

MLK Jr – a Public Life Remembered

December 7, 1956 – April 4, 1968

**A Talk Presented to the Probers Class at
Memorial Drive United Methodist Church
Houston, Texas
19 January 2014**

Tomorrow is the national holiday in which the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., is remembered and honored. His is only one of two national holidays that has the name of an individual attached to it, the other being Columbus Day. It is a singular honor for someone whose public life was only twelve years, who was considered a communist by J. Edgar Hoover (and the object of intense FBI surveillance), who was jailed numerous times and scorned by mobs, and who, before his death, was being dismissed by friends, as well as enemies, as having any relevance.

In 1955, at the age of 25, Martin Luther King, Jr., had completed his graduate school theological education and was beginning his professional life as the minister of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. A year later, on December 3, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus and was taken to jail. Four days later King was elected President of the newly created Montgomery Improvement Association, the organizing and sustaining group for the bus boycott. King was 26. The next month, in January 1956, King was arrested as part of a 'Get Tough' campaign to intimidate those boycotting the buses. Four days after his arrest, at the end of January, King's home was bombed.

I mention dates because it keeps me aware of how young King was at the time he entered his public career. Also, it was fortuitous that King was a visible leader in his ministerial position so that when a president of the Montgomery Improvement Association was needed, he was present and willing. There had been other incidents of arrests of Black women refusing to give up seats on a city bus (New Orleans was one) and in Montgomery itself a young woman earlier had likewise been arrested but had been passed over as a test case by Black leaders.

What the young King had to endure can be easily seen by placing ourselves in his shoes. Imaginatively, think back on yourself at the age of 26. At that age, the community leadership has placed you at the head of a boycott in a major city, you are being called to city hall to appear before bullying city leaders and walk by hard-eyed police. Black businessmen are showing eroding support, calculating the cost and urging caution. And now, you are looking out through the bars of the city jail.

Might not you be thinking that being a do-gooder community leader had gotten out of hand? Then comes word that your house has been bombed (the front porch is shambles and the front wall damaged) and, later, shots were fired into your house. In both cases, your wife and small daughter are in the house at the time of the assaults.

Isn't it time to reconsider your position with the Montgomery Improvement Association—with your spouse and your young child at risk, as well as your home, and your professional life? Then there is your own life.

At the age of 26, place yourself in this maelstrom and glimpse the inner strength and commitment King has.

Today, I speak of Martin Luther King, Jr., out of a concern for our 'shrink-wrapping' of him. All the life and struggles of King are repeatedly summarized in that brief film clip on TV, "I have a dream" We see King at his inspirational best and speaking with such confidence. However, absent in this brief TV spot are the grinding hellishness of segregation and the violence and deaths that it took to finally break both the controlling legal and the mythic spell of segregation.

I found this same concern in a quote from Andrew Young—part of King's inner circle, a minister, and later the Mayor of Atlanta, a Georgia Congressman and Ambassador to the United Nations:

Martin has become a larger-than-life symbol, almost a deity, rather than the flesh-and-blood man I knew. ... There is danger in this. We should not lose our sense of how the civil rights movement happened, because if we do, younger generations, along with ourselves, will lose a sense of how new opportunities were fought for and won. In blurring, or ignoring the context of the struggle, the veneration of Martin Luther King becomes devoid of depth and context, and the ability to use his model to renew the struggle for a just and equitable society is lost.

—April 4, 1968: *Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Death and How It Changed America*, by Michael Eric Dyson, p. 4.

Today I want, in the words of the once well-known newscaster Paul Harvey, 'to tell the rest of the story,' pulling King out of the surface veneration we now give him. Actually, as I have more deeply involved myself in the accounts of his active community life, my admiration has grown immensely.

To do this, my presentation today will follow this outline. First, to better understand King, I believe it is important to briefly touch on some of the context of the Civil Rights movement, the preceding century of legal and cultural segregation and the violence of lynchings and riots. Second, I want to look at King, clustering his activities under three headings: Jesus and Love, Violence, and Courage.

I. The Context of the Civil Rights Movement

Legal slavery and the legal segregation that followed have been a blight on our country's civilization. It took a war in which 670,000 (the current calculation) men died from battle and disease to end legal slavery. It took another convulsion in American life to end legal segregation. To understand this centuries-long Slavery-Segregation connection is to begin to understand the pent up fury fueling the Civil Rights era.

From the end of the Civil War through reconstruction and then through the building of the legal and social edifice of Segregation, Blacks in the South (and in parts and at times in the North, as well) were intimidated through lynchings and riots.

POWERPOINT SLIDES showed:

- signs separating Blacks and Whites as daily and pervasive reminders
- the Bible used as proof for the separation of the races and Segregation
- rage on Whites' faces protesting the integration of Little Rock schools
- dust covers of the books *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister*
- pictures of a White community 'social event,' at a lynching, along with a list of the numbers of lynchings each year
- a picture of a postcard that pictured several lynched Blacks and used by people to send out to relatives and friends

Riots destroyed Black communities. The **Tulsa Race Riot**, for example, on May 31 and June 1, 1921, had Whites attacking the Black community, the Greenwood District, of Tulsa, Oklahoma. More than 800 Blacks were admitted to local white hospitals (the black hospital had been burned down). Thirty-five city blocks composed of 1,256 residences were destroyed by fire. Black dead numbered between 39, the Oklahoma Department of Vital Statistics official count, and other estimates of up to 300.

Houston had its own race riot associated with Camp Logan in the First World War. Twenty civilians died, and later nineteen Black soldiers were executed and forty-one given life sentences.

With the daily displays of segregation in separate water fountains, schools, seating on buses, and with the community consciousness of lynchings and race riots, how do you think Black parents would raise their children? Simply—keep your eyes down, don't look them (Whites) in the eye, don't get noticed, be deferential, etc. This sounds like a stereotypical portrayal of blacks in the old movies, but it was also real.

In my mind, what broke things open, shifted the predictable ground, gave people the idea that things could change, and set them on the path to bringing about change was World War II. How that happened is a subject for another time.

The build-up of frustration and rage erupted in the sixties. The days of Civil Rights and Martin must be seen as one part of that turbulent and tumultuous time, even a 'deadly' time. Remember how raw and wretched those days were: students shot (four students killed by National Guard troops at Kent State and two students killed by police at Jackson State); a building blown up at the University of Wisconsin with a researcher in it, Civil Rights workers beaten bloody and prominent leaders being killed: Eldridge Cleaver killed, Malcolm X killed, Medgar Evers killed, John Kennedy killed, Bobby Kennedy killed, and King killed. There were numerous others killed, with less prominent names. Accompanying this outpouring of protest and blood, there were disruptive, but less violent, actions that divided America: students occupying the offices of university presidents and sex, pot, no bras, facial hair—all receiving little attention today, but back then every one a flash point of elders' rage. The burning of draft cards or fleeing to Canada was more than the generation of the depression and World War II could tolerate. So, when people today talk about the deep divisions in Washington, D.C. and in the country, I think they don't remember, or didn't experience, the Sixties and early Seventies. Nor, it might be added, do today's divisions rise to the level of the 670,000 men who died in the Civil War.

Still, in the vortex of turmoil and violence of the sixties, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., became the lead figure for the Civil Rights effort. Given that he was cursed, threatened, spied on by the FBI, called Uncle Tom by Black radicals, and finally killed, who at the time could have imagined that King would be remembered in a national holiday, and who could imagine that a thirty-foot statue of King would be on the national Mall? So, it is literally, as well as figuratively, true that over the years King has grown in stature.

II. The Rest of King's Story

I want now, in telling 'the rest of the story,' to focus on King himself. To do this I have taken disparate aspects of King's public life and gathered them under three general topics: Jesus and Love, Violence, and Courage.

A. Jesus and love

I truly believe that if King were alive today, and we could ask him to define himself, he would say that above all else, he was a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This was his professional choice in life. In this, he was following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. King began his work at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1954, and six years later he became a co-minister with his father in the Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta, Georgia. It was as a minister that he had the standing in the community to be asked to be the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and his church became the operational center of the boycott. Most of the time, in the

years following, when King was not marching in the streets or sitting in jail, he was at home, fulfilling his duties as the Minister of one or the other church.

He preached regularly on Sundays. There is one text, though, that King would preach on each year. Each year he would introduce the sermon on this text with the words, “I preached on this verse last year. However, I have had a year of experience that has broadened my understanding.” The text was from the Sermon on the Mount.

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you. Love your enemies, bless them that hate you, and pray for those which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be children of your Father which is in heaven.

– Matthew 5:43-45, KJV

From one of those sermons, King spoke these words.

Let us move now from the practical how to the theoretical why: Why should we love our enemies? The first reason is fairly obvious. Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate multiplied hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction. So when Jesus says “love your enemies,” he is setting forth a profound and ultimately inescapable admonition. Have we not come to such an impasse in the modern world that we must love our enemies—or else? The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.

...

Jesus is eternally right. History is replete with the bleached bones of nations that refused to listen to him. May we in the twentieth century hear and follow his words—before it is too late. May we solemnly realize that we shall never be true sons (and daughters) of our heavenly Father until we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

— sermon on “Loving Your Enemies, A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings, Beacon Press, Boston, 2012, pp. 49, 55.

The devotional side of King, seldom portrayed, can be found in the book, “*Thou, Dear God*”: *Prayers That Open Hearts and Spirits*, Lewis V. Baldwin, ed., Beacon Press, Boston, 2012.

One story that King told frequently was the time around midnight when he was dozing off in his bedroom and the phone rang. “Listen, nigger, we’ve taken all we want from you,” a caller hissed. “Before next week, you’ll be sorry.” King hung up and walked to his

kitchen to heat a pot of coffee. He had been receiving death threats for weeks—ever since he had accepted a request to lead the bus boycott in Montgomery.

King struggled with the question I posed for you at the beginning of this talk. As the threats poured in, had he made the right decision? He wondered if he could relinquish his role as the boycott leader without appearing a coward. Then something happened that King would talk about for years afterward. He bowed over his untouched cup of coffee and prayed aloud in desperation. King said he heard an “inner voice” that addressed him by name, and encouraged him to stand up for justice.

King’s core passion stemmed from his Christian commitment and, for him, the centrality of Jesus’ teaching on love. Two streams came together in the work of King—the message of love in Jesus and the technique of non-violent resistance from Mahatma Gandhi. Love, as articulated by Jesus, became King’s fuel, his passion, and Gandhi’s non-violent resistance became the techniques for putting this love into action in the Civil Rights Movement. King spent years in church and in seminary learning about Jesus; he and his wife, Coretta, spent a month in India studying Gandhi’s non-violence.

We live in a time when, in order to be more open and tolerant, the specific religious and Christian past is being exorcised. Some put that in the category of ‘The War on Christmas.’ I do not believe there is a war, but there is a gradual but persistent removal of Christian motivations, imagery and references from the public arena. That is being done with King as well. For example, in all the sixteen quotes inscribed on his monument on the Washington Mall, there is not one that specifically identifies the core Christian commitment of his life. I think that was done deliberately, not inadvertently. Thus, the ‘Reverend’ aspect of King’s life will, in the future, continue to recede from public consciousness.

B. Violence

Michael Dyson, in his biography of King wrote the words: “... Martin Luther King, Jr. sank into a private hell of unquenchable bleakness.” That is very strong language and is not how we think of King, seeing him speaking inspirationally and confidently on TV. However, as I have read more about King, I believe that it is one strong reality of his life.

I will repeat, and then add to the list of personal attacks on King I used at the beginning of this talk. When you reflect on this list you will understand the basis of Dyson’s evaluation of King.

- During the Montgomery bus boycott, his house was bombed, with his wife and ten-week-old daughter, at home.
- He was jailed, one of numerous times.
- During that same bus boycott a shotgun blast was fired into his home. Again, family members were at home, but no family member was injured.

- A couple of years after the boycott ended, he was in New York signing his first book, when a clearly disturbed woman sunk a letter opener into his chest. A quarter of an inch closer to the heart, and he would have been dead.
- Pictures show him being manhandled while being arrested with police severely twisting his arm behind his back and, then, kicked into a cell.
- While addressing a convention, a person forty pounds heavier than he rushed up on the stage and landed a brutal blow to his left cheek and kept punching him.
- Seldom did a day go by that in opening his mail there were not several letters calling him every conceivable name—many included death threats.
- Flights were regularly delayed because a bomb threat had been called in.
- Giving speeches in hotel banquet rooms, walking the streets, meeting in restaurants, his eyes are scanning people because he is aware of how vulnerable he is. President John Kennedy, Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, Malcolm X and Medgar Evers all were gunned down in this period.

Death was so frequently on his mind that it kept creeping into his public speeches. Some examples from different speeches are:

“I want it to be known the length and breadth of this land that if I am stopped, the movement will not stop.”

“If anything happens to me, there will be others to take my place.”

“If a man hasn’t found something he’s willing to die for, he isn’t fit to live.”

“If physical death is the price that a man must pay to free his children and his white brethren from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing could be more redemptive.”

In another speech he said,

“Lord, I hope no one will have to die as a result of our struggle for freedom in Montgomery. Certainly I don’t want to die. But if anyone has to die, let it be me!”

King’s words were met by a chorus of “No’s.” Overcome with emotion, King couldn’t continue. He broke down and was led to his seat by two preachers. It was one of the few times that the trauma King routinely endured slipped into public view. In private, he was more open about his fear, *“I went to bed many nights scared to death.”*

Then, of course, this was part of the talk King gave in Memphis the night before he was killed.

Like anybody, I would like to live - a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

This is, of course, speaking about his own death, but using the example of Moses on Mount Nebo looking over the Jordan to the Promised Land as a metaphor. (Deuteronomy 34:1-4).

In our culture, where the profile of King is always put forth standing in a pulpit or behind a lectern as a strong forceful leader, we do not see King as a person weighed down by the violence directed at him and, importantly, the violence visited on others because of him. One person wrote, about King:

“...(he) fought death and faced it down all the same, even as he used death to rally his people in the fight for justice.

III. Courage

William James, in his seminal book, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, wrote of ‘a more lonely courage.’ King certainly demonstrated the courage that we usually associate with the word ‘bravery’—bravery in the face of danger, death and standing up to the crowd. However, there is another type of courage, ‘a more lonely courage,’ that King displayed as well.

King’s supporters and friends thought that he was about to throw away all he had fought for, all that he had suffered for, all the respect he had gained in the white community, including that of President Johnson, as well as his leadership in the black community. King gave what he considered to be a speech of necessity; others saw it as a betrayal of the cause. He was warned by his friends and advisors not to do what he planned to do.

But, he did act, and the headlines justified his friends and advisors fears. The *New York Times* said that what King did was “wasteful and self-defeating” and likely to be “disastrous for both causes.” The *Washington Post* went further. It predicted that many who had once listened to King with respect “would never again accord him the same confidence”; and it concluded: “He has diminished his usefulness to his cause, his country, and his people.” The *New York Times* headline (April 11, 1967) read: “N.A.A.C.P. Decries Stand of Dr. King on” What was it that King did?

On April 4th, 1967, King delivered a sermon at Riverside Church, New York City, titled, “Beyond Vietnam.” King strongly denounced America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. He was concerned that the war was recruiting poor and minority soldiers, that it was draining resources from much-needed social programs at home, and that it was an unjust war anyway, targeting the poor people of Vietnam. To put it in a time frame, this sermon took place two years before Kent State and Jackson State.

Today speaking out against the war might not seem startling. But at the time, opposition to the war was looked on as a betrayal of the country and a betrayal of the civil rights cause. King said,

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

It is a great speech, hardly known and seldom read—"A Time to Break Silence," and it was delivered, significantly one year to the day before he was killed. Like his Letter from Birmingham City Jail, published four years earlier, it spoke in broad principles, but also addressed particular evils. King raised his voice in protest over the almost unlimited violence against the people and the land of Vietnam for the declared purpose of protecting them from the menace of world communism.

"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.

...

"Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart, as I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns this query has often loomed large and loud: 'Why are you speaking about the war, Dr. King?' 'Why are you joining the voices of dissent?' 'Peace and civil rights don't mix,' they say. 'Aren't you hurting the cause of your people,' they ask? And when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live.

...

"For those who ask the question, 'Aren't you a civil rights leader?' and thereby mean to exclude me from the movement for peace, I have this further answer. In 1957 when a group of us formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, we chose as our motto: 'To save the soul of America.' We were convinced that we could not limit our vision to certain rights for black people, but instead affirmed the conviction that America would never be free or saved from itself until the descendants of its slaves were loosed completely from the shackles they still wear.

"Now, it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war. If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read: Vietnam. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over. So it is that those of us who are yet determined that America will be are led down the path of protest and dissent, working for the health of our land.

"And as I ponder the madness of Vietnam and search within myself for ways to understand and respond in compassion, my mind goes constantly to the people of that peninsula. I speak now not of the soldiers of each side, not of the ideologies of the Liberation Front, not of the junta in Saigon, but simply of the people who have been

living under the curse of war for almost three continuous decades now. I think of them, too, because it is clear to me that there will be no meaningful solution there until some attempt is made to know them and hear their broken cries."

To show how controversial his sermon was, listen to the N.A.A.C.P., issuing a statement effectively separating the organization from the anti-Vietnam movement:

"Civil rights battles will have to be fought and won on their own merits, irrespective of the state of war or peace in the world. We are not a peace organization nor a foreign policy association. We are a civil rights organization. The N.A.A.C.P. remains committed to its primary goal of eliminating all forms of racial discrimination and achieving equal rights and equal opportunities for all Americans. We are, of course, for a just peace. But there already exist dedicated organizations whose No. 1 task is to work for peace just as our No. 1 job is to work for civil rights."

Throughout the next year, King continued to speak out against the war, and said that the civil rights movement and the peace movement should come together for greater strength. He began a "Poor People's Campaign" to fight economic inequality.

King also made a number of memorable appearances on television. In 1967, he sat down for an interview on "The Mike Douglas Show," speaking about his opposition to the Vietnam War, his stance that African Americans should not fight in the war, and his belief that the unjust war distracted from domestic social programs.

"I don't think [African Americans'] loyalty to the country should be measured by our ability to kill. I think our loyalties to the country should be measured by our ability to lead the nation to higher heights of democracy and the great dream of justice and humanity,"

He then advocated pulling out of the war.

The next year, King received an opportunity to reach out to his largest audience yet: viewers of "The Tonight Show." When asked directly about the supposed contradiction between his efforts on behalf of civil rights and in the anti-war movement, he gave his reply:

"I have worked too long now, and too hard to get rid of segregation in public accommodations to turn back to the point of segregating my moral concern. Justice is indivisible. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. And wherever I see injustice, I'm going to take a stand against it whether it's in Mississippi or in Vietnam."

Moral courage is rare. Still rarer is the courage to oppose a president who has helped your cause, the consensus of a party that has supported your cause and the legions of

workers for civil rights. However, in April 1967 King had reached a point where he knew "silence is betrayal," and he knew that he had to act. He saw that conformity to the dogma of anti-communism had muffled free discussion in the United States; that the excuse of ideology had blinded Americans of all colors to the infectiousness of the violence we practiced. King's greatness, at that moment, was that of "a more lonely courage."

CONCLUSION

And so I come to a conclusion, as every human life comes to a conclusion. Over all of us, including King, is spread the eternal shroud of death. Yet, given to us are remembrances of a truly remarkable human being. We have this holiday to remember and to honor the man. Those visiting the Washington Mall can view the imposing statue. At home we can read that truly significant *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, or we might read the sermon King preached at the Rockefeller Chapel. Both are found on the internet. Or, we can sit and ponder the changes that have taken place in this country because of King, along with the hundreds and thousands of others who brought us out of legal Segregation and set us on a new point in the ongoing effort to honor human dignity and mutual respect for all.

I started this talk by speaking of the shrink-wrapping of King by the media. What I have done this morning is to fill in more of King's life than most are aware of, but still so much is left out. So, there is shrink-wrapping here as well.

In my readings of King and about King, what stands out for me is his commitment to Jesus and his incarnation of the love of which Jesus spoke and demonstrated, his endurance in the violence that surrounded him throughout his public life and which finally killed him, and his courage shown in his willingness to step away from all that he had accomplished in order to embrace a broader vision of justice, one that included all the poor, White as well as Black, and all those suffering and being killed, even a half world away.

Bob Tucker
Houston

Senior Minister Emeritus, First Congregational Church of Houston
Executive Director Emeritus, Foundation for Contemporary Theology