

UNDERSTANDING AND BEFRIENDING THE PAST  
Sermon on the Sunday Celebrating the Conversion of St. Paul  
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William Faulkner once wrote “The past is never dead, it isn’t even past.”

This morning we gather together to celebrate someone from the distant past (St. Paul) and to remember someone from the recent past (Martin Luther King). I think this is an appropriate pairing since, after all, they were both troublesome men who shared traits like vision, pragmatism, thought, and eloquence while being inconveniently truthful as well.

Remember that in Paul’s letter to the Galatians (2:11-13) we have a description of a face-to-face encounter with St Peter and it is not diplomatic. Evidently, Peter is visiting Paul in Antioch and he is “eating with Gentiles” daily until some of James’ men arrive from Jerusalem. At which point, Peter returns to his kosher diet. For Paul, Peter’s behavior is hypocritical and he flat out says so. No doubt—Paul was a troublesome man.

But what about Dr. King? He is, after all, one of the great saints of the twentieth century, not only a Christian leader but also a martyr who died in a struggle for the soul of this country. Well, I don’t know about you, but I find his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* a hard pill to swallow. Even now, more than fifty years later, when I read this document addressed to “moderate clergy” ...It makes me squirm.

As you may recall, Martin King wrote the letter from prison following a public declaration from his southern colleagues that he was pushing too hard... going too fast in Birmingham. The Rev. Dr. King’s letter responds by holding those clergy accountable for their complicity in racism and for their inaction in the face of an evil which they recognize as wrong. In the letter, Dr. King even compares himself to St Paul, saying: “As ...Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the Gospel to the far corners of the...world, so I am compelled to carry the Gospel of freedom.”

So why do I pair these difficult men from the past today? Because I believe that together their stories teach us that there is nothing we can do to change the past except to try to understand and befriend it. “For the past is never dead, it isn’t even past.” And both Paul and Martin Luther King are real influences in our lives today. They who were troublesome and inconveniently truthful call us to a closer walk with Jesus, who would go to any length to restore our community with God and neighbor.

That brings me to a story, it is a story we have all heard.

Once upon a time, more than 150 years ago in Ossining, there was a church named after the Apostle Paul. And in that church, there was strife. Although we do not know all the particulars of the story, we do know that within its walls there was strife. We do know the Civil War had ended and the clergy of the parish leaned toward the cause of the South. We know that some people felt tied to him and his cause and message while others did not. So, the community split. Ant to this day, that 150-year-old story makes us in this church squirm. So much so, that between the sister parishes, we don’t talk about it! Because, on some level we feel that “the past isn’t past.” But, if that is so, if the past is in the room, don’t we need to befriend that old story in order to be free of it? After all, we are not those people. We are not those people.

We are neither the “sinners” nor the “saints” of that old tale.

We are another group, two sister parishes who are going to great lengths in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to restore our sense of community with God and one another. But in order to turn this page, in order to write our own history, we need to appropriate the squirminess of OUR old story. Because, squirminess isn't necessarily bad. In fact, in his Birmingham letter, Dr King admits to promoting tension. "Constructive nonviolent tension," he says, "is necessary for growth." And look! Lucky us! We have tension built right into our common story.

So let's not waste it. But how do we use it? Well, that brings me back to the Rev. Martin. Over and over, he taught the Christian lesson of love. And love is the only protection we have in handling the squirminess of our common past. In his doctoral thesis, King wrote about the three kinds of love which humanity shares.

First, *eros* or the love of desire. This first level expresses an acquisitive "we want". We want... romance...or recognition...or power...or even to be better people. So, *eros* is not bad, it is just basic.

Now, second we have *filios*, which Dr. King calls "reciprocal love." "I love you because you love me." We share a mutual connection. It is less basic, more altruistic. In the case of *filios*, we will extend ourselves for the beloved. But still, there is a payoff in the love returned.

Finally, the third level of love, *agape*. This, he tells us, is the most powerful. It means really following the path of Jesus by "going to any lengths to restore community with God and one another," up to and including death.

We, in this church today, absolutely have both *eros* and *filios*. We want to be closer to God and we share respect and love for our sister parish. Those things are "givens" in our lives. But in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have been issued a call, a call to *agape*, that third level of love. We have received a call to go to any lengths to develop a closer community with God and one another. It **is** our way forward and it is blessed, and it will turn the page on our squirmy history.

Charles Péguy, a French poet, once said "when we come to the gates of heaven, we shall be asked a single question. "*Ou sont les autres?*" "Where are the others?" Because we cannot be saved alone. Salvation is a joint effort.

So, does that mean that making friends with our history will consign us to an eternity of holding hands and singing *kumbaya*? No—though I can think of worse things. Befriending our common history will empower us to create a history of our own, whatever that may look like.

Think of St. Paul, who, after he was knocked from his horse, took his whole history with him as he went to any lengths to build community with God and neighbor. Think of MLK who raised the tension in his time to fight for the soul of this entire nation, black and white.

The road to salvation has many faces and many paths and offers a good deal of squirminess along the way. But if we follow it, we will learn to make fast friends with our past, with our God, and with one another.

May God bless you and keep you and make his face to shine upon you and give you peace.

Amen.