

Remembering the Dreamer

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

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Amos 5:18-24

¹⁸Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; ¹⁹as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. ²⁰Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Galatians 3:26-29

²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

On this weekend when our nation pauses to commemorate what would have been the 90th birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., it is important that the church lift up the value of remembering this great Christian witness.

Fifty years ago, when King was assassinated in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement – we thought we had come so far on matters of race. And as a nation, we had made significant progress - moving forward from the evils of an economy based on slavery, through the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Jim Crow South. By the 1960's, Brown versus the Board of Education had brought down walls of segregation giving way to the integration of schools; the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had overcome legal barriers that had prevented African Americans from voting; Dr. King and his movement of non-violent resistance had made positive headway toward a more civil society for all Americans.

When you visit the new Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., the mere architecture celebrates the progress we have made. The museum guides you first to a lower, underground dimly lit floor, where you begin the tour with a sense of being crowded and crammed as if in the belly of a slave ship bound from Africa to the American Colonies. As the tour continues, you are led up through the building into brighter, more expansive spaces documenting increasing civility and opportunity for all Americans. From the evils of slavery into heroic and historic achievements of African Americans inviting us all to envision an even more just society for every race and creed.

Our country has come so far, and yet, in recent years we have seen how the ugliest forms of racism still have a grip on American life and culture. And so, it is important that we remember Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – as we continue to work toward a more perfect union as a nation, and bring to reality the Biblical vision of his dream.

As Princeton University Professor of Religion and African American Studies, Eddie Glaude, has noted: “It is not just videos of police violence against blacks, and white supremacist rallies that are concerning, it’s also the soft bigotry beneath the surface, that has enabled American public policy and individual behavior to perpetuate racism.”

Glaude writes of those first decades following the Civil Rights Movement, saying: “suburban white America voiced its belief in racial equality, but relentlessly held on to white class privilege and all the policies and structures that made it possible. Many social scientists would call this the ‘new racism’ or the ‘laissez-faire racism,’ in which white Americans failed to actively address racial inequality and, in doing so, maintained the racial status quo.” He goes on to say that white people’s racial attitudes, by most measures, have become progressively better, but white Americans continue to deny the extent of racial inequality.

A study of the Public Religion Research Institute, for example, shows eighty-seven percent of black Americans say black people face a lot of discrimination today, while only forty-nine percent of white Americans feel the same. The disconnect between our stated commitments and our practice is so great that we can’t even agree what the problem is – even though, Glaude argues, we know there is racial bias in policing, racial bias in sentencing rates of incarceration, in differential punishment in schools for black and brown children; racial bias in the persistence of residential segregation, and as with women in the work force, African-American and Hispanic adults of the same educational degree earn less pay for the same work than their white peers.¹

¹ Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., “Don’t Let the Loud Bigots Distract You. American’s Real Problem with Race Cuts Far Deeper,” *Time*, 9/17/18.

Because of these overt and covert signs and symptoms of racism, it's important to remember – the dreamer. “Even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream,” Dr. King intoned from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

And then, Dr. King went through that rousing “Let freedom ring,” climax of his speech which sounds a whole lot like our scripture reading from this morning: “When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old spiritual, *Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.*”

Oh, how we need to remember that dream and the Dreamer who preached that sermon. Not because the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a saint, but because he was an agent of God’s own prophetic tradition.

The book of Amos is a judgment against the ancient people of Israel during a season in which there was great oppression of the poor. They were offering up sacrifices in worship that God found meaningless against their cruel and insensitive behavior to their fellow citizens. So Amos’ words condemn their empty worship rituals that are devoid of the ethical behavior with which God asks us to treat our neighbors. “I hate, I despise your festivals and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies,” the prophet says condemning their vain worship practices, “Take away from me the noise of your songs; but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

And when we arrive at our New Testament text from Galatians, Paul reminds the diverse community to whom he is writing that – despite their differences of race, nation, gender, social standing, and even creed – they are unified in Jesus Christ.

In Christ, any discrimination based on human diversity comes to an end; we are all one in Christ. To remember Dr. King, the Dreamer, is to remember how his whole life was forged on these foundational biblical texts that proclaim the intentions of God for the human community – then and now. For how he became the kind of Christian witness that he carries a lesson for the calling of the church today – for ourselves and for our youth and children.

Listen to how his biographer, Taylor Branch, describes King’s earliest years: “His childhood... was marked by order, balance and restraint. Sunday school and church on Sunday. Playtime in or near the house on weekdays. Afternoon job of throwing papers. Days began and ended in the King home with family prayers. It was an environment of a close, caring and privileged family that provided young Martin with the psychological security that he needed... Moreover, it was the conservative black Baptist church that imbued him with the moral courage and the spiritual stamina for the challenge that awaited.”²

“In Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church, where his father and grandfather had been pastors, he heard the Bible stories that later would serve to shape so much of his non-violent philosophy and strategy. It was there in that little congregation that he learned those elementary tenets of Protestant piety and Christian hope. And it was there in that environment, of church and family, that the elements of a dream yet unborn were fashioned. When you couple that early influence of church and home with a porous mind eager to learn, and exposed to the teachings of the world’s great thinkers, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Mahatma Ghandi and many others, you not only see how King himself

² Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*.

became a contemporary prophet, but also how positive social change can be nurtured.”³

We all know that Dr. King’s dream has not been realized. The ways we have fallen short are both obvious and insidious, on public display and hidden. But to remember him, what he did, what he led, and what he said – has to be part of our Christian conversation and discernment - in and around this church - in such a way that it might strengthen us to work against the racism that is within us, and all around us.

You know, one of my favorite stories about Dr. King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech is how his friends, standing behind him at the Lincoln Memorial that day, started cheering him on. As in the African American tradition of the congregation speaking back words of encouragement during the preaching, while he’s delivering his prepared remarks before that throng of thousands, his young foot soldier John Lewis and the great gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson, started quietly cheering him on from behind saying, “Tell them about the Dream, Martin. Tell them about the Dream.”

I love that story because it shows that even old tired, worn out sermons can have meaning beyond their typical life expectancy – if they convey a biblically based prophetic word. You see, seven years earlier when Martin King was fresh out of seminary, the ink not yet dry on his PhD, serving his very first parish at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, he told that congregation:

“The dream is one of equality, of opportunity,
of privilege and property widely distributed.
A dream of a land where people will not take from the many to
give luxuries to the few.

³ “Remembering Martin,” A Sermon by P.C. Enniss, 1/18/98

A dream of a land where people do not argue that the color of a person's skin determines the content of his character.
A dream of a place where all of our gifts and resources are held, not for ourselves alone, but as an instrument of service for the rest of humanity.
The dream of a country where every person will respect the dignity and worth of all humanity.”

That was Dr. King's early, formative, on-going Christian witness – based firmly on God's prophetic vision. It is the dream of genuine Christian unity.

Friends, we need that dream today. We need it – as much as ever. Therefore, let us remember the dreamer, and let us never lose hold of his dream.

AMEN.