

Epiphany 7
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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Rev. Paul Moore

Conversion

One of the most influential people in the United States during the 20th century was surely the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His thought was formed by his own tradition, culture, race, education, and experience. I have heard that the writings of James Baldwin were one of the influences on his thinking. Until I heard that, I had never heard of James Baldwin—a telling testament to my education—but he was an amazing writer.

One of his best-known works, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, is gritty, raw, and brutally honest window into the African American working poor in the 1950's New York City. He takes you waist-deep into the psyche of his protagonist, John. You hear his deep feelings of joy, shame, fear, and rage. You watch as he negotiates those feelings in the context of the realities of the day. At one point, John and his mother are talking. “You think that’s all that’s in the world is jails and churches? You ought to know better than that, Ma.”

“I know,” she said, “there ain’t no safety except you walk humble before the Lord. Baldwin, James. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Vintage International) (p. 18). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

In another place, John, “nearly wept to think that so much labor brought so little reward.” Baldwin, James. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Vintage International) (p. 20). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

At the end of the book, nothing has changed in the painful family dynamics or social context, but by the sheer airing of his wounds, John feels optimistic, like he's on the way to—somewhere... It has been noted that this book is largely autobiographical. The "somewhere" turned out to be France in an attempt to escape the limitations of his race in New York. Though he was chronically poor, in the end, he found what he was looking for. He died in a house of his own in the south of France, a place that became his refuge. Time featured Baldwin on the cover of its May 17, 1963, issue. "There is not another writer", said Time, "who expresses with such poignancy and abrasiveness the dark realities of the racial ferment in North and South."

Perhaps he summarizes it well when he wrote elsewhere, "It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have."

As I read the lessons for today, I hear a very different tone. In the first lesson, Joseph is reunited with his brothers. If you recall the story, they had sold him into slavery out of jealousy over his father's favoritism for him and his arrogant-sounding dreams. He had risen to power unbeknownst to them, to where he was second-in-command in Egypt. As

years of drought blasted the food supply across the ancient Middle East, due to Joseph's prudence, there was food in Egypt. The brothers go to buy food and find themselves dealing with their brother in disguise. After many ins and outs, it comes to this moment when he reveals himself to them and is reconciled. It's a heart-warming story.

In the second lesson, Paul unpacks a theological idea. Resurrection is not resuscitation. Resurrection means transformation. Just like a seed is caught up into the plant it produces, and yet the plant is so much more than the mere seed, in resurrection, the old is caught up in the new, which at once includes and surpasses it. When we claim that we trust in the Resurrection of Jesus, we stake our claim on the idea that the end result is greater than the sum of the parts, that transcendence is really our destiny. What a beautiful thought.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus continues his teaching of his disciples. He lays out for them a pattern of behavior that cuts across the patterns of the day. Love your enemies. Turn the other cheek. Give more than what is asked for. Do for others what you would have them do for you—the Golden Rule. Then he tells them why. Everybody hates their enemies. Nobody turns the other cheek. Nobody gives more than what they are asked of, and as a race, we tend to do unto others BEFORE they do unto us. To transcend that you have to do something different. The way things are does not determine what we do. We must move beyond it, set another bar for ourselves, one in keeping with the Kingdom of Heaven. Finally, he promises them something seemingly impossible. If you do this the world will respond. You will be forgiven as you forgive. You will receive as you give. You will be judged as you judge. Goodness will multiply and come back to you many times over.

Compared to the grit of Baldwin, these words of Jesus sound almost Pollyanna, but actually, the two themes, one shown in our lessons and one in Baldwin, are both present in Scripture. Up against the sunshine of today's glad promises, there are stories of slavery, betrayal, exile, and grief, whose pain is heard in Psalm 130, and other psalms of lament: “Out of the depths I cry to you Lord,” and “How long, O Lord, how long?” This is the human condition. We have brokenness, and we have hope. They both live within us in dynamic tension. It places us in a unique position in the cosmos. We are not OK, but we can change, and we can hope for change. The very tension pushes us onto the path. The very tension is ultimately the only door to redemption, to transcendence.

Where does that leave us? In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus calls on us to take up the journey. Separation, retaliation, oppression, these are all things that we do instinctively. Our lizard brain reacts to a threat by lashing out, hitting back harder than we were hit. It's driven by fear, not by love. It may feed the ego, but it starves the spirit. The journey takes us out of the lizard brain and into the heart. We choose to do differently than what the knee-jerk response might be. We choose to give, we choose to forgive, we choose to be generous, we choose not to judge. These things are hard at first because we have to rewire our brains to listen to the Spirit and follow the path of love rather than reaction.

Richard Rohr has an image that I like about this. He says that we either reflect or absorb energy from our world. What is reflected goes back out into the world leaving us largely unchanged. The world is changed though, for that energy, whatever it is, gathers momentum every time it is reflected, and it careens off out into the world to do what it will do.

What is absorbed becomes part of us. It changes us, but also, only here can it be changed itself. Jesus' words call us to absorb and transform energy before releasing it out into the world again. If it is positive energy, let it build you up first, for in so doing you will increase your capacity for it. If it is negative energy, absorb it in order to stop its destructive path through the world. Dig into it and find the jewels there, the fear hiding something beautiful, and pull out the treasure. Like Jesus on the Cross, who takes the sin of the world and turns it into our salvation, share the jewels with the world, not the fear, and let them careen down through the ages to work their magic.

This is not Pollyanna. Joseph tells his brothers in the first lesson today that God had used their horrific abuse of selling him into slavery to preserve life. In South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, victims of horrific brutality and perpetrators of that brutality faced one another, each, finally able to share their story. In enough cases to astound the world, just being able to do that enabled the two parties to see the humanity in one another, find empathy, forgive, and rebuild a nation. In the 1980s in south San Antonio, TX, older men who had been leaders of gangs began to gather to build a truce to stop the violence. And as far as I know, it is still holding. The Episcopal Church of San Francisco is involved in that.

It's been done before. It can happen again.