

Epiphany 2A Celebrating Martin Luther King Jr.

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I pray it is the Gospel of Christ that is preached today and the very word of God that is heard. Amen.

Good morning.

Many brilliant phrases have been quoted by the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a prophet who lived among us as noted in our opening collect today.

I am sure you know and remember many of them.

But there are two that stay with me and are closest to my heart, especially in times of upheaval and political turmoil.

I think they may be less familiar.

I wonder if you've heard them.

The first one is:

Quote " We may have come on different ships, but we are in the same boat now." End Quote.

Except for the Native peoples of America, our ancestors mostly came either willingly or were enslaved when they arrived in this country by ship.

Most others had choices and they arrived in America seeking a better life in a new land.

Black people were forced to build this land for them while Native people had the land stolen out from under them.

It's a terrible, brutal, ugly history.

We are a country of different races with people from different countries, cultures, and ideas mixed together.

Add to that mix, the pendulum of political opinion which swings from hard right to hard left and includes everyone in between.

And that's only what we see on the outside. We are all the same on the inside.

We love. We laugh. We worry. We care. There is so much more that unites us than divides us.

When we live into our Baptismal

Covenant ,page 304 in the prayer book, we change the world around us and that's the point.

Do you recall the words?

We vowed to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

We vowed to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.

Dr. King lived his life in that way and if he hadn't, I cannot imagine what this country would be like today.

In his final speech, his "I have a Dream" speech, he asked us to move on in these days of challenge to make America what it OUGHT to be.

He also said that we have an opportunity to make America a BETTER nation.

I believe that to be just as true today as it was when he spoke those words in 1968.

We should all be shouting out those words, wearing them on baseball caps and putting them on bumper stickers:

Let us make America what it OUGHT to be.

Let us make America a BETTER nation.

The second quote I will mention a little later on.

For now, I'd like to begin with a little history about Dr. King.

His leadership in the modern American Civil Rights movement began in December of 1955 and ended with his murder in April 1968.

That's less than 13 years, did you realize that?

Remember, during that time, he was a young man with a wife, 4 small children, and a church ministry.

I'll tell you a bit about his life by mostly paraphrasing the first page of the King Center website:

'Black Americans achieved more genuine progress toward racial equality in America during those 13 years than in the previous 350 years.

Dr. King is widely regarded as America's pre eminent advocate of nonviolence and one of the greatest nonviolent leaders in world history.

He drew inspiration from both his Christian faith and from the peaceful teaching of Mahatma Gandhi.

While others were advocating for equal rights using, "any means necessary"

including violence, Martin Luther King, Jr. used the power of words and acts of nonviolent resistance, such as protests, grassroots organizing, and civil disobedience to achieve seemingly-impossible goals.

He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize when he was just 35 years old and he donated the \$54,000 prize money to the furtherance of the civil rights movement.

Did you know his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"

was written on the margins of newspapers, on scraps of paper, paper towels, and slips of yellow legal paper

smuggled into his cell, where he was kept in solitary confinement after being arrested on April 12, 1963, on charges of violating Alabama's law against mass public demonstrations?

The day after his arrest, eight prominent White clergy members (An Episcopal Bishop, among them) placed an ad in the Birmingham News, accusing King of being an outside agitator whose demonstrations were "unwise and untimely."

They'd urged him to wait. That it wasn't time yet for change.

How long they expected people to keep suffering, to be publicly humiliated daily, legally lynched from trees while families sat and watched with picnic lunches,

for old, Black men to be called boy, for people to be denied basic services like the right to vote, equal opportunities for education, and even clean water, I'm just not sure.

(Pause)

His accomplishments are now taught to American children of all races, and his teachings are studied by scholars and students worldwide.

He is the only non-president to have a national holiday dedicated in his honor and is the only non-president memorialized on the Great Mall in the nation's capital.' (Pause)

I remember segregation.

Here's a little of my story.

My parents grew up in Florida and moved to Connecticut to escape the brutality of the south.

Each summer we drove there from Connecticut to Florida, visit my grandmother, Charlotte, who I absolutely adored.

Although slavery had ended shortly before her birth, she'd been born the daughter of the plantation owner and one of the house slaves.

You see, when slaves were freed they weren't freed with retirement plans.

This was still a very dangerous country for Black people. There was no where to go for most.

Life just went on, pretty much as it had been before.

Before leaving Ct., to visit my Grandma Charlotte, we would stop in at AAA. Each year, someone there would map out a safe route for us.

They'd say, "Be sure not to stop here after dark. Someone was lynched here last week, don't go this way.

You can stay in this motel but not here. You can eat here but not here. "

My parents were instructed to pay the bribe, if stopped by police or they would be taken to jail or worse.

Once at, Daytona Beach, as we sat on our beach towels, I saw a chain link fence that went along the sand down into the ocean.

I asked my mother about it.

She was very stern when she told me to stay on our side of the fence.

In my smart aleck voice, I said, "Come on, mommy. They can't divide the ocean."

Well, apparently they could because she told me in her no nonsense voice that this was serious.

I must stay on this side of the fence.

I realized then, even the ocean was segregated.

Sometimes we took the train. One year I noticed the colored water fountain on the train.

Now in those days the parents didn't pack bags and bags of things for kids to do.

At least, mine didn't. They expected you to sit for hours and be good.

There wasn't anything else to do so I kept getting up for drinks of water.

Over and over again I went to the fountain for a drink. It made me violently ill.

I ended up being hospitalized. The water was contaminated.

In the 60's, my parents bought a modest 4 bedroom house with a nice front and back yard, in Ct.

In the front, my mother planted flowers and fruit trees.

In the back was a vegetable garden. She was organic before anyone talked about organic gardening.

We didn't eat at restaurants because she always told us she was afraid of what people might put in our food.

Two blocks on our street had nearly identical houses.

Our block was Black and Puerto Rican with French Canadians at the end of the block.

In those days there was much prejudice against French Canadians.

The other block was white. Those kids could never play on our block but we freely came and went on theirs.

How ridiculous that all seems to me now but it was an accepted way to live then.

In the 70s, I interviewed, with the director, to attend the Bryman school in San Diego to become a dental assistant.

The director refused my application.

He told me I needed to apply to the medical assistant program because White people were not accustomed to seeing Black people in dental offices.

Well, I puffed up my 18-year-old self and told him he'd either accept me into the program or

I'd bring the entire San Diego chapter of the NAACP back with me the next day.

Now, I didn't even know if there was an NAACP chapter in San Diego
or if there was, if it had 5 members
or 5 thousand- but no matter.

He let me into the program and you know what?

I was the first in the class to land a job, after just 2 weeks into the program.

I tell you these things because this was not so long ago.

I tell you these things because there are people who would like life to return to those days.

To go back to segregation and oppression and separateness. Those who believe one life is more valuable than another.

This is not what Jesus taught.

This is not what Dr. King envisioned.

This is not what they gave their lives for.

I believe they both meant for us to always love our enemies but to also hold them accountable for their actions.

We simply can't go back to those times of legal injustice and allow those in high office to legislate hate.

I for one, will do all I can in my life to prevent it.

So, friends, I leave you with the second quote:

"We have flown in the air like birds and swam in the sea like fish,
but have yet to learn the simple act of walking the earth like brothers and sisters."

End quote.

In his final sermon which we know as the,

"I've been to the mountaintop" speech, Dr. King tells the story of the Good Samaritan from different viewpoints.

He asked the audience to imagine that the Priest and the Levite stopped and asked themselves,

"If I stop to help this, man, what will happen to me?"

Maybe they think this guy who is different from them is not worth the trouble saving.

He IS a different race, after all. So, why bother?

Maybe he is faking being injured and luring them there to do them harm.

Or maybe he deserved to be beaten up and laying on the side of the road.

But, Dr. King reverses the question,

"If I don't stop to help him, what will happen to him?"

In the holy name of Jesus, may this always be the first thought that comes to our minds too.

And in honor of the blessed memory of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. may we this day and always strive to walk the earth together, as brothers and sisters. Amen.