

Free at last!

Sermon – Peace Church Munich, August 20, 2023

Pastor Heidemarie Klingeberg

Introduction/Dedication

Peace be with you!

I want to **dedicate** this sermon to the memory of your former Pastor and my beloved friend

Christine Erb-Kanzleiter

who tragically passed away on the 4th of August.

Human Dignity, Equality and Justice were subjects she was enthusiastic to talk and write about.

Ruby Bridges

On the first page of our Worship bulletin you find the photo of **Ruby Bridges**: Nicely dressed, flower in her hair, school-bag in hand she steps down the stairs in front of the *William-Frantz-Elementary School* in New Orleans. When you look at the photo (and the other one in our bulletin): she does not come with her parents, – as we normally would expect – but was escorted by officers of the **federal police**.

And what we **cannot** see on the picture is the mob around her throwing things and crying out: “***We don’t want integration!***”

The School building is completely empty, for all other parents left their children at home. They didn’t want them to attend the same school with a **black girl**. There is only **one teacher** who agrees to teach the little pupil: **Barbara Henry** from Boston.

This scene is not happening in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, but on **November 14 in 1960**.

A **six year old girl**, terrorized just because she wants to go to school and get a good education! (Sounds like Afghanistan)

May 17 in 1954 – the birth year of Ruby – a law had been passed by the Federal Court in the U. S. concerning the **end of segregation** in schools.

Ruby Bridges Hall and her parents were fighting for the realization six years after the implementation of this law.

With time passing conditions for Ruby improved in **very tiny steps**, but racial segregation was still in effect in American society, and as an adult, Ruby Bridges Hall became an activist of the **Civil Rights Movement**.

March on Washington 1963

Three years after Ruby's first day at school the famous "**March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom**", was held in [Washington, D.C.](#), on **August 28, 1963**.^[3] This year we celebrate the 60. Anniversary of this event. At least 250.000 to 300.000 people of all races were taking part.

1963 marked the 100th anniversary of the signing of the [Emancipation Proclamation](#) by President [Abraham Lincoln](#) after the Civil War.

The purpose of the march was to advocate for the civil and economic rights of [African Americans](#) which had been granted in several **Constitutional Amendments** since **1865** when slavery was officially and legally abolished. But the social and economic situation of black people in America did not improve during the decades and especially the states in the South enacted several laws against the rights of black people like the segregation law or the interdiction of so called mixed marriages.

At the march of 1963, final speaker Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) (1929-1968), a Baptist Minister and Civil Rights' activist, was standing in front of the [Lincoln Memorial](#) and delivered his historic speech "[I Have a Dream](#)" calling for an end to the evil of [racism](#).

He was postulating **dignity, equality, freedom and justice for all people**.

Martin Luther King

Martin Luther King was a **Nobel Peace Prize** Laureate, an architect and spokesman of the nonviolent civil rights movement and one of the most influential figures of the twentieth century with more than 200 honorary degrees –

but most important: he was a **Minister** of the Gospel (in third generation by the way) in the Baptist Church and **his faith** was the motor of his actions.

He was **deeply convinced** that Christians **cannot remain** indifferent when faced with the suffering of God's children in any circumstances. He wrote about a **Prayer experience** In January 1956:

“I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: **Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth, and God will be at your side forever.**”

And he also was deeply convinced that values like human **dignity, equality, freedom** and **justice** are **core Christian values** deeply rooted in the Holy Scriptures, especially in the sermon of the Mount.

Christian Convictions

In his autobiographical book **Stride toward Freedom** he wrote that he became inspired by

the **Sermon of the Mount** with its sublime teachings of love and **Ghandi's method** of nonviolent resistance.” He wrote:

“I came to feel that this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.” (85)

The book **Stride toward Freedom** describes the **Montgomery Story** of the bus boycott after Rosa Parks was arrested in the town of Montgomery, Alabama, on the 5th of December 1955 because she refused to give her bus seat to a white person for she was exhausted, weary of work and no more willing to suffer the rules of segregation.

Stride toward Freedom meant (citation)

“the chronicle of 50.000 negroes who took to heart the principles of nonviolence, who learned to fight for their rights with the weapon of love and who, in the process, acquired a new estimate of their own human worth.”

This was the **beginning** of the non-violent mass protests that 8 years later resulted in the March on Washington in 1963.

Non violent resistance

For me the most impressive passages in this book are the pages on **non-violent resistance**.

The **heart** of the protests were – interesting parallel to the protests in **East Germany** some decades later- weekly **devotional meetings** that followed a simple pattern:

Songs – prayer – opening remarks – scripture reading – meditation – collection
– reports from various committees

The **core message** of these meetings was:

“We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love. Our actions must be guided by the deepest principles of our Christian faith. Love must be our regulating ideal.”

“Protest courageously, yet with dignity and Christian love!”

Five principles of non-violent resistance

The most interesting chapter in “Stride toward Freedom” is the description of **5 principles** about non-violent resistance. If you think about the brutality black people faced, even when protesting peacefully, this principles are remarkable. They earn **respect** and are setting a timeless **example**.

1. Non-violent resistance is **not** a do-nothing method or an **acceptance** of evil, it **resists**. It is not cowardice or passive nonresistance, but non-violent **resistance**.
2. It does **not** seek to **humiliate** the opponent but to win his **friendship** and understanding. The end is redemption and **reconciliation**.
3. The resistance is directed **against forces** of evil rather than against **persons** who happen to be doing the evil. We are out to defeat **injustice**, not persons who may be unjust.
4. It is a willingness to accept **suffering** – if necessary – without striking back and turning the other cheek.
5. The nonviolent resister refuses to hate his opponent. At the center of nonviolence stands the **principle of love**. We must have sense and morality enough to cut off the **chain of hate**.

Not passivity – but action; not fight – but suffering; not hate – but love.

Practical consequences

In the last 60 years since 1963 the human rights situation has improved in many ways. On the other hand not only the death of **George Floyd** by police violence in May 2020 has shown that racism has continued to be a **vivid problem** in the United States and many other countries.

In Germany on **August 10** we celebrated the 75th anniversary of the German **constitutional assembly** after the 2nd World War on the island of Herrenchiemsee in 1948. The German Constitution/Grundgesetz says:

Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar – human dignity must be protected

—several years later, on **August 13**, 1961, another August anniversary, the **Wall** was built that separated the German people for nearly 40 years.

Call

Today – although we live in a country where freedom and human dignity are guaranteed by constitution and law – people **still experience** racism, antisemitism, discrimination and xenophobia— sometimes subtle, sometimes openly.

I dare say that each one of us has probably experienced some kind of discrimination because of color, religion or nationality, gender or other reasons.

The Bible tells us that God created every man and woman to his image – as we have read in Psalm 8 – and every human possesses equal worth, dignity and freedom.

There is a wonderful sentence in “Stride toward Freedom” P. 180): after the successful bus boycott in Montgomery one of the participants told a reporter:

“We got our heads up now, and we won’t ever bow down again – no sir – except before God!”

in Galatians 5,1 the Bible tells us:

„It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” ... of any kind – as I would add.

You are God’s precious and beloved Child!

Don’t accept discrimination and oppression as normal, but resist courageously and in a non-violent way to fight for your rights and for the rights of people who are weak. That leads us to the point of solidarity with and prayer for our brothers and sisters in Christ and for all people who are oppressed and live under conditions of war and dictatorship.

Our Christian Hope

We know that we live on an imperfect and sinful earth and that

justice, dignity, freedom and **equality** will finally be fulfilled at the Coming of Christ.

Nevertheless – As Martin Luther King said in his famous speech “**I have a Dream**”:

with God’s help “we will be able **to speed up that day**” and at least partly fulfill the dream

“When we allow freedom to ring. When we let it ring from every city and every hamlet, we will be able to speed up the day when all of God’s children, Black and White, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: We shall overcome.” (I have a dream, last passage).

“Free at last, Free at last – Great God Almighty, we are free at last!”

Amen

Pastor Heidemarie Klingeberg