

THE LEGACY OF NON-VIOLENCE

Sermon in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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Good evening. It is an honor and a privilege to be here this evening to speak to you on the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King. We have many holidays in the United States, some of which celebrate our various religious traditions, many more which celebrate America's history. But to my knowledge only one holiday is given over to a single American, only one holiday honors the unique life of an American individual. That holiday of course is tomorrow in honor of Dr. King.

When I first began to consider what I should say here this evening, I thought that perhaps I should reread Dr King's works and offer a summary of his thought, but that has done time and again by persons more qualified than I. Perhaps, I thought, I should take one of his famous sermons and make it contemporary, thinking in terms of using his critique of America's involvement in Viet Nam as a critique of our current military occupation of Iraq. Or maybe I should address the unresolved issue of racism in America today or the growing chasm between the have and the have-nots in our consumer culture. Or perhaps I could analyze the cultural roots of violence in the light of contemporary social theories. But none of these approaches felt right. What then could I say? Where was I to begin?

In my distress at feeling like I could not do justice to the man and his legacy, I began a conversation with the one I call Brother Martin. His life and work has been an inspiration to me for many years and there are moments when I read his sermons, letters and books that I have felt an almost tangible presence, the presence of one who in spite of great human weakness and typical moral failings, had touched the essence of the gospel.

The celebration of Dr King's life is a holiday out of context for America. All of our federal holidays celebrate our wars and our warriors, those living and dead who took up arms to fight for ideals and vested interests. This one holiday that begins the new year for us does not do that but instead calls into question all of our other holidays, in a sense, it deconstructs the very notion of what we celebrate the rest of the year. It is the singular federal holiday that exalts non-violence.

Non-violence. Roll that around your tongue; let it swirl around your brain a bit. Non-violence. No violence. Are we celebrating a utopian ideal, a place we long for but shall

never exist? Are we simply engaging in wishful thinking? Or have we gathered because we know, as Dr King knew that non-violence is not an ideal or a dream but is in fact a way of life to which we have been called as others before us have been called.

Others before us is an invitation for us to consider the notion of 'legacy.' Dr King has not been the only proponent on non-violence within and without the Christian tradition. One could recognize the Anabaptists and their modern heirs, the Peace Churches. Or one could look to St Francis of Assisi or a Polycarp. Or one might even look to the current bishop of Rome John Paul II. We might think of Gandhi or the early Bonhoeffer, a Mother Teresa, Bishop Tutu or many others. But most important we might just look at the early church, the church before the time of Constantine, before the time the Christian gospel became assimilated to the gods of war.

And this would all lead us, of course, to Jesus. Jesus the Prophet, the Sage, the Healer. Not the Jesus of the churches, not the metaphysical Jesus, but the human being who lived his life seeking to do the will of God, the One he called 'Daddy.' This is where Brother Martin would begin, so we shall also.

Christian pastors and those engaged in theological research are well aware that the life of Jesus has been subjected to intense scrutiny for the past 200 years. Dr King was also familiar with this research. There have been those who argued that Jesus was a revolutionary, like the ancient zealots of Masada. This view still retains some popularity on the fringes of New Testament scholarship but the majority of serious Jesus scholars recognize that this is not an accurate portrayal of the Rabbi from Nazareth. Unfortunately, such is not the case for the majority of Christian churches in America.

The so-called 'Moral Majority' views Jesus as a Mighty Warrior, a Judge who comes at the end of time to slaughter his enemies. This same Jesus authorizes contemporary wars. When President Bush was asked if he sought the advice of his father, former President Bush, prior to the advent of the war on Iraq he replied that he "sought the advice of a higher father." There is a grand tradition, following Constantine, that has justified war and death, killing and hate in the name of Jesus. This Jesus has apparently sanctioned all kinds of pogroms, Inquisitions, witch-hunts, lynchings and military invasions. And the terrible events of the Shoah were conducted in the name and with the authority of this violent Jesus. Sadly, the correlation of Jesus and Marxism has also left its seeds in liberation theology and those who seek justice at the end of sword or a gun.

This Jesus is actually the anti-Christ, the false Jesus, a supernatural fugazi. Dr King knew this. He knew that the gospels told a different story, that the story of Jesus was the story of the revealing of violence as a human phenomenon. Dr King was well aware that the Jesus of the gospels would have nothing to do with violence and retaliation, that the God whom Jesus worshipped was not a warrior but one whose sun "shone upon the evil and the good, whose rain fell upon both the just and the unjust." Dr King

knew that the God of Jesus was a God of love in whom "there was no shadow of turning." Dr King followed this Jesus onto the streets of Birmingham and Selma and Washington D.C., not the cultural Jesus, made in the image of sickness and death. Dr King knew that "violence was not an attribute of God" (Epistle to Diognetus).

It was Jesus, the Prince of Peace, which drew Dr King's admiration and worship. It was Jesus the Reconciler who dwelt in his heart. It was Jesus, who by His Spirit, inspired Dr King to leave behind the anti-Christ of culture and to listen to the voice of the Maker of heaven and earth.

I have come to the conclusion that the legacy of Dr King has become blurred because we modern devotees of Dr King do not hear the same voice that he heard as he read the gospels. It has been almost 35 years since "a shot rang out in a Memphis sky," and I wonder what Martin would say to us today.

I have a feeling that were he among us today he would call us back to the basics, to the foundation of our spirituality. He would remind us 'modern Christians' that we couldn't do what we seek to do apart from the Creator of all things. He would encourage us to develop our spirituality, for it is only a man or a woman of deep spirit than can stand in the front lines against the principalities and powers and stand victorious. In short, he would invite us to begin where he began and lived and died, in the Presence of the good and gracious Giver of Life.

There are six elements I believe Brother Martin would have us examine if we were to follow in his footsteps. These elements are all over his writing but more so, they are consistently found in all of his actions.

The first element is that there can be no protest without prayer. The Peace Movement in America today is in fragments. At rallies, one finds not just violent acts on the part of both the protesters and the police but also plenty of vociferous violent rhetoric. Dr King would remind us that when he protested he knelt and prayed and sang and gave thanks to the Daddy in heaven. When he faced Bull Connor and the powerful fire hoses, it was on his knees. When Martin was in Birmingham during Holy Week, his family and congregation practically begged him to come home and spend the holidays with them and to preach on Easter Sunday. He struggled with this for while he desired to be home in familiar surroundings he also wanted to be with the marchers. He spent all day Saturday in prayer and on Easter Sunday came out, dressed in jeans, ready to march. He would be arrested that day and would write his famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail. To be socially active without being spiritually alive will only bring frustration and despair and ultimately back to the circle of violence.

This brings us to the second element. When we protest in prayer, we recognize that there is no reformation apart from repentance. We are called to turn from the ways and means of violence and retaliation. If we carry into our protesting a spirit of anger

we will only create angrier reactions, we will only perpetuate the cycle of violence that we seek to disrupt. To repent is to return, to return to the God of Life, the God of Love. One easily thinks here of those early Anabaptist congregations who forsook the sword, of Conrad Grebel, Menno Simons and others who realized that unless Christians rejected any use of violence, there was little sense in following Christ. Indeed, they would be persecuted, tried, burnt alive or drowned by both Protestants and Catholics alike, but they knew that following Jesus meant little if there was not a profound change of life. If we seek reformation without repentance we will only end up deforming further that which we seek to change.

Like Dr King, we look out across the social landscape and see inequality and we yearn for this change. This brings us to our third element. There is no justice apart from the joy of reconciliation. When Dr King protested, he did not do so in order to make his 'enemies' look inferior, he sought to win them over. There is much talk about justice today and biblical scholars are fond of the Gospel of Luke in this regard. They point out the Lukan themes of justice for the poor and the disenfranchised. But it is Luke's gospel more than any other that also speaks of joy, the joy of reconciliation. Justice apart from the joy of reconciliation will only ever be judgment, a judgment born of the desire for retaliation, a judgment that will only end in victimizing the persecutor. True justice is just because it sees in the persecutor a brother or sister in desperate need of love, and freely offers that love. This love is the true antidote to the hate and anger expressed as violence.

One recalls a father who had two sons, who both rejected him, one son rather openly, the other more passive aggressively. When the younger son repented and came back to the father, the father rejoiced, but the older son resented the father's rejoicing seeking instead a justice of judgment. The father had to remind the elder son that real justice is found in the joy of reconciliation.

When we love the other, even when they hate us, we are brought to the fourth element of the new spiritual consciousness that Dr. King articulated. There is no freedom apart from forgiveness. We are not free when we are consumed with anger. We are not free when we think about ways of getting even. As long as we seek redress, whether in the courts, with our fists or at the end of a gun, we are not free. We remain in bondage to the cycle of violence. Again, we are reminded that it is in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus points the way to true freedom. As he is dying he says, "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing." Jesus is abandoned by his followers, is betrayed, is tried by his peers and executed by occupying forces. He hangs bleeding, brutalized and broken before the world but Jesus does not and will not ascribe intentionality to his persecutors.

There has been much written lately on who or what killed Jesus. But whether or not it was the Roman or Jewish authorities, the betrayal and denial of the disciples or the crowds, Jesus does not point the finger of blame. Jesus recognizes that hatred and

persecution stem from something far greater than the choices of his persecutors; this hatred directed his way is a spiritual power that entralls and seduces his persecutors; they are in bondage. Jesus frees them by forgiving them and in so doing also frees himself from the desire for retaliation and revenge. True freedom can only be found in forgiveness. True freedom is not freedom found in violence nor can it be located in the desire for retribution. True freedom is freedom to be-for-the-other-in-love.

A fifth element found in the life and writings of Dr. King is that Peace comes with a price. It is the price of self-sacrifice, of laying down our life for the other, of recognizing that the other is beloved even and especially when they are full of hate, rage and bitterness. The early Christians understood this. They spoke of Jesus as one who did not assert his rights, who "did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped and clung to, but surrendered himself and became a servant, even to the point of being persecuted to death." Jesus surrendered his rights in order to serve others, to put others first, to reconcile the enemy, to forgive the persecutor. Jesus did not insist upon his rights, he was not litigious. The peace Jesus brought came with a price. Dr. King understood this. Dr. King knew that he would be arrested if he marched in Birmingham and he knew that he would probably end up sacrificing his life for his people. He had been stabbed, threatened and was a hunted man by both white supremacists and the FBI. Still he did not give in or give up but carried on. Today, we seek peace with a price, but it is a price we want others to pay. True peace can only be found when we learn to give ourselves away, freely, unconditionally, in love.

This brings us to the sixth and final element. The only legacy that matters is a legacy of love. It is well known how much Brother Martin loved his family, his congregation and those who would gather with him in protest. It is well known that Martin felt no hatred for those who would do what they could to stop him. Dr. King knew that there are really only two kinds of legacies we can leave behind – a legacy of violence or a legacy of love. There are no other alternatives. During his time some within the civil rights movement did not want to surrender retaliation as a tool against the principalities and powers of American culture. Whether litigation or armed warfare, violent rhetoric or justified revenge, some felt that the goal of justice could only be achieved if love was surrendered or at least placed on the back burner. Dr. King knew that once love for the enemy was given up all was lost. If we are to follow in his footsteps and the footsteps of all those in our religious tradition who chose the path of non-violence, or non-retaliation, we must never, ever, surrender the love we know from God toward each and every one of us.

So, there can be no true protest without prayer, no reformation of society without personal repentance, no justice without the joy of reconciliation. There can be no true freedom without forgiveness, nor peace without the price of self-sacrifice. And the only legacy that really matters in the grand scheme of things is the legacy of love. Were Dr. King here today these are the things I believe he would remind us of, the essential elements he would call to our attention. There may be more, but if we seek in our

heart of hearts to live his vision, these six elements are a place to begin and perhaps, by the grace of God we may find that in so living we honor the name of the man who, like his namesake, can bring about a true Reformation of ourselves, our churches and in hope, our world.