

To Love and to Serve

Rev. Mark Stringer
First Unitarian Church of Des Moines
1/16/17/10

"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."
"Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"
--Two quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968)

Today's **reading** is from a sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on February 4, 1968, two months before his death.

"If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral.

And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. And every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others.

I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked.

I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison.

I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. And that's all I want to say.

If I can help somebody as I pass along,
If I can cheer somebody with a word or song,
If I can show somebody he's traveling wrong,
Then my living will not be in vain.

If I can do my duty as a Christian ought,
If I can bring salvation to a world once wrought,
If I can spread the message as the master taught,
Then my living will not be in vain."¹

Sermon

I saw the coloring book picture in my daughter's backpack. "Happy Birthday Martin" it read, above a likeness of the man we honor Monday with a national holiday. I figured Leah got the page from her kindergarten class, so I asked her about it: "Do you know why we honor Martin Luther King?"

Leah said, "Because he taught us to fight with our words rather than our fists." And then she asked if I knew that black people and white people used to have to drink from different water fountains. Leah reported that she and her classmates thought that was "crazy." I agreed that it was crazy, but that, back when Martin lived, people had to learn it was crazy before they could change it, and that Martin, along with a lot of other women and men, helped people understand, and to change. Leah said that her teacher told the class that Martin was a minister, "like Leah's dad." I could tell Leah liked this fact. But, I'll confess to you, it made me a little uneasy. In fact, I could feel myself slump a little in my seat as I drove. Yes, Martin Luther King was a minister, and so am I. But...well...I thought to myself, I'm no Martin Luther King.

After I walked Leah to her schoolroom and bid her farewell, I returned to my car thinking about my unspoken denial of my connection to King, not only as a minister, but as a human!, and how quick I was to dismiss the reality that my life can and sometimes is be given in service to a higher purpose, too, even if I miss the mark more than I might like. But, comparing the specifics of my life to King's is a little unfair, and not really necessary anyway. Life is not a competition. It is an opportunity. The fact is that each of us has a ministry to live, whether we have found it or accepted it yet or not. And each of us is human, with the capacity for remarkable acts of kindness and compassion, as well as detours into self-obsession and disregard for others. I had to admit to myself that our nation's annual celebration of the life and legacy of Martin Luther King is not meant to make us shrink. Certainly, King wouldn't want it to be that way. On the contrary, I think he would want his day to remind us that we are

¹ Excerpt from "The Drum Major Instinct":
<http://www.blackwebportal.com/wire/DA.cfm?ArticleID=513>

bigger than we realize, that we are more alike in our abilities to affect positive change than we might want to accept. He'd want his day to remind us that every one of us, no matter our failures and frailties, [because you know he had them too], no matter our challenges, every one of us can contribute to the creation of a more just and peaceful world, if by no other means than by how we choose to see, to hear, and to feel the realities of our sisters and brothers and how we allow their realities to change ours. How we develop, we might say, the ability to breathe in pain and breathe out compassion. He'd want us to remember that we can help create a more just and peaceful world by how we choose to live, and more specifically, how we choose to love.

This is the message from King's life that I am carrying with me this weekend. The excerpt from King's sermon that we heard as today's reading, was not about being perfect, and it was not about always being certain that we are right. It wasn't about being honored or rewarded for what we do, either. It was about humility. About humbly trying to live one's life in service to others, trying to love, trying to take care of our sisters and brothers, trying to love and to serve humanity.

And it was about trying to be right on the war question. In his day, the war question was of course tied up in the situation in Vietnam. But the "war question" to King was no doubt much broader, because at the heart of King's work and his Christian faith and his approach to social change was his shift toward nonviolence as a spiritual and political strategy...a way of being in the world, based in love and seeking to extend compassion toward all. King did not always hold these ideals. In fact, thinking back to the early days of his involvement in the struggle for civil rights, King said he believed that an "armed revolt" may be the only way to solve the problem of segregation. But the more he read about Gandhi's understandings of redeeming the opposition through love, of basing every action in compassion so as not to provoke bitterness in those on the other side of a given issue, the more he could see the parallels between Gandhi's nonviolent methods and those taught by Jesus. After traveling to India, to have conversations with and learn from people who knew Gandhi and who best understood his methods, King came to believe that love coupled with nonviolent action was the most potent antidote to hate and the most effective way to bring about "social and collective transformation."

While most of us wouldn't argue with the results King helped bring

about in his time, we can acknowledge, I think, how difficult it often is to love or show compassion toward those who may be on the other side of a given issue, particularly a side that may have painful ramifications for us or those we care about, especially when we may feel most confident that we are right, or, in the current lingo of our UU social justice efforts, when we believe with the firmest conviction that we are standing on the side of love.

Clearly nonviolence as a path to justice requires strength and courage, and inordinate amounts of patience, even as our necessary impatience with oppression nudges us towards continued effort.

Nonviolence is sometimes thought of as acquiescence, a kind of, since-you-can't-fight-fire-with-fire-you-just-have-to-accept-your-inveitable-burns resignation to the way things are. However, that's not the kind of nonviolence that King was talking about. He did not preach resignation and he did not live resignation. For example, as he pushed for the right to vote, he said, "We do not want freedom fed to us in teaspoons over another 150 years. Under God, we were born free. Misguided men robbed us of our freedom. We want it back." (L, 55) King's idea of a non-violent resister was someone who does not shrink in the corner, but who "is constantly seeking to persuade his opponent that he is wrong." King said, "We will try to persuade with our words, but if our words fail, we will try to persuade with our acts....[We] must convince [those on the other side]...that all [we] seek is justice, for both [ourselves] and for [them]."

The nonviolence that King modeled, then, is a discipline based in a humble, but a persistent, compassion, blended with an ever-present self-respect that reinforces our right to stand up for ourselves, even as we give other people the space, the time, and the love to eventually understand that we don't seek to diminish them in order to receive the rights that should be ours.

King taught in words and deeds that nonviolence impacts all involved in significant ways. He said, "It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had." Meanwhile, those on the receiving end of non-violence would more likely have their conscience engaged and their moral defenses exposed, thereby nudging them out of their certainties into a place where they are no longer so sure what to do. Furthermore, King showed how nonviolence as an approach to social change could raise awareness in the community. He wrote,

“Nonviolent direct action seeks to create a crisis and foster a tension [so] that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored....We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed.”²

When we realize that freedom must be demanded, our efforts can easily go awry. When we, or those we care about, are being stepped on or denied rights, the most common instinct, when we don't simply resign ourselves to not doing anything, is to lash out at those doing the stepping or the denying, to not only set them straight, but to try to humiliate them. So much of our discourse these days is so snarky, so targeted to find the zinger that will rock our opponents on their heels, that to not seek humiliation of our opponent can feel like a denial of our right to argue. Demanding the freedom or respect that our friends or we deserve can easily lead to denouncing, if not degrading or even trying to destroy our adversaries.

I know I have fallen into this trap. In the moments when I have been given the opportunity to speak publicly about my belief that marriage is a civil right for all people, for example, I have had to develop in myself an extraordinary amount of discipline to not lash out at those who are compelled by their understanding of their religion to seek to deny marriage equality. I've not always done a good job at maintaining compassion for those who I so firmly believe are denying compassion to my friends. But I am trying. And I know, having watched myself on tv, that my message, my point of view, is far more inviting and persuasive when I am focused not on judging or damning those who hold alternative views, but when I am making my case for the rights of my GLBT friends, when I am articulating the joy of their love, without attacking the other side, without leading with my rancor. King taught that the true goal on the road to justice was not the defeat or humiliation of the opponent, but a sincere invitation to a change of heart. King said he sought to “defeat the unjust system...[not] the individuals...caught in that system” and believed that the best way to invite change was to lead by example, to model nonviolent compassion.

King made this invitation not only in his public appearances and in his published articles, but in his personal correspondence with those who

² Donald T. Phillips, *Martin Luther King, Jr. on Leadership*, (New York: Warner Books, 1998), p. 63.

disagreed with him. One example was when he received a letter from a woman which read, "Negroes could never be equal to the whites—even the worst of them—that's God's decision not the white man's", King responded in his own letter:

"I must confess that I am in total disagreement with your position. I feel that segregation is totally un-Christian, and that it is against everything the Christian religion stands for. This, however, does not at all cause me to hate those who believe in segregation. I feel that we should seek to persuade the perpetrators of segregation through love, patience and understanding good will that it is wrong."³

His emphasis on not hating those with whom he disagreed was foundational to his philosophy of nonviolence. He argued, "Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts." "Through violence," he said, "you may murder a murderer, but you can't murder murder. Through violence you may murder a liar but you can't establish truth. Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can't murder hate. Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that."

Most of us do not find ourselves in circumstances where physical violence against an oppressor is an option, so we may hear these words as a general call to pacifism, which, of course, they are. However, I hear in King's words a call to nonviolence in all our exchanges, meaning a commitment in all our encounters to search for the peaceful way of articulating our position, the compassionate way of conveying our perspective, the generous, humble and loving way of being in relationship with others.

Here's a King story from 1963, that summarizes his approach in a nutshell. He preached:

I remember some years ago, my brother and I were driving from Atlanta to Chattanooga, Tennessee. For some reason the drivers that night were very discourteous or they were forgetting to dim their lights, and every time we passed a car for some reason the lights stood there with all their force. And finally...[my brother] looked over at me and said, 'I'm tired of this now, and the next car that comes by here and refuses to dim the lights, I'm going to refuse to dim mine.' And I said, 'Wait a minute, don't do that. Somebody has to have some sense on this highway. If somebody doesn't have sense enough to dim the lights, we'll all end up

³ Ibid., p. 60.

destroyed.’⁴

In so many places in our American political, cultural, and religious conversations right now, it can feel like we are driving on the highway at night and everyone is refusing to dim their lights. And I suspect this dynamic is really just a mirror for the ways we are likely to treat even those closest to us with whom we may disagree. How often is our default position in our relationships anger, or lashing out, or running away? How often do we begin by assuming bad intentions and then reacting badly? How much better could it be if we could try to adopt a little more patience, try to invoke a little more curiosity, try to offer a little more understanding?

It’s not easy to do this. But we all know, don’t we, life is not easy. So why would working to bring about the true beloved community where justice is the default and kindness is the expectation not call from us a commitment to humbly and persistently try to be our best selves, our most loving, compassionate, forgiving, engaged and hopeful selves? On our highway together, somebody’s got to have some sense. Somebody has to dim the lights. Somebody has to try to love and to serve. Why not us? Why not now?

⁴ Ibid., pp. 64-65.