

## WHAT WOULD M.L.K. SAY TO US TODAY?

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke 14:14-21 NRSV

Each year when we approach the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, it is important to me that we as a church remember and honor M.L.K., because he is one of our own. He came from the church and should be claimed by the church. Even though our society wishes to domesticate him, and commercial interests wish to strip his memory of power; he came from the church, and we forget him at our own peril.

I also have personal--really personal--reasons for wanting to talk about Martin Luther King, Jr. in church. My wife and I adopted two sons, Julian and Jameson, both are bi-racial, their birthfathers are African American, and their birthmothers are Caucasian. So far, my older son, Julian, at four years old has no idea what skin color can mean in our society. This morning I gave the children’s sermon. I chose to do it today, because I figured if this is going to be the first time Julian really thinks about skin color and prejudice, it ought to be his dad talking about it. As you saw, he was more concerned with the colors of my clergy stole than with the colors of skin. I wish he could stay that way his whole life. I wish society would let him stay that way.

Society does not operate that way, however, so until the day it does, I, as the father of two bi-racial sons who have skin darker than mine, am going to talk about M.L.K. a whole lot, especially at church. I hope that some day my sons will live in a country where they will always be judged on the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. American society has come a long way over the last few decades, but the fact remains that when my sons get to be teenagers, they will be treated by a whole lot of white people as reasons to fear. I’m not sure how I as a father can prepare them for that eventuality, because I know that a time will come when the veneer of civility that exists in our culture will be punctured by the fear and prejudice that lurks below the surface. That time may come when they choose to date people of a different skin color than their own. It may come when they hear a racist joke around the water cooler or even at a church function. It may come in another form, but I do not know when that time will come for each of them.

How can I, as their father, prepare my sons for what will come? One of the things I know I am going to do throughout their lives is to turn with them to the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. I will let Martin say to them what I don't know how to say. When that veneer of civility is punctured by the sharp needle of prejudice, I'm going to tell my sons that M.L.K. talked about this kind of thing. He said,

If a man asserts that another man, because of his race, is not good enough to have a job equal to his, or to eat at a lunch counter next to him, or to have access to certain hotels, or to attend school with him, or to live next door to him, he is by implication affirming that that man does not deserve to exist. He does not deserve to exist because his existence is corrupt and defective.

Racism is a philosophy based on a contempt for life...Racism is total estrangement. It separates not only bodies, but minds and spirits. Inevitably it descends to inflicting spiritual or physical homicide upon the out-group.<sup>1</sup>

I'm going to say to my sons that people who are racist—however much or little—are afflicted by a disease of the mind. They view you as somehow inferior to them, but you are their equal. You are their equal, because God made you and therefore you are a person of worth and value no matter what anyone says to the contrary.

When my sons not only have to deal with race, but they also have to face a society that says they should be judged not only by their ethnicity but also by what they own, what they wear and what they possess, I'm going to say to my sons, "Martin talked about the materialism of our culture."

As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich, even if I have a billion dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people in this world cannot expect to live more than twenty-eight or thirty years, I can never be totally healthy even if I just got a good checkup at Mayo Clinic. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.<sup>2</sup>

I'll say to my sons, "You are more than what you own. That is the least of what determines what kind of person you are."

When my sons grow up and they're taught that in addition to skin color and wealth a person should be judged by what nation they belong to, I'll turn with them to Martin. When they hear people talk about our nation having the right to preach to other nations about democracy while at the same time it supports dictators, and when they grow up hearing that America supports freedom and justice for all, but they learn that our government supports torture, I'm going to turn with them to Martin. Together we will read his words.

Five years ago John F. Kennedy said, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable." Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken, the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments. I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas 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.<sup>3</sup>

When my sons are faced with the proposition of voting for politicians who will support future wars—wars that will start in large part because of the wars America is fighting now—and they wonder what to do. When they say, "Dad, you taught us that God loves everyone no matter what nation they are a part of, but they are our enemies." I will reply that although we live in dangerous times working for peace takes courage. Then I will turn with them to Martin's words when he preached about the Vietnam War at The Riverside Church in New York.

Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world. Moreover, when the issues at hand seem as perplexed as they often do in the case of this dreadful conflict, we are always on the verge of being mesmerized by uncertainty; but we must move on.

And some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak...

A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing except a tragic death wish to prevent us from reordering our priorities so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war.<sup>4</sup>

When my sons look at the problems of racism, poverty, classism, along with the corruption and violence of the society they live in, and they say, “Dad, what can anybody really do about any of this anyway? I’m just one person, who can do anything to change all this?” I will remind them of the cynics who have spent decades tearing down King’s reputation, reminding us of all of his flaws and mistakes. And I will say, “Kids, Martin Luther King, Jr. was not perfect; he was a man who made mistakes, but God used him to start a revolution. No matter what mistakes you make, Julian and Jameson, I want you to hear these words of Martin.”

Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great--wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That’s your new definition of greatness...It means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.<sup>5</sup>

That’s what I’m going to say to my sons.

Amen

Rev. Chase Peoples  
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The Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday  
First Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, St. Joseph, MO

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 70.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., *The Measure of a Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., “Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break Silence.” This is the speech that M.L.K. gave at The Riverside Church in New York on April 4, 1967 to a meeting of *Clergy and Laity Concerned*. The text of the speech I am using comes from the website of American Rhetoric:  
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., “The Drum Major Instinct.” This sermon is available at the web site of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project at Stanford University:  
[http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/sermons/680204.000\\_Drum\\_Major\\_Instinct.html](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/sermons/680204.000_Drum_Major_Instinct.html).