

SIN BOLDLY!

A meditation preached at
Plymouth Congregational Church
1900 Nicollet Avenue
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

January 15, 2012

the Rev. Tara Bauer
Pastoral Resident

Text: Mark 2:23–3:6

I am mindful that today is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, and on Monday, we celebrate his nonviolent activism against racism, classism and militarism. King suggested in one speech that men and women needed to form a new organization called *The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment*. He suggested this since there are some things in society that no one should ever become adjusted to such as bigotry or prejudice.¹ The challenge for us is that King's "maladjustment" can look a lot like sin.

Certainly, one such maladjusted person would be Mary Daly. She is a self-described radical, lesbian and feminist theologian. In her 1996 *New Yorker* article, "Sin Big," Daly writes: "Ever since childhood, I have been honing my skills for living the life of a Radical Feminist Pirate and cultivating the Courage to Sin."

Daly continues: "The word 'sin' is derived from the Indo-European root 'es-,' meaning 'to be.' When I discovered this etymology, I intuitively understood that for a woman trapped in patriarchy, which is the religion of the entire planet, 'to be' in the fullest sense is 'to sin.'"²

As with most conversations, it is important for us to understand how we are defining words if we are to make any progress towards understanding one another. In this quote, Daly is redefining "sin" from the moralistic themes commonly associated with it. Instead, she points to the etymology of the word; the root of sin, being "es-," meaning "to be," and I reiterate her words, "for a woman... 'to be' in the fullest sense is 'to sin.'"

Daly's sin is not because "she" is a woman, genetically, biologically, psychologically; it is because she is a woman trying to live out her fullest sense of being in the religion and society of patriarchy. She had to cultivate, to muster up all her courage, "to be," to live out the fullness of her person—as a woman, as a lesbian, as a human being—and that has meant pounding against the societal and institutional structures which would declare her sinful simply because she didn't fit into someone else's ideals.

This is the definition of sin I'm using today. It is not a definition of sin as anyone with a religious background is traditionally used to hearing it. It is not "sin" confined to some moralistic polarity of good and evil. Rather, let us see **sinning boldly as pushing against those societal structures and ideals that would attempt to confine people to a role or keep a community in its place.**

¹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *The Power of Nonviolence*.

² Mary Daly, "Sin Big," *The New Yorker Digital Edition*, Feb 26, 1996, p. 76.

When we expand our definition as Daly has, we begin to see that it is not she, nor other women, alone who have had to sin boldly whether in the wearing of trousers, pursuing the right to vote, working after having children or seeking equal pay. Rather to sin big and boldly has had to be done by any minority group, whether racial, economic, gender, sexual or ability. Any minority group who ever has had the gall, the nerve and the stamina to pursue the fullness of their humanity by seeking equal rights has had to sin boldly.

We have long called this the Civil Rights Movement but that title in some ways seems rather shallow because we're really not talking about equal or civil rights. We're talking about: How we consider someone's humanity, who we consider fully human and who is truly crafted into the *imago dei*, which is Latin for the image of God.

It seems ludicrous that an individual's humanity would even be in question. Most reasonable people would not deny that minorities, homosexuals, the working poor and homeless people are physically human. Yet, politicians and society still have its subtle ways of diminishing the *imago dei*, of considering someone's humanity a little less, whether it is in the form of social services, education or marriage amendments. Even more striking is that the conversation rarely speaks directly to an individual's humanity; often the language deployed to reject the *imago dei* is religious, civic or economic.

Congress debates that we do not have enough money for health care, education and human services. "We cannot afford it," they say. Yet, when military action arises, rarely do politicians debate about what the nation can afford, and it is often the families of moderate and poorer incomes who pay the highest price.

When the *imago dei* is denied, when the sin, as Mary Daly says, is simply "to be" in your fullest sense of yourself, then you must sin big and boldly against those systems which seek to suppress your humanity.

Our worth as individuals and communities is fully grounded in the *imago dei*, the image of God. Thus, we, in our humanity, are called to love each other, as each person is an expression of God and an object of God's love. The *image of God* is both individual and communal, deepened by our mutual dependence, respect and cooperation. The *imago dei* is so woven in humanity's interdependence that when it is diminished in one person, it is lessened in the overall and wider community.

The image of God is not only diminished in those subjected to prejudice, but also in the instigators of injustice. In Martin Luther King's words, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."³

With that in mind, let's consider today's scripture passage from the Gospel of Mark; I hear that is often what preachers do, refer to scripture passages, but when it comes to sinning boldly no one does it better than Jesus.

Jesus sins boldly. In fact, Jesus is basically sinning throughout the whole second chapter of Mark, if not the whole Gospel of Mark. Jesus just keeps on sinning again and again, big and boldly, which is actually what makes Jesus so remarkable. Or to adopt Martin Luther King's language, Jesus becomes thoroughly maladjusted.

We are reminded that the Sabbath is a holy time, a day meant for rest and abstaining from labor. Its observance is the fourth of the Ten Commandments, which in short reads: "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." The Sabbath is a part of the way life was ordered and structured.

³ Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

Jesus does not contest the structure of the Sabbath. Rather, he orients the Sabbath to the *imago dei* and God's purpose, reminding the religious and societal leaders: **"The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath."** In other words, the Sabbath is meant to benefit people.

When Jesus is confronted because his disciples are *picking* ears of grain, laboring on the Sabbath, Jesus refers to a much earlier incident in Jewish history, when David violated the rules to a greater extent in order to meet his and his soldiers' need for food.

When Jesus returns, on the Sabbath, to the holy location of the synagogue, the authorities watch for Jesus to violate the Sabbath commandment by performing the *work of healing* on a man with a withered hand.

Perhaps the gentleman's withered hand was seen as a sign of God's wrath towards him for the wrongs of his or his parents' life. Certainly, this man's withered hand speaks of his position in society, which is marginal at best. His physical deformity declares a lack of holiness.

Jesus' first statement rings in our ears, **"The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath."** Jesus calls the afflicted man forward, "Stand and come up front!" You got to hand it to Jesus: he is always good for some drama! I love it!

The tension in the air as he asks those who seek to collect some evidence against him, **"Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to preserve life or to destroy it?"**

Aha—it's a trick question! It would seem only logical, only right to "do good," that this person, this man's well-being takes precedent, his needs more important than religious ideas or social constructs. The fact that he is a human being, the *imago dei*, is more important than his race, presumably Jewish; his class, most likely poor; his sexuality, unknown; and his disability, obvious.

The question hangs, **"Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to preserve life or to destroy it?"**

There is an answer, but no response, only silence.

A person cannot truly be at rest when oppressed. A family cannot prosper when the parents are unable to find meaningful work. An economy cannot flourish when we are more bent on war than on education and health care. How can your spirit experience Sabbath rest if you are not fully embraced by your spiritual community?

The authorities cannot make any concession to the reasonability of Jesus, because it means something would have to be given up—whether power, privilege or societal structure.

Isn't this the way it's always been done? Wasn't this the original intent of the founding fathers: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?

Who knew there could be so much at risk by acknowledging the *imago dei* in this human being, healing this marginal, unclean and unnamed man. Jesus is positively maladjusted and sins boldly.

He understands the societal rules, the purpose and meaning of the Sabbath. He knows the law; yet, does not defend it. Jesus does not protect the system of holiness, rather he actively counters the pervading ideas of purity and pollution—the idea that some people are clean and others unclean.⁴ Jesus challenges the idea that the *imago dei* can be diminished, that a person's humanity can be lessened.

⁴ David Rhoads, "Social Criticism: Crossing Boundaries," in *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson, and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 149.

As scholar David Rhoads puts it: “Jesus counters the purity rules that preserved the holiness of the nation.... Through the agency of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, God enters the arena of impurity without regard to the risk of defilement...Jesus does not reinforce the purity system of the authorities. He crosses boundaries, redraws them, or eliminates them.... He violates holy times.”

In other words, Jesus sins boldly. Jesus sins boldly in the recognition of his and this man’s humanity. Jesus resists without violence and sets the stage for others who will resist the status quo; others like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as a multitude of individuals who have stood up through the ages, often at great personal cost.

Society and the church then become like the Sabbath in this scripture passage through their failure to allow people to live their fullest selves in health and wholeness. Injustice then takes root in the subtle and systemic dehumanization of individuals and communities. Martin Luther King said, “The worst disservice that we as individuals or churches can do is to become sponsors and supporters of the status quo.”⁵

Like Jesus, King was willing to violate the status quo for the realization of the *imago dei* and a beloved community. He took on the risk, putting himself and even his family in danger for a vision he had for the future.

Martin Luther King was willing to run with scissors...against the fabric of society...to sin boldly, to disturb that false sense of peace whether in regards to segregation in the South, or prejudice and impoverishment in the North.

King held out a dream of a beloved community whose humanity was fully realized and a nation of people with it. Jesus preached love for God, for each other and even for our enemies. Jesus and King meant to draw people into the interdependence of humanity, cooperation and respect.

The church, whether universal or this congregation, is called to take on the same risk as Jesus and King, to disrupt the status quo when it fails to address the needs of people and when it allows for their oppression. In other words, we must sin boldly against the Sabbath when it is no longer made for humanity.

Undoubtedly, the voices of well-meaning people will attempt to dissuade us. Just as well-meaning clergy, Christians and citizens encouraged King to *not* disturb the peace or make things worse, even as he sought through nonviolent resistance to end racial segregation, economic inequality and physical violence.

If we truly are going to keep the Sabbath holy, we must use it to heal our systems and to bring wholeness to communities and individuals, to humanize those whom society has marginalized, and to empower those who have found themselves voiceless.

As one member commented on the PlymouthSpirit blog: “Sabbath is not intended as a means of extending human suffering on earth, but rather as a means of relief from suffering. Healing on the Sabbath or feeding the hungry on the Sabbath may be the best possible celebration of God’s Sabbath.”

This is a holy time when our consciousness is compelled, when the *imago dei*, the image of God, is magnified within us, and we no longer accept injustice. Injustice is quelled when we are no longer concerned when people occupy, same-sex couples marry or immigrants seek refuge. The image of God is seen when we close the education gap, honor the humanity in those with whom we disagree or make this Plymouth community a

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Significant Contributions of Jeremiah to Religious Thought” in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Vol. 1, 194*.

spiritual haven where all people can experience Sabbath rest. To do these things, we must be maladjusted and ready to sin boldly, “for this life is not a place where justice resides.”⁶

Yet, I believe if King were here today, he would call upon us to join *The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment*, to honor the Sabbath and to sin boldly. Perhaps, if King were present today, he would draw us once again into a vision, into the work of a dream.

King would call us to be maladjusted. When, as he says, **“machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people...”**⁷

Let us say: “Sin boldly!”

When King says, we **“look on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.”**

Let us say: “Sin boldly!”

When it appears as, King says, **that “the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”**

We say: “Sin boldly!”

When we witness the **“arrogance of feeling that [the West] has everything to teach others and nothing to learn.”**

We say: “Sin boldly!”

Be maladjusted, as King says: **To segregation and discrimination, to mob rule, and to the tragic effects of physical violence...**⁸

We must: “Sin boldly!”

Be maladjusted: When schools are more concerned with neutrality than protecting children from bullying.

We must: “Sin boldly!”

Be maladjusted: When legal citizens can be deported, or others detained indefinitely without trial.

We must: “Sin boldly!”

Let us sin boldly, and in the words of Martin Luther King, may we be: **“As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth who dreamed a dream of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. God grant that we will be so maladjusted that we will be able to go out and change our world and our civilization. And then we will be able to move from the... desolate midnight of...inhumanity...to the...glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.”**

Sin boldly and make it so!

⁶ Martin Luther, Letter 99, Paragraph 13. Erika Bullmann Flores, Tr. From *Dr. Martin Luther's Saemmtliche Schriften* Dr. [Johann Georg Walch](#) Ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, N.D.), Vol. 15, cols. 2585-2590

⁷ Martin Luther King, *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break The Silence*

⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., *The Power of Nonviolence*.