

## “Standing On the Side of Love”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
January 19, 2014 Ordinary 2A

Isaiah 49:1-7

John 1:29-42

Last summer our nation celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” speech. If you have never read it, I put some copies on the ark in the entry room, and encourage you to take one home to read. It’s a beautiful and powerful speech. Fifty years ago, Dr. King described the lives of his fellow “negroes,” (or African Americans or blacks, as we say today). He said, “... the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity... the Negro... finds himself an exile in his own land.” Dr. King called on the gathered crowd to stand up for freedom and justice, not with bitterness and hatred, but with dignity and discipline. And he called on them to keep working until there is no more segregation, no more police brutality, and everyone has equal access to housing and the right to vote.

We’ve come a long way since then. Our President is partially of African descent, and our country now has a substantial black middle class. Still, that “lonely island of poverty” has grown larger and more diverse, and race is still an issue. In a recent survey,\* almost half of black Americans said they had been treated unfairly because of race in the past three years. Most white people rarely think about what race they are, but almost half of African Americans reported they thought about race every day. Many people of color still feel they are living as exiles in their own land, in a ghetto of poverty and cut off from the dominant culture, with little opportunity to break free.

Karen read from Isaiah this morning a message to people living in exile. Isaiah offered words of hope; that God would raise up a servant who would restore the Jewish people to their land and bring salvation. But he would be an unlikely servant, hidden away in God’s shadow, a servant whose weapon would be words coming from his mouth, a humble person who said his efforts amounted to nothing, and who was looked down on as a slave by the powerful. Yet God called this servant to raise the people up and lead them out of exile. And God wouldn’t stop there. That would just be the beginning. Isaiah declared this servant would be a “light to the nations” so that “salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (v.6). God will not stop until there is complete justice, truth, salvation for the whole world.

Laura read this morning Jesus’ call to his disciples. According to the gospel of John, it wasn’t obvious that Jesus was someone worth following. John the Baptist had to point Jesus out to everyone. And John called Jesus “the Lamb of God.” A lamb is not exactly a heroic fighter, not a great image for someone you would want to save you. But these are the kinds of people God calls. God chooses even people like us to bring about justice and show forth God’s Kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven, as God would have it be. And God will not stop until it is complete.

Today we invited two people who have been working quietly, and sometimes not so quietly, for justice since the early years of the civil rights movement. Ellie and Hans Spiegel are our neighbors, and I bet they will say they have done very little. But people who know them well, know they are constantly choosing to stand on the side of justice and love. Thank you, Hans and Ellie, for joining us today, and we welcome you to our pulpit.

\* “2012 Portraits of American Life Study,” as cited in “Black-White Racial Divide Is Worse, Researchers Say,” The Christian Century, January 22, 2014.