

Easter 6  
 Acts 16:9-15  
 Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5  
 John 14:23-29

## What's Your Message?

April 28 of this year saw the passing of one of the great leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in this country. Dr. Dorothy Height died at age 98 leaving behind an incredible record of achievement and overcoming obstacles unimaginable to most of us.

From her participation in anti-lynching protests in the early 1930's, tireless lifelong advocacy for all women, especially those of color and the poor, working alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, serving as a principle organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, to later being the recipient of the Presidential Medal of Honor from President Bill Clinton, the Congressional Gold Medal from President George W. Bush, and finally eulogized at the National Cathedral by President Barack Obama, Dr. Height in and in death, was a formidable presence.

As Gwen Ifill of the News Hour put it, "When Dr. Height called, you answered. I don't know anyone who had the nerve to turn her down."<sup>i</sup>

But of all the tributes written about her following her death, and there were many, one from the Washington Post, "Civil rights leader Dorothy Height had fashion flair, including stunning hats," caught my eye. While it is true no one could wear a hat with more flair than Dr. Height, an article coming out right after she died which focused on what she wore seemed rather crass.

But the story it told was not crass at all, in fact it was actually quite profound. Referring to the March on Washington, the article told how Dr. Height's sense of style was on full display. Her hair was beautifully coiffed, she was wearing a hat of course, along with a suit, earring, and heels. The writer, Robin Givhan, goes on to say:

Records indicate that the temperature went into the 80s that day, yet she is not alone in her formality. Women in the crowd are neatly turned out in dresses and suits. Men wear jackets and ties. How hot and sticky must the protesters have been? How physically burdened? Wouldn't they have been more comfortable in shirt sleeves and shift dresses? Perhaps.

But they were engaged in serious business. And while they were marching for equal rights -- the women in heels, no less -- they already had their dignity. Their attire reflected the power and value of what they already possessed.

Throughout her long life, Dr. Height's sense of style helped to convey, not just to the rich and powerful, but also to those who needed her help and needed to be inspired, that she meant business. As she once said, "We have to improve life, not

just for those who have the most skills and those who know how to manipulate the system. But also for and with those who often have so much to give but never get the opportunity.”

Her passion and her fight for civil rights was one she lived out from the inside out.

Now, most of us will never have a resume quite as remarkable as Dr. Height’s, or have such a profound impact on the greater society, but it still doesn’t mean the message, or messages, we convey to others about what we find to be essential are unimportant.

Think for a moment—how would you answer if someone asked what is the most important thing in your life? What are your passions? What do people need to do to make the world a better place?

And then, taking into account your answers to those questions, think about this—how do you convey to others about what makes life worthwhile? What do you stand for? Who do you stand with?

These aren’t easy questions, and finding the best way to communicate their answers can be complicated, make us feel uneasy or even scared. But if we don’t deal with them head on, chances are our message will either be less clear or have a diminished impact.

However, as we read the Gospels, I think we can take heart these were things even Jesus had to grapple with. Clarity was essential. He always knew, or suspected, his time was limited.

In all four of the Canonical Gospels, as Jesus comes closer and closer to his death, his words to his disciples take on greater urgency. He knows he only has a short time in which to prepare them: to instill in them the essence of his message and hopefully give them what they’ll need in order to persevere once he’s gone.

Immediately prior to today’s passage from John, Jesus tells his disciples he is leaving but will go prepare a place for each of them and then come and bring them there. He later assures them, “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Today’s reading is a continuation of that same conversation and by now he is a little more blunt, but not unkind:

Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them . . . Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’”

In other words, love as I have loved; do as I have done; know I will always be with you. Be at peace. Trust in what I am saying to you.

It is in many ways, the essence of his message. And for those of us who are Christian, it should be at the essence of ours as well.

Last week, as I was preparing this sermon, I realized I had never actually sat down and answered the same questions I just asked you. So I did, and it was tremendously clarifying. For me, I think the message I try and convey is this:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Do so with integrity, kindness, and humor. And as a coda, be good to animals, and honor and love your mothers.

But knowing our message can be the easy part. How we convey it from the inside out is often harder.

Because we're not just talking about evangelism and how we bring up (or not) Jesus or God or the church. It's bigger: it's how we live our lives, how we carry ourselves, how we spend our time, and perhaps most importantly, how we get out of our own way and let God continually transform us and our message.

Our own Canon Gerry Walcutt, who as many of you know recently died, got it right. He touched innumerable people with the Gospel through his work as a chaplain and later as a trainer of chaplains. He conveyed God's love through his faithfulness, advocacy for full inclusion, access to good health care for all people, and willingness to speak up.

He did so to the end of his days and beyond. His joy in serving God in general and this community in particular was abundant in the readings and hymns he chose for his funeral. It was just vintage Gerry—he was a most authentic follower of Jesus.

Every person here can tell us something about God no one else can. Every person here has the ability to touch people's lives with the love of Jesus in a way no one else can. And because of those two things, every person here has the potential to change the world in a way no one else can, be it one person at a time or millions.

A clergyman once asked Dr. Height when asked how she continued to do the work she did and help make the Civil Rights Movement as successful as it was and she answered, "We knew what was wrong. We knew what was right. We talked to God, and he fixed it."<sup>ii</sup>

And while I don't think she necessarily meant it in this way, it's pretty good advice for all of us.

Talk to God. Find your message. Embrace it. Live it. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid because the peace of Christ is with us all now and be always will be.

The Rev. Canon Allisyn Thomas  
9 May 2010

---

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2010/04/dorothy-height-1912-2010.html> (accessed 5 May 2010)

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-wallis/dr-dorothy-heights-funera\\_b\\_558423.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-wallis/dr-dorothy-heights-funera_b_558423.html) (accessed 7 May 2010)