



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Out of Our Comfort Zone

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 16, 2022

Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday; Second Sunday after Epiphany

Exodus 3:7-12; Ephesians 6:10-20; Luke 6:27-36

God, we thank you for your church, founded upon your Word, that challenges us to do more than sing and pray, but go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers depended on us and not upon you. Help us to realize that humanity was created to shine like the stars and live on through all eternity. Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace. Help us to walk together, pray together, sing together, and live together until that day when all God's children ... will rejoice in one common band of humanity in the reign of our Lord and of our God, we pray. Amen'.

For the past few years, about 3 or 4 years in a row, at several different churches where I was serving, I have ended up preaching on Martin Luther King Sunday. I'm not sure why it's worked out that way. Maybe it's God telling me: "That sermon was okay, Meredith, but let's try again next year."

I do look forward to preaching on this Sunday, to have an opportunity to look again at the life and legacy of Dr. King, and to bring his eternal message of justice into our present day lives. But each year, I struggle. I struggle because I wonder what I can possibly say about Dr. King that hasn't been said before—and much more eloquently—by others. I struggle because, as a white woman of privilege, I feel thoroughly ill-equipped to speak about the racism that people of color have endured throughout our history, and that our siblings of color deal with to this day. And I struggle with how to talk about the intractable problem of race in America and offer a word of hope.

On Martin Luther King Sunday, there's an impulse to gloss over difficult topics, to soften the harsh reality of the racism that endures in our nation, and to dwell instead on heroic themes of the great civil rights leader, who preached love of neighbor, who reached out his hand in friendship, who modeled non-violent resistance, and who was martyred for speaking truth to power.

But if Dr. King were here today, I doubt he would be satisfied with a sermon that merely offered a testimonial of his accomplishments. He would want to hear words that, as he put it, "arouse the conscience of the community."² Especially in a community like St. Bart's, where we pride ourselves on our radical welcome, where we strive to work for justice and peace, he would want us to confront those hard truths, to have those difficult conversations, and to take action.

The impulse to gloss over harsh truths is, I've come to realize, also a privilege. The privilege not to have to think about racism. The privilege not to have to talk about racism. The privilege not to have to feel uncomfortable. The privilege to be complacent, to be satisfied with the status quo. But two years into a pandemic, with the systems of our democracy being undermined, comfort and complacency are privileges we can no longer afford.

The prayer I began this sermon with was written by Dr. King, calling the church to challenge us “to do more than sing and pray, but go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers depended on us and not upon [God].” It was through his faith that King envisioned the beloved community. It was through the church that King was strengthened to do the work and saw the possibility for change.

So in honor of Dr. King, let’s challenge ourselves this morning. Let’s challenge ourselves to move out of our comfort zones and “go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers depended on us and not upon God.” I’m betting that here at St. Bart’s, we’re willing to rise to Dr. King’s challenge in order to help build the beloved community that he envisioned.

When we talk about racism in this country, some of us may feel defensive. Others may feel anger or resentment. Still others may feel guilty. I’m here to tell you, I’ve felt all of those things, and it’s uncomfortable. But those feelings keep us stuck. They constrict us and separate us and keep us from moving forward together in love. Let’s try instead to open ourselves up in love to the experiences of others. That means being willing to just listen and not immediately respond. It means taking the risk that people will tell you things that are hard to hear. It takes courage to just listen and not get defensive. It takes courage to be that vulnerable.

But we worship a God who took on our human vulnerability to show us what love looks like. We worship a God who finds strength in weakness and whose grace can accomplish what we cannot do on our own. A God who uses imperfect, vulnerable human beings to further God’s purposes on earth. Like Moses, who despite his feelings of inadequacy, freed the Israelites from bondage. Like Paul, imprisoned, “an ambassador in chains,” who nevertheless spread the Good News of Christ. God uses us, too, despite our fears, our doubts, and our discomfort, in the ongoing work of justice and freedom for all people.

At this perilous moment in our country, this difficult work is more important than ever. Our democracy is under threat. Hatred and division run rampant. We just marked the one-year anniversary of the attack on the Capitol. The voting rights that Dr. King worked so hard to gain are under siege. This is not the time to gloss things over. This is not the time to bury our heads in the sand.

Theologian Kelly Brown Douglas writes: “There is no getting around it: we are a nation with a warring soul. Such a soul is intrinsic to our country’s very identity. Thus, throughout our nation’s history, we have been challenged by the reality of two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideas. Are we going to be a slave nation or a free nation? Are we going to be a Jim and Jane Crow nation or a just and equal nation? Are we going to be a xenophobic and intolerant nation or a multiracial, multiethnic, welcoming nation? Until we as a nation—as a people—make a decision, we will continually find ourselves in warring soul times of chaos and crisis.”³

Wars create wounds. If we are a nation with a warring soul, we are also a nation with a wounded soul—a soul wounded by the harm we have inflicted and the harm we have endured. Our nation’s wounded, warring soul is on full display right now.

Dr. King called us to transform this nation’s wounded, warring soul into a soul generated by love. That transformation begins with Jesus’ radical call to love your enemies. It’s a difficult teaching, maybe the most difficult teaching he ever gave us, and it was at the heart of Dr. King’s non-violent movement. The love Jesus speaks of isn’t about an emotion; it’s about action. It isn’t about feeling love for our enemies; it isn’t even about liking them. It’s taking up an attitude of understanding and good will, as Luke makes clear, to act well toward those who hate you. What would happen if we all just started there, taking an attitude of good will toward each other? It wouldn’t solve all our problems. It wouldn’t eliminate racism. It wouldn’t eradicate injustice, but it sure would give us some fertile ground to work with.

This message of God's love was one of the reasons Dr. King was so successful. He wasn't interested in blame and retribution. He wanted to wake people up. Through his words and his actions, Dr. King's drew attention to racist systems, forced people to confront them, and then enlisted their help for change. He dedicated his life to the freedom and flourishing of all people. And as a pastor, he knew that all Americans, including white Americans, needed to be freed from the burden of racism, that for all Americans to thrive, the soul of America had to be redeemed.

And that's where we come in. That's where the church comes in. That's where faith comes in. Because we're in the business of redemption. We're in the business of repentance and forgiveness and love. Our faith is a mighty spiritual force, and we can't afford to let it stand on the sidelines. As Christians, we must be willing to do this difficult, uncomfortable, challenging work, because the world is in desperate need of the values we have to share. And let's use whatever privilege we may enjoy to improve the lives of others. Together, as church, clothed with the whole armor of God, we can transform this warring and wounded world with souls generated by love.

Amen.

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¹ Martin Luther King Prayer accessed here: <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/prayers-martin-luther-king-jr>

² Martin Luther King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963.

³ Kelly Brown Douglas, "Transformative Theological Education When Race Matters: The Work Our Soul Must Do," in *Preaching Black Lives (Matter)*, Gayle Fisher-Stewart, ed., Church Publishing, New York, 2020, pp. 234-235.