

“Unarmed Truth and Unconditional Love”
January 19, 2025

Isaiah 59:9-15a
Matthew 5:33-37

The University of Iowa has a long tradition of starting the second semester of classes by *not holding* classes. The semester begins on the third Monday in January, which, of course is also the day when we as nation mark the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. So, students, while we’re glad to see you again, remember, there are no classes tomorrow. On Monday and through the annual week-long Celebration of Human Rights, students are encouraged to contribute to a food drive, serve at the Free Lunch Program, and volunteer at Crowded Closet—the kind of things we do here throughout the year.

I often take my cue for preaching on this Sunday from the University’s theme for the week, which this year uses the words of King: “Everybody can be great because anybody can serve.” Those are inspiring words. I had been meditating on them for several week, reflecting on our call to service as individuals and as a congregation.

And maybe I’ll come back to them in the months ahead.

You see, my meditation and preparation were disrupted when I came across King saying: “The church must be reminded that it is not the master *or the servant* of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool.”¹ With the inauguration approaching, it seems that our thoughts today should not be so much about service as about our calling to be our nation’s conscience, guide, and critic.

This, of course, would be the case regardless of whom was being inaugurated.

So, as this Sunday approached, I shifted mental gears and began to think further about the relationship between the church and the state, which, when it is at its best, is always in tension.

To talk about this, I still needed King’s help and turned to the words of his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.”

Unarmed truth.

Unconditional love.

Right, temporarily defeated.

Evil triumphant.

There is much for us to hear in those words.

Now, we often read from the prophet Isaiah during these January days. The light from the stable and the light of the star are fresh in our memory. We notice and give thanks for the extra minutes of daylight that show up this month. So, it seems fitting that the liturgist begins our worship

services in the weeks with those stirring words from chapter 60 of Isaiah: “Arise, shine, for your light has come.” Those words are joyful and triumphant.

The words from Isaiah we heard this morning, however, come, not from chapter 60, but from the previous chapter, 59. And they describe the more troubling reality of right defeated and evil triumphant. “We wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom...we stumble at noon as in the twilight.”

Isaiah connects our own precarious condition in the darkness with this assessment: “Truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking.”

The way toward anything that might called “righteous” is blocked. Our own sense of gloom is frozen in place by the lack of truth.

That public discourse is filled with lies is nothing new. Democrats and Republicans lie. We the people become jaded. We expect nothing else.

But we’ve been through a time of exponentially increased falsehood before and I fear we are moving toward it again.

There were the false accusations against Haitian immigrants in Ohio last summer.

Now, as California fights wildfires, the President-elect tells us that there is not enough water for the effort because the governor is using the water to protect an endangered fish. The truth is that there is enough water, but water system of Los Angeles, like that of Iowa City and everywhere else, is not designed to fight forest fires. And while California’s water policies have nothing to do with the problems Los Angeles faces, Republicans in Congress are following the lead and considering refusal of disaster aid.

And now the President-elect has pivoted from blaming fish to blaming immigrants for the fires, posting a claim that “an illegal immigrant comes and sets your house on fire and the fire department doesn’t have the resources to put it out.”²

Based on the past, my guess is that this will be our future.

Consider for a moment: Lies have consequences.

There are the social and political consequences: Honesty and the trust that honesty engenders are essential for a liberal democracy. Isaiah gives us a vivid warning that a nation so steeped in the absence of truth cannot long endure.

And there are the personal consequences to our own souls: one study showed that our brains become more desensitized with each successive falsehood. The more we lie, the less the brain responds. Even small acts of dishonesty have a cumulative and disastrous effect upon us.

Listen carefully, then, when Jesus calls his followers to an honesty of speaking that demands truthfulness in all words, when he demands that we would be faithful in our commitments. This requires a certain open self-awareness that recognizes our own tendency to, as Isaiah says, “conceive lying words and utter them from the heart.”

With the humility that comes from awareness, one way in which the church, along with other people of faith, serves as the conscience and guide of our nation is by insisting on honesty from those who seek to serve the public good by leading in government. Each one of us individually and all of us together are crucial to this effort.

This is both a demanding charge *and* good news:

The charge is this: *We* are called to honesty in our own speech because we are the ones who can call for and bring about the political honesty that is needed for a liberal democracy to flourish.

The good news is this: *Our* continued expectation of honesty in the public square will set the limits for those who exercise the authority they receive from the people.

We need to find new ways to follow the centuries-old Quaker advice and speak truth to power, especially at a time when many would prefer our silent compliance.

When we speak truth to power, let us also remember that, as the Quakers once told us, we, the people of this nation, are the final reservoir of power in this country and our values and expectations set the limits for those who exercise authority. This is to say, in the United States we need to speak truth not only to those in elected office but also to those of us who put them there—to recover a common, shared reality devoid of conspiracy theories and a nihilistic disregard of truth.

It is easy to stand in a pulpit and speak truth that will never be heard by elected officials. It is easy to stand in Rockwood Hall with a cup of coffee and speak truth that the power elites of our nation will not hear.

All of this is quite easy.

The more difficult task is to speak truth that will be heard by our neighbors, so that they will join us in setting the limits for those who exercise authority.

The more difficult task is to find effective ways to speak truth that will be heard by those who do exercise authority, whose actions affect the lives of millions, who hold the fate of our planet in the balance.

Along with “unarmed truth” we must also show, as King suggests, “unconditional love.” In the section of the Sermon on the Mount that we heard this morning, Jesus is speaking about the nature of love—that it is unconditionally truthful. He calls for a kind of plain-speaking: the truth of a simple yes or no.

Love, scripture tells us, casts out fear—which is a dominating emotion for many these days.

In these days, then, we need to recognize our fear and what it does to us.

We can accept the fact that we are going to be afraid many times in life. Out of that fear can come new solutions, creative responses, and personal growth.

Having courage doesn't mean we won't experience fear, but that fear won't control us. Courage enables us to encounter threats, hatred, disapproval, and contempt without leaving what's right.

If we are going to be to some extent the conscience, guide, and critic of the state, we in the liberal church are called to important work. We used to assume—possibly with some justification—that many outside the church held our values and expectations. We are now called to define and clarify what our values are and learn to speak about them in ways that can persuade others. Following in the way of Jesus Christ, we recognize the intrinsic worth of each individual, in whom we see the image of God. Out of this, we honor and seek to protect human dignity. We seek to create a culture of tolerance, solidarity, and the equal enjoyment of individual rights in our city, state, and nation.

This is not about moral superiority. It is about creating a society that honors each of its members, a society that speaks the truth, a society that seeks the peace that grows from justice.

Yes, we live in gloom.

The shadows of these days, however, are not simply a signal of defeat. John Calvin put it this way: “Though clouds obscure the clear view of the sun, they do not entirely deprive us of its light. So, in our adversity, the rays of God’s grace shine through darkness so that we need not give in to despair.”

We will always struggle, for that is a part of living.

Still, God’s power sustains us in our struggle, so that rather than giving up, we might keep going. We remember the witness of others who show us that even in adversity, even in failure, we can still attempt great things, we can still pursue justice and seek to build up the common good of this nation. We look to the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in our own nation who would not be silent in the face of racial injustice in the North as well as the South.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once spoke of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the great hymn that we will use to conclude our worship this morning, saying that it “gives us the courage to face the uncertainties of the future,” reminding us that “there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil.”

We are not the servants of the state. We in the church are the conscience, guide, and critic of our nation. Let us continue in this task with unarmed truth and unconditional love.

¹ MLKing, “A Knock at Midnight,” in *A Knock at Midnight*, pg. 72

² Dana Milbank, “Starting Monday: The Trump Administration’s Days of Blunder,” *Washington Post*, January 17, 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/01/17/trump-confirmation-hearings-inauguration/>