

Today, I want to talk a little bit about a person you all are likely very familiar with – the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but in a way that unpacks some of what he stood up for, sat down for, went to jail for, marched for, and encouraged others to do the same. As Friday would have been brother Martin’s 86<sup>th</sup> birthday, I find myself reflecting on this weekend that has been officially set aside for our country to remember the man that was always holding up a mirror to American identity and asking home questions about whether freedom and justice and liberty as enshrined in our constitution were *for all, not just for some?* And now, as those responsible in the generations since his death, how do we measure up?

And I should state that, by all outward appearances I, in my white skin, brown hair, and pulpit in a small New England town don’t seem to have much in common with Dr. King. However, it is largely because of him my life’s journey has brought me to this place. Like Dr. King, as a southerner brought up in church and with family background in ministry, I realized that my theological education needed to take place away from the comforts of home, familiar ways of being church, and accepted perspectives about God, Jesus, the Christian religion, and the other religions.

Martin Luther King, Jr. became “Reverend” thanks to Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, and then became “Rev. Dr.” at Boston University School of Theology, the same school where I received my education to become “Reverend.” I left the South like brother Martin, determined to expand my worldviews and religious views in a school who’s motto is “The School of the Prophets” before King arrived, and now carries that association even more proudly. As a city and a university, Boston – for me, and I believe for King as well – promised an environment with a long tradition of speaking truth to power and fostering an environment of critical thinking, faith formation, and practicing Xian faith in a global environment, a “world house.”

King developed the idea of a “world house” in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize in December of 1964, when he was 35 years old. Before those gathered at the ceremony in Oslo, Norway, King said that “*Negroes of the United States, following the people of India, have demonstrated that nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation.*”

*Sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.”*

Until his death, King worked with this idea of a “world house”, which is not new to him, but rather is one of the oldest prophetic visions and traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophet Isaiah declares that <sup>4</sup> *For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant,* <sup>5</sup> *I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.* <sup>6</sup> *And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—*<sup>7</sup> *these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.* <sup>8</sup> *Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.”* (Isa. 56:4-8).

As King understood it, the “world house” was his translation of “the holy mountain of the Lord,” a place that transcends tribe, race, class, nations, and religions. The concept of a world house in which all nations and peoples of the world live together presents both a blessing and a challenge because, thanks to globalization and technological advances, we can never again live apart. We are now unable to live in ignorant bliss that what we do here in America impacts someone living in the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean. We must learn to live with each other in peace.

And in order to do this, to live with each other in peace, King called for the “complete eradication at home and globally of the triple evils of racism, poverty, and militarism.” “Equality is never fully realized as long as it means equality in a world stricken by poverty and on a planet doomed to extinction by war.” There can be no “world house” of peace and prayer when some of God’s children declare others of God’s children unequal in race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religion, and therefore not worthy of rights and privileges assumed to the powerful.

Isaiah knew it, Jesus knew it, Gandhi knew it, Martin knew it, and now the question is, do we know it? And if we do, what steps are we going to take, individually and collectively, to do our part in making the “house” a “home”?

King suggests one step in this work of creating a world house is to curb excessive materialism by shifting from a “thing” oriented society to a “people” oriented society. Fifty years ago King said that “when machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, poverty, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.” And today I would add that when multi-national corporations are legally considered to be people, and win court cases against *actual* people, there is something wrong with this picture. It speaks to an attitude of “poverty of the spirit, which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. The richer we as a nation have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually.”

This is the world we have inherited: now 15 years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and 50 years since the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, and other tremendous socio-political and military events in our nation’s history that have fundamentally changed the fabric of our American life. And our hope for living in this world house is to resist social injustice and resolve conflicts in the spirit of love embodied in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence.

King found inspiration in the work of Gandhi in India, who, though a Hindu, found inspiration for his work of freeing the Indian people from British colonialism from Jesus’ sermon on the mount read earlier. The element in the model of Jesus that both Gandhi, King, the disciples, and untold numbers of people in the centuries since Jesus was executed by the Romans for practicing active nonviolent resistance in the face of violence is “agape love.”

This is the kind of love that is active, that yearns for freedom for the oppressed and downtrodden; the kind of love that beckons those with their backs against the wall to have no fear of suffering and death and to instead “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” This is the kind of love that says, “when you turn the other cheek, you’re not giving someone more powerful a second chance to smack you around, but you are declaring to that person that you are a person who is equal to the challenge. And though you will throw no punches, standing up and standing tall in your dignity and self worth is much more terrifying than any one-two knockout punch any bully can deliver.”

When you turn the other cheek you declare to your aggressor, “I am your equal, and I dare you to look me square in the eye and not feel that if you hit me again, you will strike your own soul, too.” In the world house, it is this type of love that brings about a genuine revolution of values so that our loyalties become ecumenical rather than sectional. “Love is the force which all the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is the key that unlocks the door which leads to Ultimate Reality.”

And though the third Monday in January has been officially set aside for our nation to remember the birth day of a man who helped rewrite the history of this country as well as its future, we must not leave our hopes for kinship and dreams of peace in a world house at the church doors when we leave – in order for this ideal of brother Martin’s world house, brother Jesus’ kingdom of God, and brother Isaiah’s vision of God’s Holy Mountain to remain in our hearts and call to us the rest of the 364 days of the year, let us be comforted, challenged, and inspired to claim our place in the World House and bring someone with us through love.

*“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God. Everyone that loves is born of God and knows God. If we love one another, God dwells with us, and God’s love is perfected in us.”*  
Beloved, let us love one another. Amen.