THE NECESSITY OF VISION

Pilgrim Church, Duluth January 18, 1981 Elizabeth N. Oettinger

For most of this week, I worked on trying to write a sermon about Martin Luther King, Jr. I read books and articles and sermons and speeches, and tried to immerse myself in the internal conflicts of the United States in the late 1950s and 1960s. I tried to take in the despicable reality of Jim Crow laws and voting restrictions, of segregated lunch counters and little black children killed on their way to Sunday School. I tried to understand the courage that it must have taken to emerge as a black leader in those days, a black leader who would not compromise his vision of a society based on love and mutual respect, and who chose the means of non-violent resistance to reach those ends.

And once I felt that I had an adequate remembrance of those days, in both their horror and their grandeur, I tried to write my sermon. For two days I tried to write it. But as I struggled with my words, it became clear to me that there was nothing that I could say about him that Martin Luther King had not said more eloquently, no memory I could evoke that his own words did not evoke more powerfully, no description of his courage and specifically Christian vision which was not more obvious and challenging in his own writings.

And so I decided not to write a sermon for today. In place of a sermon, I would like to read to you a letter that the Reverend Dr. King wrote from the jail in Birmingham, Alabama, to a group of Southern white clergymen who had issued a statement to the press deploring King's impatience and his choice of tactics. The letter is quite long so I have edited it. It was written in April of 1963, almost 5 years to the day before Dr. King was assassinated while standing on the steps of a Memphis hotel.

I hope that you will find in the letter not only a recollection of the past, but also a challenge for the future. I hope that you will not only hear the words of a now dead leader, but also feel the quickening of a living Vision. In that way, will the memory of Dr. King be truly honored.

My dear fellow clergymen:

> While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely..." I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago, the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came, we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here.

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "Thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus, and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly....

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations... It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative...

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit-ins and marches and so forth? Is not negotiation a better path? You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Non-violent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored...Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood...

One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken in Birmingham is untimely..... Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was "well-timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now, I have heard the word, "Wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing reality. This "Wait." has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed towards gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse -and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your brothers and sisters at whim; when you have seen hate filled

policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters, when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisting and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people;... when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you;...when your first name becomes nigger, your middle name becomes boy, and your last name becomes John; when you are harried day and night because you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"---then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait...I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience...

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's councils or the Ku Klux Klan, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season", to be more diplomatic...

I had hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time in relation to the struggle for freedom, would reject the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time itself that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of bad people, but for the appalling silence of good people. Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of people willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides---and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in non-violent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history. So I have

not said to my people, "Get rid of your discontent." Rather I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist.

But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter, I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who despitefully use you and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream..." So the question is not whether we be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for love or for hate? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? Perhaps the South, and nation, and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

Let me make note of my other major disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear the white ministers declare: "Follow this decree because integration is morally right, and because the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted on the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern. And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which makes a strange, un-biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular. It has been my conviction that any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried.

There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced as being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Things are different now. The church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is the arch-defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent--and often even vocal sanction of things as they are. But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose

its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

Never before have I written so long a letter. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts, and pray long prayers.

If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than true brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of brotherhood and love will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of peace and brotherhood,

Martin Luther King, Jr.