

**Mark 1:29-39**  
**Isaiah 40:21-31**  
*“The Two Kinds of People”*

January 28, 2018  
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The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard says there are two kinds of people in the world: those who are willing but cannot and those who are able, but will not. Kierkegaard is talking about the difference between those who look upon the world and see what is broken and say, I would fix this if I could, and those who look upon that same world and say, I could fix this but I don't want to be bothered. For a long time now, I have thought that there are only two kinds of people: those who believe the world is getting better and those who believe the world is getting worse. I suppose there might also be a third kind of person, the one who believes the world and everything about it is never going to change. We've heard it said, the more things change the more they stay the same. We can make peace, but there's always going to be another war to fight. We can pass civil rights legislation but it doesn't make us give up our privilege for the sake of equality. We have admitted to our part in allowing the Holocaust and said with resolve, “never again,” but we know what happened in Rwanda and what is happening in Myanmar and Syria today. Even Jesus seemed to understand the complexity and utter impossibility of building a world free of these things. “For you always have the poor with you,” he tells us. There is always going to be someone with a need greater than your own. In such a world, what is there to make us believe that things aren't just staying the same, or getting worse, but actually getting better? In a world where we always have the poor with us, what incentive is there to try and make a world where there are no poor? I think a lot about this question because I believe it is at the core of our being as a church to work for a better world. Except I also know—a little bit—what it takes to bring that world about. After Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed at the age of 39 and an autopsy was performed on his body, it was revealed that his heart was like that of a 60-year old. The toll it took on him to march, to protest, to work out his dream of that better world where you are judged not by the color of your skin but by the content of your character. When asked why he kept at it, he

famously responded, “I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.”<sup>1</sup>

In a speech delivered to the Southern Convention of Christian Leadership in Atlanta in 1967, Dr. King acknowledged that,

In this decade of change, [we have] stood up and confronted the oppressor. [The black person faced] the bullies and the guns, and the dogs and the tear gas... [Yet, we] came out of this struggle integrated only slightly in the external society, but powerfully integrated within.

Dr. King knew back then what we are still coming to know now, that a better world comes not only by changing whole systems of society to make them work for everyone, but ultimately, a better world comes only by being integrated, by being put together right, ourselves from within.

Now someone will point out that in order to make a better world, isn't it necessary that we first know what “better” looks like. For this one over here will say this and that one over there will say that and...what a world! This is why I don't believe in a world where one nation or country gets to be first and call all the shots. I understand the need we have in our own country today to better care for the needs of our citizens, to provide kids with more teachers and teachers with more money and supplies, and to make sure the sick not only get the medical care they can afford but also the care they need. That we need sensible protections at our borders and in our neighborhoods to keep drugs and crime away from our homes and children, and that we all want to feel like we are part of a country where everyone is doing their part to make it better, but it doesn't work to say that we'll be better when we are first. Nor does it work to say, as we have heard some say, that every country and every person should want to be first.

We know from hearing the story of Jonah this morning that those who would be first do not, in the end, get what they want. “Get up Jonah, go to Ninevah,” God directs him.

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<sup>1</sup> From his speech, “Where Do We Go From Here?” Delivered at the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual SCLC Convention, Atlanta, GA, 8/16/67.

“That city has become so overrun with sin and wickedness. Preach your best judgment sermon to them. Tell them I’m watching and I’ve had enough.”

Jonah, we know, was a Hebrew. The Hebrew people had a history of being enemies with the Ninevites, and so it shouldn’t have been too difficult a sermon for Jonah to preach. Go to Ninevah, announce the winners and losers, and then sit back and wait for the lightning bolt to strike. Except when Jonah gets the call from God, rather than go to Ninevah, Jonah gets on a boat and heads away from Ninevah. And why? It’s simple really. Jonah is a Hebrew, which means that in addition to belonging to a country and having a national identity, he also belongs to God. As he tells his shipmates, “I worship the Lord, the God of all creation.” Uh oh, you mean Jonah’s God is *not only* Jonah’s God but also the God of all creation, who must care not only for Jonah and the Hebrews but also for the people of Ninevah. So Jonah doesn’t go to Ninevah at first. How can I go to Ninevah and preach that I’m #1 when I know that’s just not true? God has a way, though, of turning even the most proud of heart and when Jonah does eventually arrive in Ninevah to preach his sermon, and the congregation hears it, they change their ways. They turn from evil to God, and God, God of course turns to them. And Jonah, Jonah turns away from the whole thing. He goes out of the city and finds a lonely hillside to sit on all by himself and there he sulks.

“I knew you wouldn’t go through with punishing the people of Ninevah, God, you who are slow to anger and abounding in love. But if you weren’t going to do it, why then did you go and bring me all the way out here?”

Jonah never receives an answer to his question. The story of Jonah just ends rather abruptly, with Jonah still sitting there in Ninevah having to think about his next move, but I think God’s point is clear: the world is getting better, but to see that you first have to go spend time in those places where everything is death and hopelessness. If the world is going to get better Jonah had to go there, you have to go there, we have to go there together, because the world looks different over there. Over there the stranger is simply the person who has yet to become our friend; the enemy the one who has yet to receive our compassion; the needy the one who simply have yet to receive our generosity. Something happens when we give up our first place standing to go stand with those who are in last—we ourselves become less afraid, more hopeful. We ourselves become better human beings.

I read a story recently about a time when Fred Rogers, better known to all of us as Mister Rogers, went to New York City and got caught in the rain. He didn't have an umbrella, and he couldn't find a taxi, either, so he ducked with a friend into the subway and got on one of the trains. It was late in the day, and the train was crowded with children who were going home from school. Though of all races, the schoolchildren were mostly black and Latino, and they didn't even approach Mister Rogers. They just sang. They sang, all at once, all together, the song he sings at the start of his program.<sup>2</sup>

It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood  
A beautiful day for a neighbor  
Could you be mine?  
Would you be mine?  
Won't you be my neighbor?

Mother Theresa diagnosed the world's problem in this way: we've just forgotten that we belong to each other.

I've been drawing from Martin Luther King Jr. this morning, which seems appropriate. I'm not sure there's ever been another person who saw himself as belonging to the "other" more than he did. In one of his final public addresses ever, he took a moment to reflect on what he would want to have said at his funeral someday. This is what he came up with. Listen:

"If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. And every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that I tried to love

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<sup>2</sup> Junod, Tom (April 6, 2017), from "Esquire Magazine" and the article entitled, "*Can you say...hero?*"

somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. *Yes, if you want to say that I was first, say that I was first in love, first in justice and in peace.*<sup>3</sup>

There are at least two kinds of people in this world: those who believe the world is getting better and those who don't. My friends, in the spirit of brother Martin and of Jesus himself, be the first kind. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> From his sermon, "The Drum Major Instinct," preached 2/4/1968. The *italics* is my addition, to keep with the wording of my own sermon. Dr. King's original wording was, "Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace."