
The Feast of Martin Luther King, Jr.

An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The Feast of Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the name of God ...

One of my favorite preachers, the Rev. Peter Gomes of blessed memory, was Dean of Chapel at Harvard University. He used to joke about a preacher whom he described in the following way. Gomes said that this preacher had 'nothing' to say, and he said it! As I was preparing last week for today's service I shared that joke with my beloved Bethann and she expanded it by saying that she was in a service where the preacher continued to do that same thing, not once or twice but three times. He had nothing to say and he kept on saying it!

Well, my challenge today for this observance of the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. is to say something and not 'nothing.' In particular I want to say something that honors Dr. King as a live and living voice who would be our contemporary if he were alive today.



"THE ODD THING ABOUT ASSASSINS, DR. KING, IS THAT THEY THINK THEY'VE KILLED YOU."

Here I'm reminded of a cartoon.

It's an image of MLK and Mahatma Gandhi drawn in 1968 [the year that Dr. King was assassinated] ... Gandhi is sitting. MLK is leaning over in Gandhi's direction, as Gandhi, hand extended, tells King: "The odd thing about assassins, Dr. King, is that they think they've killed you." ...

<http://www.chicagonow.com/gifted-matters/2014/01/assassins-cant-silence-kings-dream-of-brotherhood-of-mankind/>

That's right. "They think they've killed you." But the "odd thing" or the irony is that martyrs for the truth like King and Gandhi continue to live on in our public life as if they were still alive today. And so I'd like to say something about that

today, rather than nothing.

In that connection we have our scripture readings assigned for today including this passage from the Letter to the Ephesians:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm ... As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace ...

Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak. *Ephesians 6:10-20*

Now right away we can observe that this scripture connects with Dr. King's own life story of being "an ambassador in chains." Recall his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." That was a letter that he wrote to white fellow clergy after being arrested in 1963 for peacefully demonstrating against segregation and racial terror. Yes, we can see how this letter to southern white ministers was his contemporary version of today's reading from the Letter to the Ephesians.

Indeed, it represents a key feature of Dr. King's own life and witness as exemplary; as a singular example of Christian virtue. It's as if King himself were making that appeal at the end of the reading:

Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Similarly Dr. King's life and witness represents a "mystery of the gospel" that is expressed in our gospel reading appointed for today. It's the *mystery* of someone actually empowered and granted the grace to love one's enemies as that gospel calls us to do (Luke 6:27-36):

'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt ...

But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Yes, church friends, that's the kind of scripture that expresses the Christian virtue that Dr. King exemplified in his life and witness. For example, recall this statement as his own expression of the love of enemies:

We must meet violence with nonviolence ... We must love our white brothers, no matter what they do to us. We must make them know that we love them. [Jesus](#) still cries out in words that echo across the centuries: "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you." This is what we must live by. We must meet [hate](#) with love ...

But finally, I would have us reflect on one other, perhaps more profound mystery that was a hallmark of Martin Luther King Jr.'s ministry among us. And here I invite you to reflect with me from the perspective of this query: Who any longer in our world today has the stature and the boldness to make the following declarations: the kind of declarations that Dr. King made in his Acceptance Speech, on the occasion of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, December 10, 1964.

I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind. **I refuse to accept** despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history ... **I refuse to accept** the idea that man is mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events which surround him. **I refuse to**

accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.

I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction. **I believe** that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant ... **I believe** that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men.

I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits ... **I still believe** that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive good will proclaim the rule of the land. "And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid." **I still believe** that We *Shall* overcome!

https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-acceptance_en.html

And so, Christian friends, with that declaration of audacity and hope, let us pray together our Collect appointed for today's observance: the Collect found on page 5 of our worship booklet:

The Collect for the Feast of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Almighty God, who by the hand of Moses thy servant didst lead thy people out of slavery, and didst make them free at last: Grant that thy Church, following the example of thy prophet Martin Luther King, may resist oppression in the name of thy love, and may strive to secure for all thy children the blessed liberty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

<https://standingcommissiononliturgyandmusic.org/?s=martin+luther+king%2C+jr>