

“Church-Lighting Faith”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

05 February 2023

Rev. Paulo G. França

Texts: Psalm 112

Matthew 5:13-20

‘You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world’

~ Matthew 5:13a,14a

Prayer

Living God,

May your Word proclaimed today be a light to our feet

And nourishment for our souls.

In the name of the One who is your Word in human flesh

And a Light to humankind,

Even Jesus Christ, our Teacher, we pray. Amen.

“I am a Man.” These were the words written on the placards carried by striking sanitation workers and allies in Memphis, Tennessee on March 29th, 1968. Frustrated by the dehumanizing and enduring discrimination they faced daily at work and angered by the deaths of two garbage collectors who were crushed by a malfunctioning truck compactor, the sanitation workers, all of them Black, walked off their jobs on February 12th to peacefully demand for better working conditions and fair pay. Two days later, the mayor of Memphis Henry Loeb III declared the strike to be unlawful and ordered the workers to return to work. Despite the loss of income and brutal police repression, the strikers decided that they would no longer allow a racist society to continue to see and treat them as anything less than human beings. This is what those words ***“I am a Man”*** meant, ***“I am a Human Being.”*** When they finally went on strike, the Black sanitation workers of Memphis were not just asking for a few more dollars to be added to their paychecks; they were standing up for their humanity.

Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was organizing the Poor People’s Campaign at the time of the strike, and he went to Memphis to support the strikers’ cause. King had become more outspoken about the economic injustice that kept Americans of all backgrounds in poverty. In Memphis, he said to a crowd of at least 25,000 that the sanitation workers were reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich country and receive starvation wages. And Rev. King made an unqualified link between civil rights and economic justice when he asked, ***“What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee? What does it profit one to be able to attend an integrated school when he doesn’t earn enough money to buy his children school clothes?”***ⁱ

The bold stand for racial and financial justice in Memphis became King's final struggle for human dignity and equality in America. On April 3rd, 1968, he returned to the city of Memphis to stand in solidarity with the sanitation workers who were by then striking for 52 days. At the Mason Temple, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his last sermon. He challenged the gathered community to practice a "**dangerous unselfishness**" and leave work, school and other commitments to show concern for the people who were marching and carrying those signs with the simple words that history will not forget, "***I am a Man.***" King, the preacher, preached to his congregation about the rightness of their struggle. He declared, "***We aren't engaged in any negative protest and in any negative arguments with anybody. We are saying that we are determined to be men [human beings]. We are determined to be people... we've got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end. Nothing would be more tragic than to stop at this point in Memphis. We've got to see it through... either we go up together, or we go down together.***"ⁱⁱ The next day, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

Even after King's death, the city of Memphis still refused to concede to the demands of the Black sanitation workers, choosing instead to call in the state police and the National Guard to enforce a curfew. The killing of a Black man, even of a Black man of the stature of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was not enough to make a racist political system willing to accept the full humanity of Black Americans. On April 8th, Coretta Scott King led a silent march through Memphis accompanied by more than 42,000 people to honor her husband and to pressure the city to do right by the striking workers. Memphis resisted. President Lyndon Johnson sent Undersecretary of Labor James Reynolds to the city to work on a solution to end the strike. On April 16th, 12 days after Rev. King's assassination and 64 days after the beginning of the strike, the city of Memphis agreed to raise the workers' wage and recognize their union. A few months later, the union had to threaten another strike to force the city to honor its commitment to the Black workers.ⁱⁱⁱ The city of Memphis did not see the need to improve the work conditions, pay and quality of life of the sanitation workers, because in a society steeped in anti-Black racism and White supremacy, Black lives did not matter.

"***I am a Man.***" "***I am a Human Being.***" This simple sentence and the "**dangerous unselfishness**" of people who believed in the God-given dignity of every person showed the whole country and, indeed, the world that important, decisive, and even miraculous positive changes do happen when we choose to be light for each other instead of conforming to the darkness of racism, the cruelty of police violence and the racialized politics of injustice and indifference.

"***I am a man.***" These were also the words Martin Boyce used to describe his sentiment when he joined hundreds of other gay men, lesbians, drag queens, and transgender individuals from all walks of life to confront the NYC police at the Stonewall Inn on the night of June 28th, 1969.^{iv}

The 1960's have been described as "the Dark Ages" for LGBT human beings in America. The overwhelming majority of medical authorities then defined homosexuality as a mental disorder. In fact, despite Pope Francis' latest public criticism of laws that criminalize homosexuality in more than 67 countries, 11 of which punish homosexual acts with the death sentence, the official teaching of the Catholic Church is still that homosexuality is a sin, a moral deviation and an intrinsically disordered inclination.^v In 1969, unlike Blacks, women and heterosexual men, the LGBT community was not a protected group or class. There were no constitutional amendments or state laws that safeguarded the human rights of sexual minorities both the State and the Church considered to be sexual deviants. Even today in 2023, there are 29 States that do not fully protect LGBTQAI+ Americans from discrimination.^{vi} But in the 60's, a man or a woman could be arrested for simply exhibiting homosexual behavior in public. In New York City alone, 500 people were jailed each year for what the city called "crime against nature." Hundreds of gay men, who were unlucky enough to be deemed pathological sexual deviants, were submitted to aversive conditioning with electric shocks, forced sterilization, involuntary castration and occasionally to lobotomy in an attempt to cure them. Gay bars were the only space of temporary refuge and acceptance. One man captured the relevance of gay bars in the 60's by saying, "***Gay bars were to gay people what churches were to Black people in the south.***"^{vii} And yet, the New York State liquor authority had a rule that even one known homosexual in a licensed premise made the place disorderly and politicians were all too happy to deploy law enforcement to enforce anti-gay laws and crack down on the very few bars where the LGBT community could get together, dance, laugh, hang out with friends, go on a date, meet their spouses, cultivate a common identity and show the kind of affection that was off limits everywhere else in society.

In June of '69, when the police raided the Stonewall Inn again and started shoving people into paddy wagons, transgender Latino women, Black gay youth that fled the intolerance of the south, young adults who had been living in the streets after being kicked out of their homes by their devout Christian families, lesbians and gay men fought back. On that night in '69, the LBGT community decided they would no longer live with the choice of pretending to be heterosexual and be safe or claim their true identity and risk becoming the victim of vigilantes that coordinated violent attacks on gay people in the streets or being carted off to jail every time the police raided another bar. It was terrifying to assume who they were and fight against the police, but many understood that the unplanned Stonewall uprising of '69 was the Rosa Parks' moment for the LBGT community in America. They stood shoulder to shoulder, held their ground and said "no" to oppression.

The Stonewall uprising changed the course of history for LGBTQAI+ rights in America and around the globe. It quickly became known as "***the hairpin drop heard around the world.***" In the late 60's, "*hairpin drop*" were code words gay people used to let others know about their identity. But, on March 28th, 1970, LGBT Americans would not use gambits to speak about themselves anymore. The community organized the first Pride

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

March and were joined by almost 2,000 people. The term homosexuality said nothing about being a man, a woman, a person, or a human being, it only reduced people to a personal secret, a social weirdness and a medical disease and the brave human beings who fought the police wanted to show the country their humanity. While they marched, they were taking small and tentative but firm steps toward human rights for future generations and adding new flavor to the meaning of the word “equality.”

Howard Zinn, that great American historian, wrote something that I often go back to when I feel discouraged with the reality of the world and the institutional Church. “***The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.***”^{viii} Zinn believed that if we act together now in however small way, our small acts multiplied by millions of other people’s acts of solidarity and love can change the world. We have a chance to spin human history toward the right direction.

This is in essence what it means to be “salt of the earth” and “light of the world.” In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus surprises the people who gathered to listen to his preaching first by reminding them that they are blessed. Bridget Chamberas preached on the passage traditionally known as the Beatitudes last Sunday. If you were not in worship, I encourage you to go to our YouTube Channel to listen to Bridget’s inspiring reflection on Jesus’ world-transforming theological and homiletical choice to call the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, all who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, peacemakers, and those who are reviled and persecuted for seeking to live out his teachings in the world blessed. Jesus saw the full humanity of people who had grown used to being wounded, pushed aside, silenced, denied justice, and punished for their love of peace and faith in what is good in humankind and Jesus said to them, “***You are blessed.***” And this morning, still preaching to the same congregation, Jesus surprises them once again. He tells those people in whom no one would see much value that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Jesus doesn’t say that they should be salt and light or that they have to work harder to be salt and light. No! Jesus affirms that they are salt and light. In his very first sermon, Jesus gives his followers an identity – they are blessed – and a role in the world – bring the best flavor in every circumstance and light up the room. Use your saltiness and luminosity to reveal the good, enhance the positive, draw out beauty, enliven hope, and show possibilities for freedom, peace and justice that are still hidden.

In January of 2019, our congregation made the choice not only to believe but embrace Jesus’ teachings in this morning’s Gospel. Together, we took a stand. We affirmed our faith that God calls us to spice things up and to let the light of our faith shine in Acton. We voted almost unanimously to become an Open and Affirming church. We made a covenant to be a blessing to the LGBTQAI+ community, to people of every age, gender, race, gender identity, immigration status, nationality, physical and mental ability, socioeconomic background, political affiliation and faith tradition. We affirmed our identity as a congregation that knows that our calling is to be salt and light. Our vote was just a

small gesture of faith in the long struggle for human dignity and human rights, but our unwavering decision to see, treat and value every person as a beloved child of God is the kind of “**dangerous unselfishness**” that moves history in the right direction. And you went all the way into this Gospel-inspired mission to be a pinch of salt and a spark of light. You called a dark-complexioned, openly gay, married, Brazilian immigrant to be your Senior Minister! Your desire to use your light to be a blessing in the long walk toward justice and equality reminds me of the young man in Alice Walker’s poem “*Once*.”

***“It is true—
I’ve always loved
the daring
ones
Like the black young
man
Who tried
to crash
All barriers
at once,
wanted to
swim
At a white
beach (in Alabama)
Nude.”^{ix}***

Thanks be to God for the barriers of injustice and racism the Black sanitation workers brought down in Memphis. Thanks be to God for the Stonewall uprising and the barriers of intolerance and discrimination the LGBT community smashed in New York City. Thanks be to God for our daring vote to become Open and Affirming and light a flame of acceptance in our church and in Acton. Thanks be to God for the “**dangerous unselfishness**” of people of faith across the centuries whose daring small acts of love, hope and courage bless us with new sight so we may see each other today as human beings. But as Rev. King said in his last sermon, now that we voted to become Open and Affirming, we’ve got to give our whole selves to this struggle until the end. The struggle of the Black workers and the LGBTQAI+ community for justice and equality and for every person to be seen and valued as a human being is not finished yet. And nothing would be more tragic than if we lost our saltiness and hid our light after our ONA vote. Friends, we’ve got to see it through. We have to see the humanity of those God has blessed and loves. We’ve got to join others who are doing tiny little acts of justice and let our saltiness and light guide humankind toward greater equality and acceptance of our common humanity. Either we go up together, or we go down together. With God’s help, let us be daring and crash all barriers that still make some people feel that they are not blessed, not welcomed in the Church or that they are less than human.

Stand with me, friends, shoulder to shoulder, and let us recite the words of our Open and Affirming Covenant. As you say these bold and sacred words, remember all those who have fought for human dignity, for justice, and equality and give thanks for our call to be salt of the land and light in human history.

The Covenant is on page 11 in the bulletin. Please stand and let us recite the words together:

We at Acton Congregational Church accept, affirm, and invite all families and individuals, as we all are created in God's image.

Following the loving example of Jesus, we welcome into our community persons of every gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, and marital status; of every age, race, citizenship, and nationality; of every mental and physical ability; of every economic and social status and political affiliation; of every faith background and at any step on the journey of faith.

We welcome all of God's people to share in the life, mission, leadership, ministry, worship, sacraments, service, education, and fellowship of our congregation. As we grow together in Christian faith and love, we celebrate the diversity God has created, and we are committed to working together, with God's help and the Spirit's guidance, to make this statement a reality in our church.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ By Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in All Labor Has Dignity, speech delivered at Bishop Charles Mason Temple of the Church of God in Christ in Memphis, Tennessee, on 18th March 1968.

ⁱⁱ By Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in I've Been to the Mountaintop, sermon delivered at Bishop Charles Mason Temple of the Church of God in Christ in Memphis, Tennessee, on 3rd April 1968.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stanford University. Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike, The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, [<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/memphis-sanitation-workers-strike>].

^{iv} Stonewall Uprising. Documentary film released in 2010.

^v By John Finnis in What the Church teaches about homosexual inclinations, Reason, Faith and Homosexual Acts, Catholic News Agency, [<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resource/55276/what-the-church-teaches-about-homosexual-inclinations>].

^{vi} Freedom for All Americans [<https://freedomforallamericans.org/states/>].

^{vii} Stonewall Uprising. Documentary film released in 2010.

^{viii} By Howard Zinn in The Optimism of Uncertainty, published in "The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear," Edited by Paul Loeb, location 1087 [Kindle edition].

^{ix} Quoted by Howard Zinn in The Optimism of Uncertainty, published in "The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear," Edited by Paul Loeb, location 1027 [Kindle edition].