China ... and Wisconsin and each of the other 49 states. Gas prices are going up, there is talk of a government shut-down in the US., and well, it feels like the whole world is falling apart...

After worship, Ken Anderson may talk about Paul Robeson or the Sacred Conversation on Race, an effort by the United Church of Christ to examine our role and responsibilities in racism. But right now, I want you to think about current events and what walls need to come tumbling down - those in Egypt, Libya, in the USA, in our hearts ... ? And let me also ask you: what do Joshua, Thomas K. Beecher, Paul Robeson, and Martin Luther King, Jr., have in common? What is their message for us today?

First, **Joshua** honored the guidance of God to overthrow the walls of privilege, power, and the status quo. Jericho was heavily fortified and armed, and the story tells us that, with God, all things are possible.

Second, **Beecher** - look at the meditation - do you hear echoes from King's "I Have a Dream" speech? It comes from a pamphlet that he wrote when fundraising for this beautiful building. Perhaps you didn't know that this church - our Park Church - is known as "the first institutional church" in America because of the diverse services that were part of our history - including the first public library, food and medical services for the poor, gymnasium, parlors open to all members, a kitchen that could serve 200, and a sewing circle to provide clothes for the needy. Being church wasn't about being comfortable; it was about serving God through serving each other. Thomas K. Beecher was passionate about the church, living and teaching the connection between worldly justice and God's love for all people. Beecher lived Jesus' moral authority.

Third, **Paul Robeson** - Ask Ken for the details, as this is his passion. The son of an escaped slave who became a revered Presbyterian preacher, Robeson was both an All-American football star *and* the first black actor to portray Shakespeare's Othello alongside an all-white cast. He won a full scholarship to Rutgers University in 1915, was the only black student there, earned a Phi Beta Kappa Society laureate, and was the class valedictorian in 1919.

He then moved to Columbia Law School and paid for it by working as an athlete and performer. He spent much time in England, where the color of his skin was less an impediment to success, and also became involved in human rights wherever he found it, speaking out against racism and anti-Semitism and Nazism wherever he found it. He was a superstar, on the stage, concert hall, and political arena. But as he got more involved in issues of social justice, he was blacklisted for being a Communist, especially after being horrifically misquoted by the press.

He was friends with Max and perhaps Crystal Eastman - the two children of Annis Ford and Samuel Eastman who were the clergy couple following Thomas Beecher. These are the same Eastman children who grew up in this church, sat next to Samuel Clemens in these pews, and learned about the connection between worldly justice and God's love for all people. All three were political socialists, passionate about human rights, and often labeled Communists. All three of them learned about human rights and God's justice here in church. They all tried to live with moral authority.

Last, Dr. Rev. Martin Luther **King, Jr.**: His "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" is up there in historical and theological importance with the four letters that St. Paul wrote from jail. King challenged the weak ministers in much the way that Paul did, exhorting church leaders to greater humility, courage, and purpose. Both of them urged the so-called Christian leaders to live, not just talk the walk.

During St. Paul's time, and King's, and ours, it is commonplace to think of church as a place for *comfort* rather than *challenge*. In contrast, King - like Beecher and Robeson - lived and died for Jesus' moral authority - unlike the tyrants of the middle East and the weak religious and political leaders of our country, all of whom focus on worldly power and personal privilege and dismiss the power of moral authority.

As we look at Black History Month, we acknowledge that racism has been the great sin of our country in a way that misogyny or elitism or religious or political abuse has been elsewhere.

But that, you say, was years ago! *We* are part of Park Church, icon of the abolitionists! Our parents/grandparents were on the right side - on God's side - working to end slavery. *We* weren't racists!

Or *were* we? Or *are* we?

We need to examine institutional vs. personal racism. Example: Once-thriving city of Richmond, CA - before, during, and after WWII. GI Bill and FHA opportunities were only available to whites, who moved away to the suburbs leaving the city to sink lower and lower into poverty. I'm sure the same is true in some parts of New York State. Educational and economic and employment opportunities are NOT available to all. Most of us are privileged and have been all our lives, because of our family and ethnic backgrounds and the color of our skin. The social institutions existed to enhance the status quo. Our culture and political system have allowed us to create walls of privilege and opportunity - but only for some. *Unnatural Causes* featured on PBS featured a story about Richmond, California, where I used to live.

During World War II, the Kaiser shipyards in Richmond ran 24 hours a day. The war effort drew workers of all ethnicities to Richmond. When the war ended, new governmental policies brought sweeping changes to communities like Richmond. As the shipyards closed, thousands of jobs left. So did anyone who could. But only white families could get the new government backed mortgages to buy homes in the new suburbs. Richmond's population fell by a third.

Until 1962, out of \$120 billion dollars in government-backed home loans, less than 2% went to non-white households. In Northern California, between the war and 1960, of 350,000 federally guaranteed new home loans, less than 100 went to black families. That's .02%! In cities like Richmond, African Americans were left behind in increasingly neglected neighborhoods.

Not only did blacks face discrimination once they returned home after the war, the poverty confronting most blacks during the 1940s and 1950s represented another barrier to harnessing the benefits of the G.I. Bill as it made it problematic to seek an education while labor and income were needed at home. The United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), because of its strong affiliation to the all-white American Legion and VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars), also became a formidable foe to many blacks in search of an education because it had the power to deny or grant the claims of black G.I.s. Additionally, banks and mortgage agencies refused loans to blacks, making the G.I. Bill even less effective for blacks.

The Black middle class failed to keep pace with the white middle class because blacks had fewer opportunities to earn college degrees. In addition to the other obstacles, gaining admission to universities was no easy task for blacks on the G.I. Bill. Most universities had segregationist principles underlying their admissions policies, utilizing either official or unofficial quotas. Even if they could gain admission to universities, public education was in such a poor state for blacks that many of them were not adequately prepared for college level work. Those blacks that were prepared for college level work and gained admission to predominantly white universities still experienced racism on campus.

By 1946, only one fifth of the 100,000 blacks who had applied for educational benefits had been registered in college. According to a Brookings Institution report, buying a car in a low-income neighborhood costs as much as \$500 more than in an affluent community. Cashing a check? Add up to 10% more. Furniture, appliances, and even groceries are more expensive. Researchers call this "the poverty tax."

What are the walls that need to come tumbling down? Throughout the Middle East, tyrants and rulers are being overthrown by ordinary folks whose primary weapon is that of moral authority, recognizing the connection between worldly justice and God's love for all people.

What Joshua, Beecher, Robeson and King had in common was an absolute fearlessness in trying to live the gospel of Jesus Christ. What they had in common was an understanding that God's love for the world becomes apparent when there is worldly justice.

As we deal with the national and international challenges facing this world, may we be mindful of those walls we are building up and those we are working to help come tumbling down. For while men can create walls of power and privilege, it's only a question of time before God-fearing people will inspire the rest of us to take up the arms of moral authority to tear them down.

Remember that, with God, all things are possible.