

When times look bleak, when the problems of our time crowd the world, when we find no respect anywhere for anyone-- we need what the Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas calls “moral imagination”.

Black slaves in the United States used song and story to envision a world that was not yet theirs. They sang of living in the promised land. They sang of freedom—they lived and died in bondage with freedom not yet in their grasp—but they sang about it, thought about it, envisioned it. They faith in the dream.

They acted as *if* they were already free—in their hearts.

Songs were also sung during the civil rights movements in the 60’s.

We shall overcome, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe we shall overcome, some day.

We'll walk hand in hand, some day.

We shall live in peace, some day.

The whole wide world around some day

These activists and marchers and workers envisioned a time when all people--black and white-- could all live together peacefully, each one respecting the other. Many didn’t live to see the civil rights bill enacted, but it did happen. As they had had faith it would.

Maybe full civil rights for all citizens in our country isn’t something even we will see, but we can use our moral imagination to *act as if* all people here are free and treated as having equal worth. We have ***faith***.

So let’s talk about what that means, “to have faith”. To us, it may mean right belief. Remember, though, to a Hebrew Jew, *like Jesus*, faith meant something very specific. Faith has three components—all of which had to be operating for faith to be present:

- the capacity to trust,

- the courage to act
- the expectation that God would meet you in that action

To a good Jew- to Jesus- faith always provokes an action. James put it well in his letter: “Faith, without action, is dead.” When we have faith in God it compels us to act accordingly. Faith isn’t just something we *have*, it’s something we *do* because of our beliefs.

Sometimes we need to remind ourselves (and each other) that what currently is happening in our world, is not yet the kingdom Jesus talked about. But we have to have trust-- have faith—that it will change.

We then we have to act as if we believe it.

I don’t mean that we just “think” the kingdom is coming or “wish” it was coming, like we “wish” we could win the lottery.

Faith means we can actually envision- see—God’s kingdom that is breaking in through the chaos. And faith means we act as if we are already in that kingdom, even as we are surrounded by things that try and fool us into thinking that the kingdom will never come.

In the gospel reading this morning –the disciples had just finished listening to Jesus’ stories about how God feels about his children: the prodigal son, the lost sheep, the story of Lazarus-- and they are trying to get their heads around how God’s children *all have worth*. God loves everyone- not just the rich and powerful, not just the righteous, not even just the people in their own religious group, as the Pharisees have taught them.

Jesus fully understands that his teachings are difficult: that many people then, and many people now, will stumble over this radical notion that sinners are worth as much in God’s eyes as the ones who are always good.

Then Jesus tells the disciples to trust him. To have faith. And—he tells them—even if their faith is as tiny as a mustard seed—they have the power within them to change the world.

And if they do, so do we.

That's a pretty big statement.

If we believe that--- trust that-- have *faith* that what Jesus says is true—then we must act with justice. We must show mercy. We must love. Because we trust Jesus, we have the courage to act and we know God will meet us in these actions.

We act “as if” this kingdom of God really exists.

The principle of “acting as if” isn't a new concept. William James-- a philosopher and physician-- wrote about this phenomenon nearly 100 years ago. James found that for someone to bring about in physical reality what they wanted in their lives, it happened most often when they acted as if it was already the reality.

Psychology professor and author Richard Wiseman says that positive action is far more than just positive thinking. He says that by acting as if you are a certain type of person, you become that person.

So if we act as if we are Christ in the world and act as he did—loving everyone and bringing his healing touch wherever we go—Christ's world—Christ's kingdom—will become a reality. Oh, we may not live to see it, but it's coming. It will arrive. And it's not positive thinking or “fake it till you make it.” It's more like “believing is seeing.”

All it will take is a tiny bit of faith in action. Our acts of faith will change the world, like we are uprooting a tired tree of hate and war and greed, and hurling it into the sea.

Because if faith *without action* is dead, that means faith *with action* is stunningly alive. AMEN.