Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day, following closely after his birthday on January 15. King is remembered as a great civil rights leader, perhaps the most important one of all. What is not always included in today’s remembrances is the fact that he was a Christian, an ordained clergy person, whose working for change was deeply rooted in his faith. I think of the Bible saying God does not look on the outward appearance, but on the heart. King said much the same thing when he said, “I have a dream.” And he held up a vision of a color-blind world where people were “judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

Today almost everyone has good things to say about him. But it was not always so. I have memories of seeing King on the news on TV. He was always giving speeches about race and poverty and such, surrounded by lots of other people who seemed very intense and excited. I recall seeing scenes from marches he led, lots of signs being waved, lots of police, lots of turmoil. I remember him being called a rabble rouser. I remember when he was shot dead in 1968. And someone said, “He was asking for it. He was such a rabble rouser.” It seemed wrong to me, but I couldn’t figure out why. It was all pretty confusing to a ten year old boy. Those were different times, and racial equality was not a widely held value. It seems strange today to think of someone calling him a rabble rouser. But…

The Merriam-Webster.com online dictionary defines a rabble rouser as “a person who makes a group of people angry, excited, or violent (such as by giving speeches) especially in order to achieve a political or social goal.” By that definition, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. WAS a rabble rouser.

And so was Jesus. Today it might seem strange to us, but Jesus’ teaching was not always warmly received. In fact, some people got angry, excited, and even violent to the point of trying to kill him. One of those instances was very early on in his ministry. In fact, that was the response to the first teaching of Jesus reported in Luke’s Gospel.

LUKE 4:14-22
Synagogue worship was mostly teaching and prayer.
The custom was the men of synagogue would take turns reading the Scriptures. Then they would sit down and make comments on it.

Today was Jesus’ turn.

He read from the prophecies of Isaiah these verses that were part of the Year of Jubilee. The Year of Jubilee came around every 50 years, a time when land was allowed to lie fallow so it might rejuvenate, a year when debts were forgiven so people might regain their ancestral lands and indentured slaves would be freed.

There is some question as to how fully that practice was ever really lived out. But the Year of Jubilee became a symbol of the Jewish hope for the coming of messiah. So Jesus’ selection of this particular reading from Isaiah would have been well-received. Especially his brief comment that God was bringing the Jubilee to fulfillment.

It raised their hopes. What they did not realize was Jesus was the living fulfillment of these verses. “This scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

If Jesus had just stopped there, everyone would have gone home happy and hopeful, giving him good reviews. “Nice sermon, Jesus.” “Good message.” “The hometown boy has done well.”

If only he had stopped there.

But Jesus didn’t stop there. He began to meddle. Oh, he stuck close to Scripture. But he meddled.

**LUKE 4:23-27**

He pointed back to two stories right out of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. In the first story, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were leading the nation of Israel into idolatry and all sorts of immorality. God send the prophet Elijah to call them to repentance. They fought him every step of the way. So Elijah announced a God-sent drought as punishment. (1Kg.17:1) In the midst of the drought God sent him into Gentile territory to hide out from Ahab and Jezebel. A Gentile widow put him up and fed him. She had almost nothing of her own, on the verge of starvation. but she agreed to put him up and feed him. And because of that, God multiplied her food throughout the drought. And later, when her son died, God worked through Elijah to raise her son from the dead. (1Kg.17:8-24) And Jesus pointedly said, God didn’t send Elijah to any of the people of Israel for shelter. He sent him to this Gentile widow. And she got blessed as no one in Israel did.

Story number two was how the next prophet, Elisha, brought healing to Naaman the Syrian, another Gentile. It’s a funny story, really. Naaman was a commander in the army of Aram,
a powerful and important man.  
But he had leprosy.  
Elisha told him to go dunk himself in the Jordan River seven times.  
Naaman said, “The Jordan? That little muddy creek?  
I’m an important guy.  
My healing should be done in a more significant place than that.  
Like one of our big, impressive rivers back home.”  
Elijah said, “Oh, you can do that.  
But I’m telling you, THIS is where you will be healed.”  
Naaman reluctantly agreed to wash himself in the Jordan River.  
And he was healed.  
And he realized the one true God really was the God of Israel.  
(2Kg.5:1-14)  
Elisha healed Naaman of leprosy.  
But none of the lepers in Israel got such a healing at that time.  
Only this Gentile.  
Two stories from their own Scriptures that showed God extending his grace  
NOT to the people of Israel, but to Gentiles.  
NOT to “people like us,” but to “them.”  
Not to our race, but to their race.  
Jubilee for the people we call “them.”  
Jesus was saying the favor and blessing of God,  
announced in the Isaiah text he had read,  
was not restricted to the Jewish people.  
It was for Gentiles, too.  

As you might expect, this created a bit of a stir.  
LUKE 4:28-30  
These stories did not sit well with Jesus’ listeners.  
In fact, they were enraged by the words of this rabble-rouser.  
Some of them were so mad, they were ready to throw Jesus off a cliff.  
It was sort of like what so often happens in politics today.  
When you don’t like the message,  
but you can’t argue effectively against it,  
the alternative is to get rid of the messenger.  
So we get negative campaigns of character assassination,  
labeling, name-calling, insinuation, and rumors,  
rather than any real discussion of the issues.  
Except in Nazareth they were looking for an actual assassination.  
Let’s throw him off the cliff!  
But somehow, Luke does not tell us how,  
Jesus walked through the crowd and away from them.  
He’s bullet proof… until it is time to die.  
I wonder, were Jesus’ listeners upset because God poured out blessings on Gentiles?  
Or were they upset because God did not do the same for Israelites?  
Or were they upset that Jesus made them see in those stories what they knew to be true,  
but had managed to remain willfully ignorant?  
These were stories from their own Scriptures.  
Bible stories.  
From which Jesus extracted a very real and true point.  
God’s grace is not just for Israel.
God’s care is not restricted to any single group of people.
Not based on nationality, race, gender, income bracket, or social position.
It’s not even focused on those with the right theology or morality.
In the Bible there are stories of God showing love toward all sorts of people.
Non-Jews, pagans, adulterers and prostitutes, thieving tax collectors,
unclean shepherds, and even soldiers in enemy forces.
It’s all there in the Bible.
But the people of Nazareth didn’t want to hear it.
They wanted to hear what THEY wanted to hear.
And just shut up about the rest of it.
We’ve got to admit that is not a thing of the past.
And it’s not just found among Jews.
It’s alive and well in the church today.
In US today.
How many good church-goers are keeping their noses clean,
ever crossing the line to steal anything,
ever committing adultery,
ever murdering anyone,
living pretty much by the rules…
But we don’t really want to hear what the Jesus says about
envy or materialistic greed.
“Don’t store up for yourselves treasures on earth.
For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Mt.6:19, 21)
We don’t want to hear it,
because Jesus’ words force us to ponder how much saving is too much.
How much of my saving and investing
is simply prudent planning for the future,
and how much is because
I don’t fully trust God to provide?
How much of my buying bigger and better and more
is because I find more joy in stuff than I find joy in the Lord?
Let’s just skip over those teachings.
We don’t want to hear what Jesus says about,
“If you are bitterly angry with someone,
you’ve committed murder in your heart.” (Mt.5:21f)
“If you look at someone lustfully,
you’ve committed adultery in your heart.” (Mt.5:27f)
Or the many times Jesus names divorce as a sin,
the breaking of a sacred covenant.
Jesus said it at least as much as the entire Bible mentions homosexual sex as sin.
But we don’t like to hear that,
because, even if we personally have not gone through a divorce,
all of our lives have been touched by one or more divorces
involving people, good people, nice people,
people we know and love.
And to call that “sin” is just too uncomfortable.
There is plenty in the Bible,
and even in the teaching of Jesus,
that we really do not want to hear.
Of course, we’re not likely to try to throw Jesus off a cliff these days. But we’ll register our complaint with the pastor, or with the Pastor Parish Relations Committee, or even with the District Superintendent or Bishop. We might switch churches.

Maybe go to one where they tell me how to be happy, healthy and wealthy. Anything to shut out that voice that makes us so uncomfortable. Because I want to hear what I want to hear. That kind of prideful stubbornness can result in spiritual shipwreck.

In the summer of 1986, two ships collided in the Black Sea off the coast of Russia. Hundreds of passengers died as they were hurled into the icy waters below. An investigation revealed the cause of the accident.

It wasn't a technology problem like radar malfunction, or even thick fog. The cause was prideful stubbornness. Each captain was aware of the other ship's presence nearby. Both could have steered clear. But neither captain wanted to give way to the other. Each was too proud to yield first. By the time they came to their senses, it was too late.

Prideful stubbornness, pushing Jesus away because we don’t like what he says, can result in spiritual shipwreck.

But there were some who encountered Jesus’ rabble-rousing challenges and responded differently. Jesus encountered a tax collector named Zacchaeus, despised by his neighbors because he collected money for the occupying Roman government, and collected even more than was required because he could, by law, keep any excess for himself. Jesus’ words shook him so strongly, he paid back everyone he had ever overtaxed. (Lk.19:1-10)

Jesus defended an adulteress against her accusers, who were itching to stone her to death, as the law prescribed. After her accusers drifted away he said to her, “Go and sin no more.” (Jn.8:1-11) And though the Scriptures don’t tell us, the story was told. So I suspect she went away a changed woman.

We have the story of Saul, a vicious persecutor of the church, encountering the risen Christ and being transformed into a planter of churches, preaching Christ, leading people to faith, encouraging their growth.

What is the difference between those who hear Jesus challenge and push him away, and those who hear him and are changed?

One thing. Recognizing Jesus is Lord. Not just saying the words, but really Lord, Lord of all and Lord of your life. It’s the humility to say, “I’m not in charge. He is. He is first in my life. Not me, but Him.”

Or, as Paul said, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” (Ga.2:20)

When Jesus is first in your life, when he’s the one calling the shots, life becomes a new kind of adventure. And blessings abound in unexpected ways.

Booker T. Washington, the renowned black educator, was an outstanding example of this truth.
Shortly after he took over the presidency of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama,
he was walking in an exclusive section of town
when he was stopped by a wealthy white woman.
Not knowing the famous Mr. Washington by sight,
she asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping wood for her.
He had no pressing business at the moment,
so Professor Washington smiled, rolled up his sleeves,
and proceeded to do the humble chore she had requested.
When he was finished, he carried the logs into the house
and stacked them by the fireplace.
A little girl recognized him and later revealed his identity to the lady.
The next morning the embarrassed woman went to see Mr. Washington in his office
and apologized profusely.
He said, "It's perfectly all right, Madam.
Occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor.
Besides, it's always a delight to do something for a friend."
She shook his hand warmly
and assured him that his meek and gracious attitude
had endeared him and his work to her heart.
Not long afterward she showed her admiration
by persuading some wealthy acquaintances to join her
in donating thousands of dollars to the Tuskegee Institute.
You just never know what might come of a humble spirit.
One thing is for sure:
It will result in faithful obedience to Jesus.
Jesus WAS a rabble rouser.
He still is.
How will you respond to him?

Scriptures cited: 1Kg.17:1; 2Kg.5:1-14; Mt.6:19, 21; 5:21f, 27f; 31; Lk.19:1-10; Jn.8:1-11; Ga.2:20