

Sermon – January 17, 2021, So Much More

Martin Luther King Jr.

I remember vividly the time that the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial was approved for installation off the United States Mall and near the Lincoln Monument. It was proposed to go in a place where many of our most revered monuments stand. The Vietnam Wall, An almost forgotten World War I memorial, the Korean War memorial, and a monument to Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

I was the senior pastor of The Palisades Community Church and on the Board of Trustees for the International Council of Community Churches. I represented 5 African American congregations and one Caucasian one (mine). The International Council of Community Churches was the first church entity to integrate in the United States of America. It was seen as a leader in the ecumenical world of race relations within the

church. It was a huge honor to represent these historic churches, and to make decisions on a national scale. What was even more humbling was working alongside some Civil Rights leaders who had done so much for equality within our nation and churches.

As a region we decided that we would raise money for the memorial among our churches and give this money to the nonprofit set up to erect this monument. I will say that even though many of our churches had small budgets I was proud of the amount of money we raised for this cause.

Of course with anything that had to do with Martin Luther King Jr. there was controversy. Some did not even think it appropriate to honor this great Civil Rights Leader. There were two controversies that made me ashamed, and illustrated perfectly the struggle that King and many Civil rights leaders have had to contend.

When a Chinese sculpture was chosen that caused quite a stir. In the hew and cry about the sculpture it was lost that the DC monument board had sent back revisions to the artist about their drawings, and models. They said that it needed King needed to be softened. He looked too fierce, too angry.

Too fierce, too angry. As it turns out the photo that the sculpture was being fashioned upon was the pastoral photo that hung at his church Ebenezer Baptist. The picture that was being used in honor by his congregation was deemed to assertive for a monument to a man who fought Bull Conner. White people have a tendency to do this to People of Color. Clean them up for the public.

The white part of the United States needs to hear, repent, and change to our neighbors who we want to just shut up about the injustices they endure. We need to deal with their anger, not dismissively, but with an open heart. We

shouldn't use conflict avoidance to let the racist, homophobic, sexist, ageist, or the powerful bully our society and the church into silence on basic issues of human rights.

On Monday I will not be working or in the office in celebration of civil rights giant Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It is only right that he is given a federal holiday and that we in the church honor him as one of the prophetic precursors to the modern movement toward human and civil rights in our country and the world.

King, who is sometimes, heralded by the same people who would have been his opponents in days past would really relish the use of his words by many white protestant ministers. King was against the Vietnam War, believed in the radical redistribution of wealth, understood that no movement toward justice could avoid breaking unjust laws, expressed deep disappointment in incrementalistic liberals, believed in sin, and the

redemption of those who wished African American's harm.

If you listen to much of the sanitized portrayal of King, you would get the indication that only half of his "I Have A Dream" speech is the extent of his witness. If we only listen to half of one speech we will miss so much of his witness.

I have read many of the works of Martin Luther King Jr. and find his imprint heavy on my own ministry. It has helped me to open up to the spirituality of liberation that comes from listening and being taught to those who are poor. I have been challenged constantly to confront my own white supremacy and privilege with not only other African Americans, but other People of Color. It has made me realize that women deserve absolute equality in pay, opportunity, and health in our society. Those who are immigrants and refugees have been given a special understanding in my spirituality today because of an openness to the spirit of freedom. I

was confronted on my own anti-Semitism by those who loved me and realized that to be concerned for human liberty meant for me to change my own deepest prejudices. For those who are born Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer community I have truly found witnesses to what it means to see Jesus in the world.

I am proud to stand as an ally to those who are oppressed, outsiders, and ignored because Jesus is my example. A Jesus, who promises us the view of greater things if we follow him. It is not a Jesus who wants to make sure the old traditions of First Presbyterian Church are kept. That the prejudices of my grandparents are carried on into a new generation dressed up as a Christian Faith. Just like any abuse, I say it stops with me. That is taking responsibility.

I bring this up because there are always those who question the integrity of faith from those who uphold the most basic human and civil rights

of others as being political. If affirming another person's dignity and freedom is off limits in the pulpit I no longer want to preach. It would be safe to preach a watered-down message you could all affirm with no challenge whatsoever. If that is faith, I would rather be faithless.

Yet, I don't have to worry because I am a Presbyterian. Both our understanding of scripture and our understanding of the Confessions uphold my ecclesiastical and theological right to uphold such positions in the church today. I have lost funding, job opportunities, and sometimes relatives because of my views of Jesus Christ's every increasing grace, but I have made peace with that.

Martin Luther King Jr. took the risk of saying the words that were not prudent for him to say in a polite Southern society. There need to be more, not less, ministers of good conscience that will be willing to take risks for the sake of the civil and human rights of their neighbors, even if it costs

them their employment. That are willing to say the hard words of repentance, even if parts of their congregation are scandalized. I don't want to stand before my maker someday and say that I let my neighbor suffer from injustice perpetuated by "good" Christians. Justice starts in our community and must work outward. The good news is that we are all in this together. As King reminded us we are intricately woven together in a web of mutuality.

Let us love our neighbors as ourselves. Let us never bring harm with our words that might bring violence to their door. We are all created today in God's image. Thanks be to God.