

From the Threshing Floor to the Public Square
[Romans 12:9-18](#)
Lynnewood United Methodist Church
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I officially completed half of the required coursework for my Master of Divinity degree. Of all the courses that I have taken to date, my hands down favorite course is Baldwin, Bible and Social Justice. In this course we explored the writings of James Baldwin, his use of biblical principles and allusions, and how we apply these principles to create and sustain social justice movements.

James Baldwin, born in 1924, was an African American author, activist and arguably a progressive liberation theologian who used his pen to diary, explore, explain and eventually respond to the social rejection he experienced as a black, bi-sexual man living in America. In his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin revisits his journey into self-awareness, activism and transforming empowerment. Baldwin's protagonist, John Grimes gives us a critical view of the institutions that framed Baldwin's reality: his family, his church, and his community.

Go Tell It on the Mountain is divided into three parts:

Part One –"The Seventh Day" is a biblical allusion referring to Genesis 2, verses 1-3: The biblical seventh day is a respite and a day of reward, a holy day of celebration and rest from the previous days' work in which God had completed his creation, and "God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." In this section we are introduced to the key players and places that influenced the development of John Grimes' worldview. The novel opens on the morning of John's 14th birthday. When John awakens, he sees his home for what it is ... literally and metaphorically dirty, dark and dying. His family, with his abusive religious stepfather at the helm, are physically, emotionally and spiritually crippled. They lived in abject poverty. The family as a whole was well aware of its second class status predetermined for them because of poverty and their black bodies. The love that Christianity purported never manifested itself in his supposed Christian home. More importantly, LOVE failed to appear in his church which like his home was dirty, dark and dying. In the midst of it all, glimmers of hope found John. He fondly remembered his school teacher's kind and encouraging words that opened his eyes to his academic potential and the comfort he experienced when he was in the presence of his Sunday school mentor, Elisha. It is amazing how random acts of kindness can have such an effect on an individual's life. John's foundation was complete. God had done His part. The cards were dealt and it was up to John to decide how to play them.

Part Two is entitled "Prayers of the Saints." In this section, John travels back in time to observe his stepfather, his mother and his stepfather's sister through their prayers. It is through their prayers, John explores their aborted hopes and dreams. He accesses the lives they planned for themselves, specifically the lives they foresaw when they migrated from the segregated south to the anticipated promised land of Harlem. It is

here John realizes that hopes and dreams are not sustainable when they stand alone. Like with all of us, there is a backstory to be told—filled with people, places, successes, disappointments, joy, pain, circumstances and individual decisions that create our here and now reality. As John retraced his stepfather's footsteps from his youth to his present existence, John realized that his stepfather as a young man was not different from himself. Although John's stepfather is the quintessential antagonist throughout the novel, the reader cannot escape his or her own humanity and have compassion for him. The hopelessness that surrounded him created a bitter human being ...incapable of experiencing and extending love even to those closest to him.

The third and final section is entitled the "The Threshing Floor," which like the opening section is a biblical allusion. In biblical times there was no machinery, so after the harvest, the grain was separated from the straw and husks by beating it manually. First there had to be a flat surface that was smooth and hard, and this was known as the threshing floor. The process of threshing was performed generally by spreading the sheaves on the threshing floor and causing oxen and cattle to tread repeatedly over them, loosening the edible part of cereal grain from the scaly, inedible chaff that surrounded it. Then winnowing forks were used to throw the mixture into the air so the wind could blow away the chaff, leaving only the good grain on the floor. For John Grimes, the Threshing Floor was where he endured the arduous spiritual and emotional process ... where he placed the sum total of his being on the altar of worship and presented himself as a living sacrifice ... which was his reasonable service ... while seeking to serve God. John willingly endured the discomfort of reliving every pain, every disappointment, every fear, every insecurity and every hate that crippled people like his stepfather leaving them there in exchange for the opportunity to experience love and ability to extend it to others. John feared becoming his stepfather and was willing to endure whatever was necessary to avoid that future. Through John's journey to self-awareness and personal liberation, Baldwin offered a portal of entrance to emotional and spiritual healing, hope and wholeness ... where the transformed's message inspires the transformation of others, creating movements of political, economic and social activism.

My brothers and sisters, we cannot make orange juice without oranges. Arguably, we cannot expect the world around us to be transformed if we are yet to be transformed ourselves. In other words, we cannot give what we do not have. We cannot create and sustain social justice movements without first being the social change we want to see.

Today we celebrate the 88th birthday of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. born in 1929 and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. King experienced the warmth of love of family and regularly heard words of exhortation and Christ centered transformative messages. However, the segregated world outside of the confines of his home and faith community clearly exhibited that separate was not equal and told him that he and others who looked like him, were less than and unworthy of basic human rights. Dr. King viewed his advocacy for human rights and his social protest against poverty and injustice as his reasonable service as Jesus' disciple. He did not confuse relationship with religion.

He understood that religion had the tendency to exclude and create outsiders. More importantly, his message of LOVE proclaimed that we are God's creation, that we are family irrespective of our superficial fleshly differences - Black / White ... Citizen / Immigrant ... Male / Female, Gay / Straight ... Queer / Questioning. Relationship with God is all inclusive ... and no one person or group holds the patent on it. Brother Martin said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." To love God is to serve God, and we serve God by serving and loving His creation. Like Christ who washed Judas' feet in the midst of knowing that Judas had betrayed him, Dr. King chose to love and pray for those who hated him and sought to destroy him. King surrendered to the Most High ... chose to leave the hurt, humiliation and suffering he experienced at the hands of state sponsored segregation ... and the all too willing enforcers of it on the altar of worship so he could effectively serve the Creator and inspire others to catch the vision of equality for all of humanity. Dr. King responded to human suffering and provoked others from every corner of the planet to view civil rights not as a black and white issue but as a human issue. In his faithfulness to God, Dr. King bore tangible fruit that lived beyond his 39 years of life. It was within the process of seeking God daily and loving God with all of his heart, mind and soul, his worldview evolved from us 4 and no more ... to I am my sister's and my brother's keeperand I love my neighbor extends beyond race, class, gender, borders, cultures, languages and traditions...here, there and everywhere. Dr. King personified the unconditional love of Christ. He chose to love those who loved him as well as those who hated him.

Following Dr. King's example, brothers and sisters, we are God's disciples ... We are in God and God is in us ... we cannot pick and choose who we will love. How can we love God whom we have never seen and have hate in our hearts for those we have seen? We cannot bring to fruition God's will on Earth as it is in Heaven without starting from a place of LOVE. Most of us will NEVER deliver an inspiring speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, receive the Nobel Prize for Peace, nor will we author essays and books that cause millions to re-examine their personal humanity. HOWEVER, that does not dismiss our social responsibility as citizen of planet earth or invalidate our spiritual covenant of responsibility as the children of God.

There is a song that I learned when I was in the 4th grade. It simply says:
Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me ...
Let there be peace on earth the peace that was meant to be ... With God as our father
... brothers and sisters are we ...
Let me walk with my siblings ... in perfect harmony ...
Let there be peace on earth on let it begin with me.

Brothers and sisters, God's love is a gift freely given to us. Transformation of spirit, soul and mind is an arduous ongoing process which is an act of our willingness to trust God and surrender the sum total of our being on the altar of the threshing floor where we become the change we want to see... taking the message of healing, hope and wholeness to the public square for all to hear.

Happy Birthday Dr. Martin Luther King, and thank you of being the personification of loving God, loving humanity and living our faith. Amen