

**January 19, 2014**

**TEXT: John 1:29-42**

**TITLE: The Art of Finger Pointing**

On December 19, 1956 a letter was issued by the Montgomery Improvement Association, signed by its president The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and its secretary, The Rev. W. J. Powell. Nearly 12 months after the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott, the US Supreme court affirmed the ruling of a federal district court declaring bus segregation unconstitutional. The MIA waited for a full month after the ruling to declare and end to the boycott, to assure that the ruling would be implemented. Dr. King signaled the end of the boycott by boarding an integrated bus on December 21, 1956.

In anticipation of the end of the boycott, the MIA's letter offered advice on how to live into this new way of life – so that everyone would be as safe as possible and everyone would emulate the virtues of the larger movement for full civil rights. The letter read:

“This is a historic week because segregation on buses has now been declared unconstitutional. Within a few days the Supreme Court Mandate will reach Montgomery and you will be re-boarding integrated buses. This places upon us all a tremendous responsibility of maintaining, in face of what could be some unpleasantness, a calm and loving dignity befitting good citizens and members of our Race. If there is violence in word or deed it must not be our people who commit it.

For your help and convenience the following suggestions are made. Will you read, study and memorize them so that our non-violent determination may not be endangered. First, some general suggestions:

1. Not all white people are opposed to integrated buses. Accept goodwill on the part of many.
2. The whole bus is now for the use of all people. Take a vacant seat.
3. Pray for guidance and commit yourself to complete non-violence in word and action as you enter the bus.
4. Demonstrate the calm dignity of our Montgomery people in your actions.
5. In all things observe ordinary rules of courtesy and good behavior.
6. Remember that this is not a victory for Negroes alone, but for all Montgomery and the South. Do not boast! Do not brag!
7. Be quiet but friendly; proud, but not arrogant; joyous but not boisterous.
8. Be loving enough to absorb evil and understanding enough to turn an enemy into a friend.<sup>1</sup>”

The letter goes on to offer practical tips for boarding the bus, suggesting that African American bus riders attempt to board buses with friends, whenever possible, and avoid sitting by a white person if other seats are available.

MLK's letter to the people of Montgomery is a reminder to those participating in the boycott that even with the victorious Supreme Court decision, and a decisive change, the journey isn't over. In fact they all – together - remain a part of something bigger. He encourages those who will soon be boarding integrated buses to point to the virtues of the Civil Rights movement in word and deed as they embrace the decision and usher in a new way of life in the South. Through a calm and courteous demeanor, through a choice to abstain from violence of all forms, African American men and women boarding buses point to the larger truths and goals of a fully integrated nation – where brothers and sisters of every race can abide peacefully together, sharing in equal rights and equal opportunities in every facet of life together.

Our scripture text opens for today with the words of a first century prophet, John the Baptist. Like Dr. King, John the Baptist's words today point his disciples to something bigger. Although his own ministry is thriving, John is quick to point them to Jesus. His words and his witness point out the larger truth of who Jesus is as he passes by. John insists on surrendering his prestige and points to the one who has come to take away the sins of the world. He shares his testimony of encountering Jesus in the waters of the Jordan. He then sends others out of his own baptismal pool and in the direction of the Living Christ.

In John's Gospel, is John the Baptist who sets the stage for Jesus to call his first disciples. His ministry and his words herald the coming reign of the Messiah. And his testimony points them to Jesus. John nudges Andrew and another in the direction of Jesus and saying, "Look, there is Lamb of God.

Our text invites us to consider the face of discipleship in our own lives and within today's church.

We sense that discipleship has something to do with following: following Jesus, following God's word, following the teachings of the church. But when we try to wrap our heads around what discipleship looks like for US and for the CHURCH, things get a bit more complicated.

There is still racism, sexism & heterosexism within this world – and within the church. There are still divisions among us, that separate that which we say is held together in Christ. And there is sin and brokenness all over the world – including the church. And there is the unfortunate reality that so many people in the world see the church as an incubator for guilt, judgment and even hate – that it makes it hard to point to Jesus.

Sometimes, to make life easier, we don't think of ourselves as disciples. We assign that role to people whose names are listed in our gospels. We look to a dozen or so men and a handful of women. We label them saints and praise their witness. But their

stories seem so different from ours. Theirs is the story of those who got to look Jesus in the eye. Theirs is the story of those who saw miracles first hand. Theirs is the story of those whose lives weren't quite as complicated as ours.

We forget sometimes that we too are disciples. The call to follow has been issued to us, and the invitation of come and see is ours to speak. But how? How do we get it right?

Some of us think that being a disciple means being Christ. We take St. Teresa's challenge to be Christ's hands and heart too seriously, and think that WE need to be Jesus to others. In stead of pointing to Jesus and allowing Him to take control, we take on the weight of the world. We solve problems. We dole out love and goodwill – which is very well and good. But sometimes we take it too far, and we try to be saviors of the world. Not only is this model simply not sustainable but also, but in this paradigm, discipleship becomes all about us.

And then there are those who think that pointing to Jesus means serving as a mediator. We believe that our role is to stand between Jesus and others. We fill our role in a "Match.com" sort of way. We filter our special knowledge of Jesus and prescribe the best way to package it for success. We suggest the steps one must take in order to get to know Jesus. But this approach becomes dogmatic rather than relational. It sets apart some Christians as super-Christians and others as recipients of a lesser grace.

Now others feel that the best way to point to Christ is to place him in an ivory tower of sorts – up and away from the rest of creation. These disciples insist on pointing to a transcendent, Jesus far away from the messiness of humankind. They think that following Jesus means somehow creating a distance between Jesus and sin or brokenness. They think that by following Jesus in this way they too will gradually gain a distance from all of the sin and brokenness of the world. But these disciples start to look more like guards and gatekeepers rather than disciples. They forget what John's gospel is so sure to point out that in Jesus God took on flesh to be with us in the midst of our sin and to lead us to everlasting life. The focus of their ministry tries to protect Jesus from those who are sinful or broken; from those who are outcasts and marginalized...frankly, from anyone who is NOT like them.

But our scripture reminds us that Jesus is not looking for bouncers. Jesus is looking for disciples. Followers. Jesus is not looking for mediators or gatekeepers or a cast of mini-me's. Rather, Jesus is looking for friends to walk by his side; to listen and to learn about the fullness of God's love. He is looking for disciples with the courage to open themselves up to this call, and then to love to point him out to others and say: "Come and see."

Christ's hope is that we will drop everything when we hear Christ's call: all of our prejudices and all of our fears; all of the disguises of our egos and all of the identities in which others dress us up; all of our time constraints and all of our electronics – to stop what we're doing and follow.

John wants us to get this. John's gospel is so insistent upon this that his whole first chapter builds to this moment. He writes of a transcendent God who puts on flesh and dwells among us. He places John the Baptist's testimony right before the story of Jesus calling the first disciples, so that the disciples can see Jesus – and so that the disciples can see that discipleship is modeled by the one who lets go of his baggage so that Jesus – with them and within them - can increase.

John's message is clear: The role of the disciple is to follow Jesus and to point others to the living Christ. The role of discipleship is to be transformed by God's radical grace in Christ – and then to bear witness to what Christ has done in us.

The role of the disciple is to open ones self to forgiveness – and then to forgive; to open ones self to healing – and then to heal; to open ones self to the peace that surpasses all understanding – and then to work for peace; to open ones self to justice – and then to commit ones self to the work of justice; to open ones self to love – and then to love. And to do so in the name of the one who forgave, healed and loved us first.

Come and live in the light. Open your eyes and open your hearts to the Messiah in your midst. And know that he comes not to judge you, but to forgive you. He comes not to cast you aside, but to embrace you. He comes not to ridicule you, but to love you. And in loving you – he longs to set you free.

Jesus is here. Come and see. And may your lives – and this world – be changed.  
Amen.

<sup>1</sup><http://slate.me/KnNnux>