

**RACIAL JUSTICE AND BEYOND:
MLK'S UNFINISHED LEGACY**

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
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I am looking forward to our Fellowship's participation tomorrow evening in the annual march and commemorative service honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. Based on the experience of this event in previous years, this will likely be a distinctly mixed experience. The march through downtown Staunton will be over in less than half an hour. There will be an unnecessarily long delay between the end of the march and the beginning of the commemorative service at Central Methodist Church. Once the service begins, the enthusiastic leadership of Dr. Ed Scott will carry it forward in spite of redundant proclamations, and the music and dance will be truly inspiring. Join us!

In spite of all the energy and talent that is invested in the remembrance of Martin Luther King, Jr., I believe they are too one-dimensional. Like many other commemorative services like it around the nation, this service celebrates Dr. King as a champion of **racial justice**. True enough, but he was also a courageous champion of even broader social justice issues: world peace and economic justice. Perhaps I should have titled my sermon "MLK in 3-D." This morning I would like to call attention to those issues and his unfinished legacy, which challenge us to honor him not only as a heroic figure of the past, but as a prophet leading us into the future. **If we ignore his vision for our nation and our world, we dishonor his memory.**

In order to understand the breadth and depth of Dr. King's commitment to justice, we need to understand his personal journey. His actual birth name was **Michael**, and throughout his life he was known to his family and close friends simply as "Mike." A precocious student, he graduated from high school at the age of 15, from Morehouse College at age 19, and from Crozer Theological School at age 22. He entered a Ph.D. program at Boston University, where he came under the influence of **Howard Thurman**, who served as a mentor for the rest of his life. Thurman had previously visited India, where he met and conferred with Mahatma Gandhi. With

encouragement from Thurman and financial assistance from the American Friends Service Committee, King traveled to India in 1959 (11 years after Gandhi's death by assassination). This trip had a profound impact on MLK. He was impressed by the philosophy and ultimate success of nonviolent mass protest as a tool for social reform. On the eve of his departure from India, King said "I am more convinced than ever before that the method of nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for justice and human dignity. In a real sense, Mahatma Gandhi embodied in his life certain universal principles that are inherent in the moral structure of the universe, and these principles are as inescapable as the law of gravitation." [quoted in "Martin Luther King, Jr." *Wikipedia*] With encouragement from Bayard Rustin, another mentor figure who later helped organize the famous March on Washington, King plunged deeply into the philosophy and tactics of nonviolent protest.

There is a sad but interesting footnote to this period in King's life. While he was a graduate student at Boston U., King and his wife Coretta Scott attended services at several different Unitarian churches in the area. As Coretta later explained, "We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian." [Rosemary Bray McNatt, "To Pray Without Apology," *UU World*, Nov./Dec. 2002] King felt that liberal religion held a too idealistic and optimistic view about human perfectibility. As he put it, "The more I observed the tragedies of history and man's shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depths and strength of sin." [quoted by McNatt] To say the least, the concept of sin is not prominent in Unitarian Universalist theology.

King's commitment to nonviolence was tested over and over, as he himself was the target of violent attacks throughout his life. During the prolonged bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, (in 1955) his home was firebombed. At a book-signing in Harlem three years later, he was stabbed in the chest by a deranged black woman and narrowly escaped death. In city after city in the racially segregated South, the use of nonviolent sit-ins and boycotts proved to be an effective strategy, but it was also frightening in the violence it often provoked. Last Sunday a group of our teens viewed a PBS documentary film about the Freedom Riders—courageous black and white young people from the North who put their personal safety on the line to

challenge the segregationist laws of the South. This film is disturbing in its revelation of the depths of human prejudice and violence. In one unforgettable scene, angry whites set fire to a bus filled with Freedom Riders while local police stood by and watched. In Birmingham, Alabama, police used snarling dogs and fire hoses against defenseless young people. Television coverage of these scenes awakened the rest of a nation that did not want to confront the harsh realities of racial discrimination. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," King castigated ministers who were reluctant to challenge the transparent injustices of racial discrimination.

Dr. King's reputation as a leader of the Civil Rights movement took a quantum leap in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, which is widely regarded as one of the great speeches in American history, alongside Abraham Lincoln's address at Gettysburg in the midst of the Civil War and Franklin D. Roosevelt's first inaugural address in the midst of the Great Depression. These speeches are famous because they represent turning points in our nation's history. The most dramatic part of King's speech was ad-libbed, when he spoke passionately about his vision of an America in which children would be judged "not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." His electrifying speech mobilized a whole new generation of civil rights advocates, myself included.

In 1964, Dr. King became the youngest-ever recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize at age 34. I think this was a turning point in his life, because his vision of justice began to transcend racial equality in the American South. During the final years of his life, he articulated his commitment to economic justice for people of all races and his commitment to world peace. In doing so, he became not only a courageous critic of his time, but also a remarkably insightful prophet of the future. Against the advice of his allies in the Civil Rights movement, he became an outspoken critic of the Vietnam War, not only because he was opposed in principle to the use of violent force, but also because he believed that the billions of dollars being spent on that war would be far better spent on domestic programs to combat poverty in America.

In January 1967, Dr. King took a brief retreat to a secluded house in Jamaica, where there were no phones and no threats to his personal safety. There he wrote the book titled *Where Do We Go from Here*, in which he articulates his vision for the future and unifies his commitments

to racial justice, economic justice , and world peace (the 3 D's). Listen to these prophetic words, written more than 40 years ago. "A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look at thousands of working people displaced from their jobs with reduced incomes as a result of automation while the profits of the employers remains intact, and say: 'This is not just.' It will look across the oceans and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: 'This is not just.' . . . The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: 'This way of settling differences is not just.' . . . A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." [*Where Do We Go from Here?* pp. 198-99]

As we listen to these prophetic words written more than 40 years ago, we find ourselves submerged in the longest war in our nation's history, with dubious results from the thousands of American military casualties and tens of thousands of civilian casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the wake of the greatest economic recession since the Great Depression, millions of American families have plunged into poverty while a tiny fraction of our citizens enjoy unprecedented wealth and comfort. In the words of a red-neck comedian, "**What kind of deal is this?**"

So what are we to do? Unfortunately, the tactics of mass protest that were so effective in the campaign for civil rights are not nearly as effective today. The limited success of the "Occupy" movement demonstrates that city officials and police are much more sophisticated in their response to public demonstrations. It also demonstrated a guiding principle of the demonstrations organized by Dr. King and his colleagues in the Civil Rights movement: that public protests need to have a clearly defined goal. The Wall Street tycoons who were the targets of the Occupy movement were well insulated against facing the protestors. Does anyone seriously believe that they will voluntarily change their behavior in a system that serves them so well? That system is a combination of political and economic interests that protects and defends the status quo of wealth and privilege. The massive amount of unrestrained money spent by PACs (political action committees) on political campaigns is, in my opinion, an affront to

democracy. The Supreme Court decision that narrowly overruled the Campaign Reform Act jointly sponsored by conservative and liberal members of Congress was in my opinion one of the most regrettable Supreme Court rulings in our lifetime.

What would Martin Luther King do in the face of these discouraging conditions? At least these two things: **visualize and organize**. He would challenge us to renew the vision of liberty and equality that forms the cornerstones of our democracy—the founding values that are all too easily lost in the mindless games to achieve political advantage, which have paralyzed our Congress and generated deep cynicism among our citizens. I believe that he would also challenge us to organize a peaceful mass demonstration—a modern-day March on Washington—that will convince the leaders of Congress that it is time once again to transcend their political differences in order to serve the needs of our people. He would challenge our belief that the complex journey toward social justice has run its course. He would challenge us to convert our frustration into action at both local and national levels. He would say to us: **Persevere in the face of resistance and disappointment**. He would say to us: **Live my dream**.