

“Freedom”

Rev. Liz Miller

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Matthew 5: 3-12

Nine years ago I participated on the March for Women's Lives in Washington DC. I was a sophomore in college in Atlanta, Georgia, and on an early Saturday morning, I boarded a bus with 30 other women from my college. We drove all day and that evening, we arrived at a church in DC. It was already packed with people. There were sleeping bags in the sanctuary, the social hall, and the Sunday school classrooms. I remember setting up my spot in the corner of a hallway, one of the only free spaces left. The next morning, we woke up before the sun to wait for the caravan of busses making their way to the Washington mall. There, I joined 800,000 people to champion women's rights. There were speakers and musicians during a huge, loud rally, and then we marched, through the mall, down Pennsylvania Avenue, right past the White House.

My memories from that weekend are a blur of chants, conversations, signs, and strangers who treated me like a friend. I remember the overwhelming sense of camaraderie and the feeling that we had power--we had the power to change lives, to be heard, and to be visible. I felt alive. I felt like I was apart of something much larger than I could ever create on my own.

My clearest memory from the event actually came after the march, after everyone had left DC, and we were on our way home to resume our regularly scheduled lives. Back on the bus, somewhere in South Carolina, in the middle of nowhere, the bus broke down on the side of the highway. It was late at night, and it was hot. While we waited for help or a repair, we left the bus, seeking cool air in the long, wild grass alongside the road. I was laying down, resting my eyes, when my cell phone rang. It was my brother, calling to tell me that I was officially an Aunt. Colby Robert Miller, his first baby boy and my first nephew, had just been born. Here I was, sweating and exhausted in North Carolina, and all the way in California, my nephew had finally entered the world.

Those two events are always linked for me. I remember thinking that I wanted my nephew to grow up in a country where his voice mattered. I wanted him to grow up in a place where if you are unhappy with laws and policy that politicians pass, you can do something about it—that you can be a part of the process. I wanted him to grow up feeling like he can be a part of a movement of change and hope and love. And, I didn't want him to ever have to struggle, but in the event that the world was not yet perfect by the time he was grown, I wanted him to feel strong enough to stand up for himself and his rights.

Marching at our capital is an American tradition. In 1894, 120 years ago, a group of people who were unemployed gather and marched to lobby for more job creations. One hundred years ago, 5,000 people marched so that women would have the right to vote. In 1943, 400 Rabbi's marched in Washington to plea for help for their Jewish brothers and sisters who were suffering in Europe. Twenty years later Martin Luther King would march for Civil Rights, joining ranks with US citizens who had come before him, and becoming the voice that continues to echo in our lives, speaking for justice and for equality. People from all different backgrounds and political persuasions have marched. It is not strictly a liberal or a conservative movement—it is for anyone who wants to make a statement, who wants to be a visible presence in our nation's capital, and who wants to make a change in the laws and rules that govern our lives. It is for anyone who believes in justice.

Not every march has resulted in policy change or new laws. I think that is often only part of the intent. I think that when we march, we are opening our imaginations. Whether we are in Washington, or at home watching on tv, we are invited to imagine a different world. We are putting our hopes and our desires out into the world, for our neighbors and family and elected officials to hear and respond to. Demonstrators do just what their name implies--they demonstrate that there is still injustice. There is still inequality. They remind us, no matter what side of the political line we are on, that there is still work to do. They enable us to imagine what that work might be, how we might help do that work, and the goodness and righteousness that can come when it finally happens. They allow us to imagine a

world that doesn't need us to march anymore.

There are so many moments in my day when it is easy to forget that there is still injustice in our world. I have a pretty comfortable life. I feel supported by my community, loved by my family, and protected by my government. Sure it's not perfect, but my day-to-day life is cushy enough that I can forget that my life is a privilege, and that close by people are still facing inequality and injustice. They are climbing uphill battles and don't have the support of our government or their neighbors to help them. Just when I start to get comfortable, I hear something that shakes me down from the clouds and reminds me that as a Christian, I am called to continue to be a voice and presence in those places and stories that make me say, "That is not okay! That is not right! That is unjust!"

Those stories aren't always so far away as Washington DC. This weekend news broke about Rev. Thomas Ogletree, an 80 year old Methodist minister and former Dean of Yale Divinity School. On March 10th, right here in Connecticut, Rev. Ogletree will stand trial for officiating his son's wedding to another man. He faces losing his standing as a minister because he stood up for love, because he stood up for his son. On March 10th we are called to stand up for Rev. Ogletree, to once again stand on the side of love and equality. Our work is not done.

Back down in North Carolina, they have been engaged in a movement for the last year called Moral Mondays. On Monday afternoons, faith leaders and community leaders gather at their state capital in protest of new legislation being passed. The legislation changes are sweeping right now, and affect different kinds of people and different issues, with the common theme being that they most often disenfranchise the poor and minorities. One of the most widely protested new policies is the worst voter suppression bill that has passed in the nation since Jim Crow. This February 8<sup>th</sup>, there will be a Moral March and thousands will gather together to protest and to have their voices heard. Our own Andover Newton, the UCC's seminary in Massachusetts, is sending a bus full of clergy down to the march to be witness for their brothers and sisters in North Carolina, to stand beside them and let their voices be heard. Our work is not done.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.” On this weekend, during the celebration of the life of Martin Luther King Jr., we are reminded that there are more powerful witnesses than violence. There are ways to stand up to hatred and division. There are opportunities to be a voice for the voiceless, or to help the message of those who are in pain reach farther. When we gather in peace and speak for love, our voices can be heard. Change can happen. Bridges can be built, wounds can heal, and justice can prevail. This weekend is a reminder that there are ideas and people and beliefs that are worth defending. That we are called to step out of the comfort of our lives and stand in solidarity with those who are crying out for justice. In the midst of the celebrations and the reflections is that every present reminder that our work is not done.