

Living our Mission Statement

(Through the lens of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's
"Letter from Birmingham Jail")

"Where there is no vision, the people perish..." Proverbs 29:18a - KJV

Proverbs 29:18a
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Today we reflect on the vision and mission of the church — its purpose, its relevance, and its courage in the world. And when I say "church," I mean both the Church universal and this particular community of faith called College Hill Presbyterian Church.

We begin with a voice from over 60 years ago, one that still refuses to be silenced and continues to call the church to account — **the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** On this weekend when our nation pauses to remember and honor his life, we do more than admire him. We return to his words so that they might examine us. In April 1963, Dr. King sat in a Birmingham jail cell. He had been arrested not for violence, but for confronting violence — for leading nonviolent demonstrations against segregation. He wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in response to eight white Alabama clergymen who urged patience, moderation, and quiet. They acknowledged injustice existed — but insisted the struggle should wait for the courts, wait for a "better time," wait for calmer days. In other words, they told him justice could come eventually... just not yet.

Dr. King refused that logic. He responded with words now etched into our conscience: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." This is not just poetry. It is theology. King was proclaiming something profoundly biblical: our lives are bound up with one another. The suffering of some is never just "their problem." What harms one child of God wounds the body of Christ.

He went on to make a crucial distinction between just and unjust laws: "One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws." And then King spoke directly to the church — especially to cautious white churches that preferred order over justice: "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

In other words: **kind words without courageous action are not enough. The church is tempted in every generation to be polite when the gospel calls us to be prophetic.** We are tempted to defend comfort when Jesus calls us into costly love. We are tempted to say, "Of course racism, poverty, and injustice are wrong," while doing very little that might risk criticism, misunderstanding, or change. Dr. King named that temptation clearly. He warned that the church would become an "irrelevant social

club" unless it chose to stand with the oppressed, challenge unjust systems, and speak uncomfortable truths in love. That warning still stands.

So today we ask: **What does it mean for College Hill to be the kind of church King called for — committed not only to charity, but to justice?** Charity feeds a hungry person. Justice asks why they are hungry in the first place. Charity helps someone find shelter. Justice asks why housing is unaffordable, why wages are unlivable, why systems are inequitable. Charity responds to emergencies. Justice addresses root causes. Both matter. Jesus cared deeply about both. He fed people, healed people, embraced people — and he also confronted systems, challenged religious hypocrisy, and spoke against imperial power. The gospel is not neutrality dressed up in piety; it is Good News for the poor, liberation for the oppressed, sight for the blind, and release for the captive.

College Hill is entering its 114th year of ministry in the Kendall-Whittier and TU neighborhoods, and beyond. We are the second-oldest Presbyterian congregation in Tulsa. **Our longevity** has not depended on buildings, budgets, or nostalgia. It has **depended on vision — the deep sense of who we are, what we are called to do, and where God is leading us next.**

Proverbs says, "**Where there is no vision, the people perish.**" But in Scripture, vision is not simply human strategy or long-range planning. Vision is God's dream for the people. Our calling is not to impose our own plans on God, but to practice discernment — listening, reflecting, adapting, and being open to transformation. College Hill has done that through world wars, the Great Depression, social upheaval, denominational debates, and more recently, through the constant pivots required during the pandemic.

If we believe this community matters, then each of us has a role. Yet vision is not enough. **Vision requires action.** Mission requires commitment. The Holy Spirit requires our "yes." **Our mission here at College Hill** is not accidental. It is rooted in that gospel. In our Mission Statement we say that we are called to:

- **Build an inclusive community of faith.**
- **Receive and openly share the love of God.**
- **Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice.**

These are not generic churchy phrases. They are bold verbs: build, receive, share, reach out. We took a good look at our Mission Statement during our recent Annual Session Retreat. To **build an inclusive community of faith** means inclusion does not happen accidentally. It requires effort. It requires listening. It requires truth-telling about where we are inclusive — and where we are not yet. It also means acknowledging honestly who we are as a progressive congregation and welcoming others without pretending to be something we are not.

To **receive and openly share the love of God** means we must first know ourselves as beloved. We talked about that last week on Baptism of the Lord Sunday. We cannot share what we have not experienced. Sharing God's love is not coercive or manipulative; it is open-handed, invitational, rooted in grace.

And to **reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice** means that faith for us is not passive or private. It is public, embodied, and engaged. Peace and justice require advocacy and sometimes holy disruption (we see that happening now across the country in response to current immigration policy)—but they must be **joined to compassion so our message is never lost in our anger.** Justice asks us:

What happens to immigrants in our city?
 Who has access to healthcare?
 Whose neighborhoods are polluted?
 Whose children attend underfunded schools?
 Who is incarcerated at disproportionate rates?
 Who is excluded because of race, gender identity, or sexual orientation?
 Who is silenced because they do not have wealth, or status, or power?

Justice asks uncomfortable questions — about racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, ableism, poverty, gun violence, environmental harm, and more. And the gospel does not give us permission to look away. But justice, for Christians, is never abstract or cold. Again, our Mission Statement says we reach out with a compassionate voice. That matters deeply. **Christian justice is not driven by hatred of opponents — but by love for neighbors.** It is not fueled by contempt — but by grief and hope. It is not about winning arguments — but about honoring dignity.

Compassion means we remember that people are more than their positions. It means we resist demonizing, even as we resist dehumanizing systems. It means we tell the truth, but we tell it with love, humility, and courage. And here's the crucial thing: social justice is not extra-credit Christianity. It is not a side hobby for "the political activists among us." It is at the core of following Christ.

So what does that look like for us — not in theory, but in practice? It looks like:

- standing with LGBTQ+ siblings when others deny their dignity
- advocating for racial justice rather than just lamenting racism
- addressing poverty, hunger, education, and healthcare access
- caring for the earth and confronting environmental injustice
- naming white supremacy as sin, not merely "political disagreement"
- refusing silence in the face of violence, bigotry, or discrimination

It also looks like something quieter but just as radical:

- listening deeply to those on the margins
- building authentic relationships across difference
- examining our own privilege and blind spots
- allowing our hearts — and our habits — to change

Justice always begins with love. And love always leads somewhere beyond comfort. College Hill has a long history of leaning into that calling. We have tried to be the kind of church that Dr. King described — not simply a thermometer, reflecting the temperature of culture, but a thermostat, helping change it.

But history alone is not enough. Every generation has to decide again: Will we risk being misunderstood for the sake of compassion? Will we put our bodies, our resources, and our voices where our values are? Will we choose courage over complacency?

We live in a time when many are leaving institutional religion — not because faith has grown irrelevant, but because too many churches have chosen silence over solidarity, politeness over justice, comfort over compassion. We have the opportunity to be different. Not perfect — but faithful. Not fearless — but courageous. Not loud — but clear.

So as we enter this new year together, as well as my forthcoming retirement at the end of April, **let us recommit ourselves to discern God's vision for us in this time and place – and for the future.** Let us remember that God's dream is larger than our fear. And then, by God's grace, let us live that dream with our hands, our hearts, and our lives.

May we refuse lukewarm faith. May we become a people of genuine peace and justice. May we build the beloved community Dr. King glimpsed and Jesus embodied. And may our community of faith never be an irrelevant social club — but a living, breathing sign of God's love in the world.

Amen.

Resources:

Wikipedia, "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

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