

The Difference Faith Makes: A Look at Martin Luther King Jr.

A Sermon preached at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Gladstone, NJ on Sunday, January 19, 2020, the eve of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday by the Rev. Dr. Kent R. Walley, rector.

My sermon is going to be different this morning. I am going to talk about history – recent history in America that I believe still impacts our country. On this eve of Martin Luther King Jr Day, I want to reflect with you on his life, his theology and the history of the civil rights movement. I do believe this history can help us understand our country today and inspire us to see the relevance of our faith to how we live our lives.

This is personal for me. God has put all of this on my heart and I still have much to learn. As a follower of Christ it pains me to see racial tensions. Through the cross of Christ we are united to one another. God loves people from all races, all ethnicities, all nations and all cultures. Jesus told us that in fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah, He came to release the captives, free the oppressed and preach good news to the poor.

On November 22nd, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas Texas. I don't remember this event, because I was 2 years old at the time. Nor do I remember that day just a few months earlier on August 28th, 1963, when the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., led a peaceful demonstration in Washington D.C. An estimated 250,000 demonstrators packed the mall from the Lincoln Memorial to the Washington monument. Nerves were on edge around D.C. Attorney General Robert Kennedy had ordered thousands of National Guard troops on standby bracing for riots, ready to be called in from just outside the city. Special ordinances closed liquor stores. Retail owners removed merchandise from their shops in anticipation of looting. But the National Guard was not needed. The demonstration surprised many by being so peaceful. There were only 4 arrests, none related to any kind of violence on the part of demonstrators marching for jobs and freedom. And King gave his famous "I have a dream" speech.

Neither do I remember 1964, when the Civil Rights Act was passed and King received the Nobel Peace Prize; nor 1965, when the Voting Rights Act was passed. I was six-years-old in April of 1968, when an assassin's bullet killed Martin Luther King Jr., in Memphis, Tennessee. I have no memory of this or the race riots that followed.

I was alive through this traumatic time in U.S. history but I was too young to remember any of it. And during my years in school in the 70s, it had not yet become part of the curriculum. I had known only pieces of this history.

So when I saw that my alma mater, Fuller Seminary was offering a doctor of ministry course on the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the civil rights movement, I decided to attend. I was required to read numerous books, listen to 8 CDs of King's sermons and watch documentaries. The class was held two weeks ago, onsite in Birmingham, Alabama at the Civil Rights Institute. This was a thought-provoking,

educational experience that was at times moving and at times a deeply spiritual experience for me.

I must offer two caveats regarding this sermon. First: this is not a political sermon. One of the things I have come to appreciate about King was how he was not wedded to either political party. His theology and leadership set the agenda and the political parties reacted and tried to keep up. He did not so much endorse parties as he spoke out against obvious injustice and called people to take action, regardless of their political party. He sought to unite people, not divide them. He tried to show that making changes for greater justice was good not just for African-Americans but for all Americans, for the good of our country.

Second, I am aware that for many in our modern day, King is remembered for his adultery. King was a human being. Imperfect and sinful like the rest of us. This is not to excuse his actions. They do leave him vulnerable to the charge of being hypocritical when calling for change based on Christian morality. Nevertheless, King's public legacy has much to teach us about Christianity in the world, living out our faith, and relating to the political powers of our times. King was flawed, just as King David was flawed. David committed adultery, and then murdered Bathsheba's husband. King was flawed just as Moses was flawed. He killed an Egyptian taskmaster and then fled the country. King and the flawed human beings in Scripture remind each of us that you don't have to be perfect to be used by God to accomplish great things in the world. We are all imperfect sinners in need of forgiveness, each with our own flaws, but that does not prevent us from having a dynamic relationship with God and serving Him.

Let us consider then King, his theology and role in the Civil Rights Movement. Another name I didn't know was Emmet Till. Perhaps you all remember. Emmet was a 14-year-old African-American teenager who was lynched in 1955. A white woman accused him of flirting with her in the grocery store she owned in Money, Mississippi. The next night her husband and half-brother abducted Emmet, tortured and mutilated his body, then shot him and threw him in the river. His body was recovered a few days later. His face was mutilated and marred so that his facial features were unrecognizable, but his mother made the decision to have pictures taken and an open casket funeral so the world could see what had been done to her son. The two men who killed Emmet were acquitted by an all-white jury. They were not brought to justice until 2002.

Less than three months later in December of 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the colored section of the bus. The white bus driver told her to give her seat to a white man, since the white section of the bus was full. Rosa had heard prominent speakers in town speaking about the lynching of Emmett Till. The Montgomery Improvement Association formed to lead a bus boycott and they elected the new minister in town to be their president, 26-year-old pastor, named Martin Luther King Jr.

King came on the scene at an inflection point in the history of race relations in the United States. Tensions had been building for years. After the Civil War, laws were passed to

give the newly freed slaves a portion of the land on which they had labored. But the laws were soon repealed and with very few exceptions, most of the newly freed slaves began their new lives lacking education, job skills, money, and land. The white upper class still had all the resources. What emerged in the south was a series of laws called the “Jim Crow” laws that subjugated and segregated the African American people. To help enforce these dehumanizing laws violence was used. From 1882 until 1960 some 4384 people were lynched (according to the Equal Justice Institute, though the Tuskegee Institute puts the number at 4743). Many of the lynchings were celebrated with public ceremonies in a circus-like atmosphere. There was no trial, no jury, no defense, no evidence presented. Some were killed for being *accused* of serious crimes like theft, rape and murder, but many were lynched for things such as talking disrespectfully to white men, or refusing to run an errand for a white woman. An African-American mother was lynched for reprimanding white children who had thrown rocks at her.

The violence, injustice and de-humanizing “Jim Crow” laws were a way of life for even middle class African-Americans in the south from the end of the Civil War right up until the 1950s. Segregation prevented African-Americans from having the same opportunities and education as white people. One small but poignant example is when King talks about trying to explain to his young daughter why she couldn’t go to the amusement park she had seen advertised on television. “Colored” people simply weren’t allowed to attend.

It is amazing to me that in such a context, King effectively led a large movement to not retaliate with violence but to merely march peacefully. Throughout the course of his life, King regularly received phone calls that threatened his life and the callers often threatened to also kill his wife and children. Bombs exploded at churches and at African-American homes. One rocked King’s house. Violence erupted when the so-called Freedom Riders simply tried to ride a bus which at that point both white and black people were legally allowed to do. On more than one occasion, assurances of safe passage were given, only to end in violence against the riders while police were nowhere to be found. Sometimes the police themselves were perpetrators of the violence. There were times the police fired tear gas into groups that had been told they could gather at a certain place, and at times the police used night sticks, police dogs and high pressure fire hoses.

I would like to observe three remarkable things about King in this context: 1) his personal relationship with God, 2) his call for faith from demonstrators and 3) his repeated message for people to love their enemies.

1) King had an active relationship with God. On more than one occasion he speaks about how incredibly difficult it was for him to be a spokesman and leader of the movement. At midnight one evening, he received another phone call from someone who was threatening to kill King and his family. And he became discouraged. King talks about making coffee and going into the kitchen and pouring his heart out to God. He prayed, “Lord, I can’t do this. I can’t go on. It is too difficult.” King describes how God met him in that kitchen and assured him that God would go with him. King found new courage, optimism and resolve to continue amidst the threats and the violence.

At times King struggled to decide the right course of action or to know how much personal risk he should take. Time and again, he left meetings for private prayer and then returned with a renewed sense of direction. King's leadership galvanized the movement for civil rights, his speeches helped people see the injustices. ***None of that would have happened if King had not had a vital relationship with the living God.***

2) King led the movement based on Christian principles. He had learned non-violence from Gandhi, but he infused it with Christian teaching. In his book, *Why We Can't Wait*, King states that in the demonstrations in Birmingham, when protestors were facing police brutality, arrest, police dogs, and fire hoses, everyone who was preparing to demonstrate was required to sign a card agreeing to among other things: "meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus; pray daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free; and strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health." (68). In other words, protestors were not allowed to march unless they had a daily devotional practice.

King also talks about how fundamental the hymn singing was before and during the demonstrations. The demonstrations were organized in mass meetings that took place in churches. And during several of the marches through the years when King was present, he would kneel for prayer, and thousands behind him for blocks and blocks would all kneel for prayer.

How difficult it must have been, with all of that history of lynchings and dehumanizing Jim Crow laws fresh in mind, for African-American demonstrators to face police brutality and NOT respond with violence. It was one of the remarkable miracles of the 20th century that the protests remained as peaceful as they did. And at the heart of the movement was King and other Christian leaders calling for demonstrators to pray and reflect daily on the life and teachings of Jesus.

So King 1) persevered because of his personal relationship with God, 2) insisted on demonstrators staying in relationship with God through prayer and reflecting on Jesus, and 3) King called upon people regularly to "Love Your Enemies."

In fact, King made it a practice every year to be sure to preach a sermon about loving your enemies in whatever church he was serving at the time. In those sermons, King references Jesus' teaching. King talked about everyone being a sinner, but everyone also being created in the image of God. King said, "There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us." (*Strength to Love*, p.45) What a remarkable statement when thinking of those who committed lynchings!

In these sermons he spoke about how hating another person only poisons the soul of the one hating. He said we must love our enemies because "hate scars the soul and distorts the personality." He talked about restoring relationships through forgiveness – forgiving those who have wronged us. (*Strength to Love*, p.47) How difficult that must have been as he applied it to those who acted violently, such as police chief Bull Connor who turned police dogs loose on children in Birmingham.

In one sermon, King preached, “To our most bitter opponents we say, ‘We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with our soul force...We shall so appeal to the heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.’ Love is the most durable power in the world. This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of Christ, is the most potent instrument available in mankind’s quest for peace and security.” (*Strength to Love*, p. 50-51)

And so I wonder how you are receiving this sermon this morning. It has been hard to preach. I realize that I am preaching quite a different kind of sermon than the one I usually preach. But what I find compelling, is in the context of clear injustice and violence, King stood for love, not retaliation, and he was carried forward by His living, active and vital relationship with God. King called upon others to embody the teaching of Jesus Christ, and he did it all without being political or divisive. He called for unity. He called upon all sides to see that upholding civil rights made us all better people and made our country a better nation. He appealed to conscience without manipulation. And he was a leader who not only galvanized the divergent African-American leaders of his day, but his leadership moved two presidents, a congress and changed the hearts and minds of our nation.

In some ways this sermon is really just a way of saying that what we talk about every Sunday makes a difference in how we live our lives. King is an example of what a living vibrant, Spirit-filled life can look like. That was what it looked like for King in his context. It will look different for each person in their context. But can you join me in being inspired to live a life of love in connection with God?

In our day, I long to see the statesman, like Martin Luther King Jr. who will rise up and call for unity in this divided nation. I long to see someone who can call races together to see the good in each other and work toward the betterment of all people, rather than merely being concerned with political power, polls and elections. I long to see Christians rise up and lead the way – rather than follow along with partisan politics. I long to see Christians setting the agenda and calling upon both parties to work together to do the right thing.

Yet I fear that what has happened since the 1960s is that we have removed Christianity and faith from the public sector. We have come to understand faith as a subjective, private matter, just one among so many other subjective, private matters. With God removed from the marketplace and faith so diminished in the public arena, we have faith less and less in the forefront of our minds, and we give ourselves more and more to other things. King warned of this very danger. We as individuals lose so much and our world loses so much when faith becomes diminished and privatized.

In the civil rights movement, in the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Christianity and faith in God were at the forefront of all that happened. The result was

remarkably peaceful protest that convicted people's consciences and changed their hearts and minds.

Just one imperfect man prayed and listened to God, meditated on, and proclaimed the life and teachings of Jesus Christ – just one man God used to have such an impact. His life, joined with many Christians in that era brought about great change. In my opinion, understanding his life and this history is a first step in learning to talk to one another across our political, racial, and socio-economic differences.

May each of us, in our contexts, follow the example of King, pray and listen to God, meditate on the teachings of Jesus, take care to nurture the state of our souls and join God in loving action in this world and in the lives of those around us.

To Christ be the Honor Glory Power and Praise Now and Forever. AMEN.