

## “Our Collective Call: Intrinsic Motivation”

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1 Corinthians 1:18-25; Matthew 5: 1-12

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Foolishness. That’s our scripture today. Foolishness. Yesterday morning a 37 year old man named Alex got up in the morning and made a decision that he loved his community so much he would go walk the streets to make sure his neighbors were safe. By all accounts from friends and family and the veterans he served as a nurse, he was a man who liked to be helpful; who cared about his neighbors; who always put in 100% to make sure the people around him were cared for. It wasn’t just his profession; it was the way he was. And yesterday, in stooping to help a woman who had been intentionally knocked to the ground, he was surrounded by armed ICE agents and then shot 9 times. Some will say he was foolish to be out helping his neighbors. Some have already villanized him for it. But church, I am here to tell you, this is the kind of foolishness we are called to.

A week ago, spurred on by an event that we co-sponsored with other area churches on Monday night, I re-read Martin Luther King Jr’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” If you haven’t ever read it, I greatly encourage you to do so. It’s a letter that Dr King wrote in response to the white pastors in Alabama who did not want him to come to their state. It wasn’t that they didn’t believe in his cause, or so they said, they just didn’t want trouble. Dr King, in a thoughtful, thorough, and oftentimes deeply intellectual and theological way, responded to those moderate white clergy. As they were sleeping in their warm comfortable beds with their families, Dr King was alone in a jail cell; and yet, his letter is not one of rage, but of deep sorrow. He grieves that his fellow Christians will not join him even as they assert that they follow the same Christ. He grieves that his countrymen won’t stand with him even as they say that they are for liberty and justice for all. He grieves that while they accuse him of causing trouble and breaking the law; they refuse to see that it is not the non-violent movement that is creating violence, but rather the violence that is already in the system and is now being revealed for what it is.

If we step back for a moment, and ask ourselves what is the internal motivation of those white clergy to ban together and write Dr King a letter as he sits in jail, I think we can fairly confidently answer. Those moderate white clergy are afraid. They’re afraid of the violence that is now happening in the light of day instead of at night when before they could ignore it. They are afraid of what this will lead to, and how their congregations might react. I’m sure they’re afraid that people will walk out of their churches and never return if they go to aid Dr King and they will be left without a livelihood. I can imagine they’re also grieving that for a long time they had been able to ignore the problem. They probably weren’t completely ignorant to the plight of

black people; but because everything was and is so segregated, they didn't have to see it daily which means they didn't have to think about it or respond to it daily. Who wants to live with the anxiety and despair and rage that comes with realizing what is happening to your neighbors on the daily and feel so helpless to stop it? No one. How can I be so sure of these motivations? Well I confess to you, church, it's because they live in me too.

I don't like how my body feels as I read the news; as I hear about one more person being taken or being killed. I don't like wondering what is happening to the five year old and the two year old that are now being held in detention center. I don't like to think about the teens in my kids' school who are now living without parents and aren't sure what they should do next. I worry about the families we've been bringing food and what kinds of horrific decisions they are having to make every day. This isn't the world I want to live in; and yet, it is the world I have been living in every day of my life - I just have had the privilege of not having to face it when I didn't want to. I'm grateful to leaders like the Brooklyn Park Police Chief for publicly sharing the news that his own officers who are black and brown have been pulled over by ICE for no reason and questioned. It takes courage to consciously combat racism - it takes diligence to realize it's happening even in our own heads, especially when the federal response to the police chief's statement is to question its validity without even an attempt to look into it. Of course the same thing has been being said all over the state from black and brown communities, but it's a story we all must tell. I saw the same courage several weeks ago now, when our St. Cloud community came together in support of our Somali neighbors at the library. In attendance were the St Cloud Mayor, the Police Chief, a few legislators, county workers, school board members, and others. There were people with Somalian heritage, Hispanic heritage, European heritage; as well as Muslims, Christians, and Jewish people. At one point Hudda Ibrahim, a community leader and City Council member said something like, "When the Hispanic community was targeted a couple of years ago, we in the Somali community were afraid to speak up. I am sorry. Today we all stand together."

We are beginning to wake up, aren't we? We're beginning to see what Jesus has been trying to teach us all along - that people will call us foolish for loving one another; for standing with one another; for reaching across racial, cultural, religious divides to unite in love rather than fear, and we are to embrace that foolishness, which Jesus embraced. Later Paul would write that "when one suffers, we all suffer; when one rejoices, we all rejoice." It's time we realize that we are all in this together. What we do now, in this time of crisis, and how we come together as a community can, by God's grace, make us stronger together, or it can tear us apart. It's really up to us.

So I want to share some things that haven't worked in the past:

First, it does not work to think we have to solve this alone. If our internal motivation is for glory or power or fame, or even to quickly fix the situation, we will not only be sorely disappointed, but we will end up making it about us instead of about the world we are working to create. In some ways, the most tragic part of Dr. King's murder, is that it allowed the movement to become about him. The civil rights movement was never about one person. He would've been the first to say that. It takes all of us working together to make this a world in which all people can thrive, and we all have a stake in the outcome. It's going to take time and it's going to take choosing to be in community over and over again.

Second, as people with a history of being colonized and colonizing others, it's easy to remove ourselves from the picture and think we're just doing it for someone else. I'm speaking mainly to the white people in the room, but it can be a reminder for all of us since we are all victims of colonization in one way or another: liberation is not just for one group or another; none of us are free until we are all free. And since Europeans have had the market on solutions for so long and frankly just keep choosing white supremacy, it's time to center the voices of people of color; the voices of the Queer community; the voices of the poor. This gets tricky because we also don't want to ask people to be the spokesperson for any one group. So it has to be a "both and." We need to listen well, to not expect anyone else to have all of the answers either, and to come together to seek wisdom from a diverse range of people and communities.

Third, we need to be able to trust one another so we can engage in the difficult conversations that are needed to bring lasting change. In a world that is fed AI news daily, this is really difficult. It means we have to come together face to face; person to person; and hear each others' stories. It means we have to move out of what's comfortable and get to know our neighbors - learn a new language - listen to one another's stories. It means extending positive regard for each other so that we don't fall back into a tribalism mindset; and it means being able to recognize trauma responses in each other that often push us away- esp now. The trauma from these weeks and months is going to live in our community for generations. We have to trust each other enough to hold each other accountable when we harm one another, and be willing to say I'm sorry. In our trauma responsive work as a church, I feel like we've grown quite a bit in this area. More than ever before we are able to name that people respond differently in times of stress; that people's reactions often have to do with things we don't know about; and I've seen you extend grace over and over to each other and to yourselves. We need to continue in this practice and this work together, not as an insular community, but inviting people into the work all the time.

Does all of this seem impossible? Especially this morning? Naive? Unrealistic? It does today. So much of the work we have seen happen is being undone before our very eyes. Which is exactly why, as people who follow Jesus, prayer is necessary. Why

would we ask God to do something we can already do? Instead, we ground ourselves in following Christ. You see if we are going to be motivated by our own glory; our own ego; our own selfishness; even our own safety above and before others' safety, then we will continue working for the world we currently live in. Jesus offers us a different way.

Jesus was at the height of his popularity with the crowds when he gave his sermon on the mount. He could've said a whole bunch of things they were longing to hear that would've fed his own ego, fanned the flames of violence that were so prevalent in his time, and probably made him much more popular. Instead, Jesus said:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

As people listened to Jesus speak, they began to realize that this movement was different. He's not lifting up those who follow all religious rules; he's not praising those who are polite in public and maintain the status quo. Jesus blesses those who are part of the movement to grow towards God and one another. What Paul calls the foolishness of the cross— this way of living in the world that stops violence and hate at its source. What Dr King called nonviolent resistance. What Jesus is pointing to in this sermon is a God who doesn't turn away. A loving God who sees people where they are, recognizes how harmed in spirit they have been from this world that tears them down. A God who lifts up the peacemakers, the merciful, those who are grieving, those who are persecuted for following God's way of love.

You see it is in our most vulnerable times, as individuals and as a community, that when we turn towards God and Jesus' way of love, that we can begin to hear and see and work with the Holy Spirit who is moving. Jesus is saying that when we think we are the weakest is when we are truly blessed, because that is exactly when we can

learn to be interdependent; when we can see and hear one another in our pain; when we can come together in solidarity and be part of healing the world.

This is our collective call - to be a community that measures not how many people are here, but rather how liberated each person is to worship God and walk humbly with one another. I don't have any idea of how any of this is going to change on a national level. But I do know that we, as a community, get to decide what we do here and now in the St. Cloud area. The Kingdom of God may seem like it is hidden in this moment; but if it's hidden, it's because it is a seed — longing for us to bring light; water; air; and song so that it will grow within us. This is our *collective call*; this is our identity in Christ; this is the way we integrate with one another - through love and grief and anger at what's happening in the world, coming together to be the people God has called us to be.

I want to end with a poem by Nikita Gill that has brought me some comfort because it speaks to the rage inside of me that will need to be channeled into love:

*The rage you are feeling  
Comes from the same place  
Inside your heart as the love.*

*This is why you refuse to accept  
A world where cruelty reigns  
And the fire consumes all.*

*You have known hope  
And joy and kindness  
Like you have known water.*

*And justice is a river  
That demands  
You do not give up on it.*

May God bless our efforts as we continue to go about the foolish work of loving our neighbors as Jesus does.