



SUNDAY SERMON

Strive for Justice – Honoring the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

DATE

Epiphany 2
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PREACHER

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It's worth a trip to Memphis, Tennessee just to go to the National Civil Rights Museum. The exhibits lead visitors to a segregated lunch counter, through marches and protests, the bus boycott, the sanitation workers' protest, and more. It is informative, overwhelming; at times depressing; sometimes uplifting... but nothing prepared me for the final stage of the exhibit.

Before it was the Civil Rights Museum, the building was the Lorraine Motel: the motel where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was staying with colleagues – Ralph Abernathy, and others – when he was assassinated. The last stage of the exhibit lets one look into the room he had slept in, and then one steps out onto the balcony. The balcony which is imprinted upon our national imagination by the photograph – of King shot and fallen, Jessie Jackson pointing in the direction of an unseen assassin. The place is a shrine. Standing there, in silence, I wept.

This past week, re-reading some of his sermons, speeches, and letters, I wept again. And again, as always, in the company of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words, I find myself inspired; compelled to reach beyond my complacent insularity; to confess my silent betrayal of my sisters and brothers of any race or tribe who are oppressed; and to confess my silent betrayal of my own inmost beliefs; then to find new conviction about my own need to speak and act in different ways – the ways of God's justice and love. Let's give our thoughts to Dr. King for a few minutes today.

Two essential elements are defining for Martin Luther King's theology: history and love. History. God has acted, does act, and will act – in and through the deeds of humankind. This is bedrock. God delivered Moses and the Hebrews out of the chains of Pharaoh, and God can and will do it again. King affirmed time and again that "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." His understanding of God in history gave King an inextinguishable hope, and – in his words - "an audacious faith in the future" ("Where Do We Go From Here?"). It gave him a sense of his own place in the movement of this river of time; and he was aware of history as a judge, that prompted him to act.

The other core element in King's theology is love. To love one another, as God loves us. The principal activity of King's faith was to strive to love all people. Not just "nice" love, but Jesus' radical love: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." (Luke 6:27) King knew that to love our enemies was not only the "right" thing – according to Jesus' commandments; he understood that love is transformational, that love has power. Out of his ethic of love emerged the principal strategic tool for his work of justice-making and civil rights; namely, non-violent resistance.

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He did not seek to overcome the evil and violence of racism with more evil and violence; he sought to overcome it with love. Time and again he returned to the mantra that, "the end is preexistent in the means; destructive means cannot bring about constructive ends" ("The American Dream"). "Through violence you may murder a murderer but you can't murder murder. Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that." Differentiating between just and unjust laws, King sought through pressure, protests and other means to apply creative tension to upset the racist status quo.

During his life, King led this nation to take extraordinary strides for justice. Yet, in new guises and old, racism is as pernicious today as at any time - in our world, our nation, our city, and our own hearts. Poverty snares people of every hue – and black and brown people disproportionately. Prisons hold people of every hue – and black and brown people disproportionately.

I do not believe Dr. King would be pleased or rest easy knowing that we were remembering him and giving thanks for his prophetic ministry on this 91st anniversary of his birth. Unless... we heed his prophetic challenge and take from his memory a charge to act for justice in our time and place.

The long arc of God's desire for justice will only be made real in the lives of God's people by human words and deeds, by our words and deeds. King's charge to the church was to be, "the conscience of the state; ... to speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace."

King was compelled to speak and act: the outrageous disparity between the reality of racist oppression with which he lived – and the promise of God's justice, with which he also lived, gave him no choice. King was compelled because he knew first hand and intimately, had always known, the dehumanizing power of the evil against which he fought. We will not be compelled to act for justice unless or until we connect ourselves in some tangible and substantial way with those suffering injustice. Someone experiencing oppression first hand, does not have to be told to act.

Most of us here today are not experiencing oppression most of the time. (I will speak for myself: I am not experiencing oppression). If the prerequisite to action is compassion, the prerequisite to compassion is proximity – our proximity to and alliance with those oppressed by society. I can feel sorry for a woman in prison, I can feel sorry for a youth in this city whose family circumstances, or lack of education and support prevent him from having hope. I can feel sorry for many people who are far away from me, and I may even be prompted to act with charity. But it is not the same as standing with them.

Compassion is not "feeling sorry for;" compassion is "feeling with," "being with." The forces are great that tell us to look out for ourselves, to protect our own interest. Yet doing so isolates us from the suffering of others; it leaves compassion as a pleasant sentimentality and makes Christ's ethic of justice-with-love a distant dream. I must, we must, resist the attraction of insularity and security, and put ourselves in direct relationship with the oppressed of our communities, or I fear we shall remain forever mute, impotent. We shall not be the church of Christ.

This is why I believe it is so important for the people of St. Columba's to redouble our commitment to build partnerships with others across this city and beyond. Through the church or any number of other means, many of you have found and nurtured substantive relationships, many have not and are eager to do so. Now is the time.

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Even if we do not feel racist, we participate in systems that are racist. The systems are not neutral; they support equity or they don't. We cannot be neutral. "There is not in-between safe space of 'not racist.'" We are being either racist or anti-racist. (Kendi) This is not a matter of moral character. It's a matter of choice – each day, at countless decision points, through action or in-action, speech or silence. Either we take action as anti-racists, or we confess that our silence and inaction make us complicit, enabling injustice to grow.

No one is spared the choice. As King wrote in *Stride Toward Freedom*, "we are caught in a network of inescapable mutuality." "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Or, as he cautioned youths in one of his commencement addresses: "Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be" ("The American Dream").

From the call of the prophet Isaiah to the witness of John the Baptist, and to the first steps of those first disciples, our God in Christ calls each of us – to come, to follow, to walk together hand in hand in the light of God. Let us go forth with this charge. Amen.