

Buena Vista UMC - Dr. MLK Jr Sunday, January 15, 2017

Sermon- Rev. Deborah Lee

Scripture: Isaiah 49: 1-7, John 1: 29-42

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to join you today, it is an honor to be invited to reflect with you this Sunday morning, as we celebrate the 88 birthday of Dr. MLK day. The first day of this week filled with so much anticipation, uncertainty and divisiveness in our nation. It is so good to be together.

I want to thank Suzanne for sharing in the Children's message her children's story: *Brave Berta* about Berta Caceres, whose life we think about as one of the many martyrs, like Dr. King. The value and power of children's books cannot be underestimated. I remember, I was introduced to the story of Dr. King...through a children's book when I was 7 or 8. My mom, an immigrant to this country, bought me a children's book through the Scholastic Books order form. The book meant a lot to me as a little Chinese American girl growing up a minority in Ohio in the 1970's.

Whenever Dr. King or the civil rights movement is mentioned, I feel it is important to acknowledge and express gratitude for the many ways in which that movement of racial and social justice benefited me.

I wouldn't be here as there would have not have been a pathway of migration and citizenship for immigrant families like mine who came after 1965. This was only made possible because of the Immigration Act of 1965 which eliminated racially biased immigration quotas. Also in the many ways that desegregation, fair housing policy, employment rights, and educational rights shaped the outcomes in my family's life.

Today, I have been asked by the worship committee to reflect on Dr. King's speech: *A Time to Break Silence (Declaration Against the Vietnam War)*.

The National Council of Elders, of which Rev. Phil Lawson is a part, issued an invitation to all faith communities to collectively reflect and study this speech by Dr. King on the 50th year of its writing. Not his "I have a Dream" or "I Have Seen the Mountain Top" speech, one of the more popular speeches, but actually his most controversial one.

This speech was denounced by 168 papers and caused him to lose privilege with Lyndon B. Johnson and the White House, and lost him his popularity with the American public. After the speech, 2/3 rd of Americans were against him, including 55% of Black folks. It also cost him his life ... one year to the date this speech was given.

Unfortunately, this is not the speech kids learn in school this week (an ongoing part of the silencing). But it should be, because it contains more information about the Vietnam War than in our school history books. It should be, because if we substitute every time the word Vietnam appears, with the country Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine or Honduras, the words would still ring true today and they would be just as controversial.

What is in this speech which got him killed? What was in this speech so dangerous & threatening that others wanted to silence him?

In this time of epiphany and revelation could it be because he revealed how war is *always* an enemy of the poor: the poor in this country and the poor in other countries?

Could it be because he names what everyone outside this country knows, but people within this country have trouble admitting: that the US government is “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world?”

Could it be because he challenges the very institution of militarism, and its function to protect international investments and profits?

Could it be because he calls forth Christians to move beyond the narrow allegiance to US patriotism and nationalism, to the vision of God’s much bigger family -with brothers and sisters of all races and nationalities – far beyond our borders and flag?

Could it be because he shines a floodlight on the triplet of racism, materialism and militarism so embedded in our countries’ history?

Could it be because he prophesies that our country cannot have integrity, cannot be on the right side of history, if we do not undergo a radical revolution of values away from these 3 evils?

He said if we didn’t do it, we would be bound to find ourselves in the same place 50 years later. And although many have worked hard trying...maybe it was not enough of us, and maybe if they had not taken him away from us we could have made more progress.... but here we are-- 50 years later and he was right.

We are still at war in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria and threatening to go to war with North Korea, perhaps Russia?...perhaps China? We have 800 US military bases in foreign countries across the globe. Domestically, we see the rise of white supremacy, Islamophobia, rape culture, police shootings of unarmed African Americans, mass deportations of immigrants, homeless people and families living under the freeways, and millions who may once again be without healthcare. I want to cry out like in the reading from Isaiah 49, “....Have we labored in vain? Have we spent our strength for nothing?”

Just before Christmas, 13 of us from our 2016 Root Causes of Migration delegation returned from Honduras. We began going two years ago in response to the influx of migrant families, unaccompanied minors coming from Central America. We felt it was our moral imperative to not only address the need locally, but to ask more deeply why were they coming? What were the conditions and root causes forcing people to leave? Two of the families living in our Casa Nueva Esperanza transitional house came from Honduras. We realized that most of us knew very little about Honduras.

I’d like to share with you a brief sketch of what we witnessed and learned. In fact, what Dr. King outlines as the root causes of the Vietnam War, we can also say are the same root causes of forced migration to Honduras: The same underlying causes, the triplet of Racism, Militarism, and Materialism.

First, materialism, which I translate to greed and impoverishment of people and entire countries. Honduras is a rich country. It is rich in fertile agricultural land, precious minerals, and natural resources. Its richness is evident in the number of companies and corporations who are there seeking to enrich themselves from the natural resources. But while Honduras is a rich country, Honduras are one of the economically poorest peoples in the world.

Land has been systematically taken and stolen and given to the 10 richest families in Honduras and international corporations to be used for export and mineral extraction. Since the coup in 2009, 127 Hydroelectric dam permits have been granted to extract and export electricity to

countries further north. 950 Mining permits for gold, silver and other precious metals have been granted without the prior consent of affected communities, many indigenous. Mining in Honduras is only taxed at 1%, with global corporations taking 99% of the revenue.

Land defenders, like Berta Caceres, coming from indigenous and peasant communities who are fighting to stay on their land, trying to keep their mountains and rivers sacred and holy find their lives are threatened. This past year (2016), in Honduras, 32 human rights and land defenders were murdered. Berta is just one of many.

The second underlying cause is Racism. How many of you know very much about Honduras – have read a book about it or been there. The fact that most Americans generally know very little about Honduras and yet they know everything about us, has something to do with racism. Whose story matters? Whose history matters? Racism has something to do with the unequal 100 year relationship of colonization and US meddling of Honduras' internal affairs to protect US banana commercial interests & other economic investments. Racism has something to do with the way in which the ancestral lands of indigenous and black Hondurans are being robbed and taken from them by their own government and foreign companies in the biggest transfer of indigenous lands. More recently, racism has something to do with the coup in 2009, endorsed by the US with blatant disregard of Honduran sovereignty, democracy and human rights.

The third underlying pillar is militarism. This refers not just to the 5000 new military police since the coup which have now been deployed on city streets of Honduras, but to the cooperation and funding by the United States, under the pretext of fighting gangs and drugs. US military funding in Honduras funds, equips and trains special forces who seem only effective protecting special interests and resources. Dona Berta, Berta's mother, whom we met- called it a "shameful contradiction" that the troops whom you see everywhere in Honduras have the newest boots and most expensive equipment, in such a poor country like Honduras, where some children don't even have shoes. More guns and weapons and tanks funded by our tax dollars, has instead meant greater criminalization and assassinations of union workers, activists, and land defenders, and done more to protect private resources than to combat drugs or illicit activity.

As result of this triplet of impoverishment, racism and militarism, there is a steady wave of displacement and migration. In Honduras, every family has someone in their family working here in the US and sending money back. Every day, several hundred Hondurans leave to join them. Every day, two plane loads and several hundred Hondurans are deported back from the US and Mexico. And still people risk their lives on the journey.

Militarization not only describes a root cause, but it is also the militarized framework by which our country has approached the movement of migrants. Not as a humanitarian crisis or a result of faulty economic and social policy, but as a national security issue requiring a militarized response.

Immigration is essentially "illegal" for almost all Central Americans. An avocado has more rights to migrate, than an avocado picker. Crates of T-shirts sewn in Honduras can migrate but not the seamstress of those shirts.

We have militarized borders to make sure she doesn't come or to make it so life threateningly dangerous it might be a deterrent. We have militarized our borders, built 1100 miles of wall, have

42,000 immigrant detainees and last year over 230,000 annual deportations. All this costing \$18 billion annually to support this apparatus. This does not include what we have begun to pay Mexico (\$82 million annually) to catch and deport Central American migrants for us. All this has not addressed the root cause and it has only meant that migration has become more expensive and more lucrative for those who profit from it.

Where it used to cost \$3000 per person to pay someone to take you north, it now costs \$10-12,000 with people getting paid off on every step of the journey. Migrants have become a commodity who can be kidnapped for ransom, charged a head tax on, prostituted, labor trafficked, and sold for their organs. If they get to the US, where they may be detained for weeks or years, they generate revenue for local county and private detention centers to the tune of \$159/ per person a day. (It costs us \$6.5 million a day)

If they get released on bond or bail, they may find work under the table because our law doesn't allow them to legally work, where they are often afraid to report abusive employers when they are short changed, not paid, or otherwise exploited.

By making immigration illegal, we have created a billion dollar business on the backs of people forced to flee out of desperation.

Rich people get a visa and buy a \$700 plane ticket. Poor people pay \$12,000 and come the only way they can. There is a trade of human beings going on today.... with people paying their own way. People forced to pay for their own enslavement, by selling off land, and promising their indentured servitude.

I'm sharing about Honduras- but this could also easily be Palestine or the Philippines, or many other places in the world.

One our Pilgrimage, one of the key holy places we wanted to go on this trip, was to the River Gualcarque - Berta's river. There is a story why we wanted to go. Fr. Melo, our host and Jesuit friend in Honduras whose organization supported Berta and many of the social movement organizations in Honduras told the story of him going to visit the community engaged in the 3 year struggle to defend the Rio Gualcarque from the hydroelectric dam project. Berta would tell him, "It's not enough to come to the meeting and talk. You have to go see the river.

So it was at the top of our agenda. We must go and see the River. We didn't know how difficult it would be to get to the river. Two- three hours on a very difficult windy, muddy, rocky, mountain road. Then 1 hour on foot down a little path. We could see the big scar on the mountain where dam construction had begun- but because of the community's resistance had been stopped, at least for now.

To the river we went. Accompanied by the children of the town and the men with machetes. Many of the women stayed to cook lunch on an open pit at the site of the blockade.

Then, suddenly we could hear it. The River, with beautiful giant rocks. That is what "Gualcarque" means. River with the big rocks. Much like the name Standing Rock- their kindred struggle.

It was beautiful and cold. We brought our holy water. We had to know what they loved, what they were trying to save, what they were willing to give their life for. Tomas Gomez- the person who was elected to succeed Berta as coordinator of the indigenous network committed to fight against the mining and hydroelectric concessions after she was assassinated in March, said, "Jesus

came to denounce the masters of the law. Jesus came to earth- knowing that it would lead to crucifixion. When People become members of COPINH, they know they will die.“

Saving the River- It was not just for their little community – it definitely is, but we realized their commitment to defend the river and the planet – is a sacrifice and gift for all of us as well.

The Gospel reading from John- tells us of John’s account of Jesus’ baptism. Twice he calls Jesus the “lamb” – a reference to the symbol of Passover – a reminder of the liberation and deliverance of the people by God. When we point to Jesus, we are pointing to liberation from slavery and oppression. Salvation that is not just personal, but structural, societal. Transforming the whole Jericho road.

The story of Jesus’ baptism is an invitation to each one of us to get in the river. To get wet, to take off your shoes, roll up your pants. Or just jump in with your clothes on. To be changed and transformed, to be part of the transformation of society. To be baptized in the Holy Spirit. To say “I’m all in.”

It is an invitation to have moral courage in this time. To be willing to be controversial. To maybe lose friends. To have difficult conversations with people at work or family members. It is Time to break the silence.

Later in the reading, Jesus meets some of his disciples to-be and asks: What are you looking for? And the disciples answer: Where do you live?

I have no idea why they answer the question so strangely. But maybe the only thing that matters is they were looking for Jesus, they wanted to walk with him, eat with him, breathe with him.

Jesus is unphased by their non-sequitor answer. He says. Come and See. Get to know me. Come close, and follow. Walk together with me.

I was thinking how sometimes when we are receiving and welcoming immigrants and migrants we too ask the wrong questions. Maybe it’s not that important to ask: Who are you? Why have you come here? Why are they trying to deport you? ...Maybe we should be asking. Have you eaten? Would you like a cup of tea? Or as in the book of John: What are you looking for? Where do you live?

And what if they like Jesus said: Come and See. Come close and see our reality. Come get to know us. See how we live.

Just about a year ago...BV braved those questions with Estela and Otto’s family. What are your looking for? Where do you live, you asked?

Where they lived, was with 3 other families in East Oakland in a rental that was burned out by fire. They were looking for a place they could afford to stay out of cold. They were a newly reunited families, and Estela and the children needed accompaniment with their legal case. They were looking for a place to start life anew again.

I want to thank Buena Vista for taking a radical step. Sometimes discipleship require us to get personal. It’s not just about giving money or advocating from a distance, but opening our homes and congregations. It says: Come close. Let us get to know you. It requires us to open ourselves. To be more intimate, to be vulnerable to be transformed.

This is the work faith communities are being called into- during this time. Immigrant communities have already lived through a time of massive numbers of deportations, family detentions and challenges for new migrants in the past few years- now we know and anticipate they will be targeted in even harsher and more vicious ways.

We are being called to commit to walk alongside. We don't know everything that will happen, but we are asking congregations as an expression of sanctuary to say - YES - we will stand with you, we will be together, to know you, to accompany, to follow you.

We are called to accompany and to learn what they are dealing with, what they are struggling with. This will look like accompaniment and housing, protecting those facing deportation, advocating for policies (such as the City of Alameda's Sanctuary City policy) that will help protect people from easily getting turned over to ICE and that will help them people not retract, but continue to participate in the life of our community. And organizing rapid response when people are under threat of being taken away.

It is possible that by doing so, by association, we could be labeled illegal too. We could be targeted, and be called criminal or terrorist too. There are risks to stepping into the River. But to follow Jesus means, to throw our lot with him and whom he loves. To say- I'm with Jesus. I'm with immigrants.

The Children's book I alluded to about Dr. King, the page that is seared in my memory, is the last page in the book. It is the image of Dr. King in front of a great river of people, stretching out so far, you could barely make out their faces. Like Moses leading the Hebrew people out of slavery. Can you picture it? The strength and power of such a river of people.

What gives me hope today.... is the river of people standing behind Dr. King. All those who joined him and those who come after him. The people whose names and faces we do not know. People for whom standing up to unjust laws of segregation and going to jail meant, losing a job, not paying the rent, being separated from your family, being blacklisted. The everyday people who stood up and were willing to make sacrifices. Every day people like those in Berta's community in Honduras. Every day people like you and me.

The image says, even as beaten down and worn out as some of us may be, if we can come together, walk together, work together, stand together, sacrifice together...hold each other up -- we can resist and transform structural evil and violence in the world. And if we can't do it all in our lifetime, we pass on the torch to the folks that are coming behind us.

The words of Dr. King calls us in his Beyond Vietnam speech: "These are the times of real choices and not false ones. We are at the moment where our lives must be placed on the line if our nations is to survive its own folly. Every person of humane convictions must decide on the protest that best suits his convictions, but we must all protest."

We are called to be the river of people standing together...the River of people following the dream. The River of people not afraid, not giving up hope. The River of people willing to lay down their lives, lift up their voices, put their bodies on the line so that "justice may roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Come on down to the River. Come and get in.