

Arc of Freedom: A Martin Luther King Day Sermon
The Reverend Dr. Jim Nelson
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Here is some of my story: On a Saturday in the spring of 1964 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a friend of mine and I were driven by her father to a church on the near north side of Milwaukee to teach in a Freedom school. Not knowing what I was doing, really - I was there because I had a crush on her [I later learned that she was a UU - probably the first UU I ever met] - I was unprepared for meeting the black kids I was to tutor. But it was there that I was first confronted with race in our nation.

I had never gone to school with a Black kid, not in elementary school in Minneapolis and not in junior high or high school in Wisconsin. I remember once, just once, when I was a kid in Minneapolis seeing a black kid at our local swimming pool, and how foreign he looked. There had never been a Black in any of the churches we belonged to. In 1964 I was aware of Blacks in sports – Willie Mays was my childhood hero - and in the arts – I was a big Chuck Berry fan - but there were none in my personal life. I had no idea what to expect and I was relieved, I think, to find out that the kids were just kids, nothing more, nothing less. It was my introduction into the racial life of this nation

Race continues to be an issue for our nation. Black, brown, yellow, white. Gangs in our schools, proportions in our prisons, numbers in higher education, life expectancy – race is still an issue. In this time when visions of justice are spoken about in terms of prescription drugs and tax cuts, of social security funds and homeland security; in a time in which the racial divide is still wide; in a time in which support for the poor – disproportionately people of color – is threatened; in a time like this, maybe it is good to remember, again, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

All over our newspapers there are articles and announcements about how King will be honored this weekend. And this is good to do - he is a true hero; he is one of our greatest Americans; he deserves our undying gratitude and honor. King, perhaps more than any other figure in our recent history worked to unite us – to bring about that national ideal of *e pluribus Unum* – out of the many one. Perhaps more than anyone, he had visions of justice reaching across a number of divides – race, gender, and economic status. King, were he still with us, would proudly and strongly stand on the side of love, as we proclaim on our sign. King, were he still with us, would be a deep critic of our nation and a great lover of freedom and democracy.

But there is a deep danger here. Peter Gomes, the African American Minister of Harvard writes: *'In death he was able to claim the loyalty denied him in life, for it is far easier to honor the dead than to follow the living, and so we take to our bosom the dead, for there they can no longer do us any harm; and we can translate a living, breathing, both noble and fallible human being into a heroic impotence, satisfying our need to both admire and be protected from something larger than ourselves.'*

This something larger than ourselves is what I want to try to get at today. This something larger is, of course, the Holy; it is God, and what is asked of us. This something larger is who and what we shall be, how we shall be as a people of God. This something larger asks why racism persists even when we know it is evil; this larger something is what makes demands of and on our lives.

I think of this often as I walk to work, and I

cross through the neighborhoods between my house and the church, of the wealth, then the poverty, of the white, then black, then brown. I think of how much division there is even as I recognize how far we have come.

I think of this as I look out us here and wonder about the legacy of segregation, of why so few African Americans or Hispanic Americans, why so few people of color join our churches. I wonder at the segregation by age – how little we see of our children, how rarely we invite them into this house.

And as I wonder at all of this, I recognize that we have come some distance from that Saturday in 1964 when I went downtown in Milwaukee. How far we have come – even in an administration that stands for nearly everything I do not, and whose policies I think ruinous, there are faces we could not have imagined forty years ago. A black man as secretary of state, succeeded by an African American woman. A Hispanic man as attorney general. An African American on the Supreme Court. More women sit in the senate; a Black man will sit there for the first time in many years. Whether we like what they think or do, the face of these nation has changed and it is a face more diverse than ever. This is cause to celebrate.

Yet the divide is as deep as ever. Why?

Here is what Wendell Berry wrote about racism:

I believed then [in 1968], and I believe more strongly now, that the root of the racial problem in America is not racism. The root is in our inordinate desire to be superior - not to some inferior or subject people, though this desire leads to the subjection of people - but to our condition. We wish to rise above the sweat and bother of taking care of anything - of ourselves, of each other, of our country. We did not

enslave African blacks because they were black but because their labor promised to free us of the obligation of stewardship.'

The desire to be superior to our condition? We wish to rise above the sweat and labor of taking care of anything - of ourselves, of each other, of our country? To be free of the obligation of stewardship? Is this right?

If it is it means that what we can be doing and should be doing is the work of community building, of putting our hands and our bodies to work, and of reaching out and working in this local community. It means that our deeds here, locally, will matter longer than the positions we take, the lobbying we do, the speeches we deliver, the letters we write. Those matter, too, but it is our work that will endure.

Another story: in 1969, after college, I lived in a funky neighborhood in Washington, DC and worked as a construction laborer at a job a bit north up in Maryland. It was a union job and I was one of only two white laborers; the rest were Black. All of the carpenters were white. I was the only college kid. The Blacks were mostly from the District. The carpenters mostly from rural Maryland.

Even though they invited me to eat lunch with them, the carpenters picked on me. Tested constantly, I was called nigger lover and little nigger boy behind my back. I had pretty long hair and was called girlie and faggot. I tried to ignore it all. After all, I was a liberal. But it stung, I tell you. It stung a lot. I was not used to being put on the outside, even a little; I was not used to being discriminated against, and it stung. It was a lesson for me.

But one day, I had enough and I told a carpenter off. Later that day, he let a roll of concrete re-enforcing wire go and I only

barely got out of the way.

Toward the end of that day, he told me to get something for him and I told him no - in less than pastoral language. He came after me with a hammer. Now I'm not a little guy and I am strong, but he had a hammer and was clearly a violent man. I had no idea of what to do. Just before he got to me, one of the laborers - his name was Robert - he was Black -- got between us. Robert was young and big and very strong. He had a four-foot piece of two by four in his hand. "Touch him' Robert said, 'and you're dead.'

Nothing more. For what seemed like hours, they faced each other. Then the carpenter backed away swearing at Robert as he did. No one ever mentioned the incident, but the taunting stopped and I began to eat lunch with the laborers.

Hidden in this story is the crux of the issue. King was convinced, at the end of his life that economic injustice was at the heart of racial injustice, and, if the racial problems of this nation were ever to be resolved, it would happen through a shifting of the economy towards a more equitable distribution of wealth. The answer was to be found, King suggested, in better stewardship of all our resources.

The carpenters thought they were better than the laborers because they had more, were paid more. At least in part. They thought they mattered more just because of who they were,

Lincoln said in his Gettysburg address 'we cannot by our words sanctify nor consecrate this ground' - no, it is the deeds we do which will hallow our lives. Nor can we consecrate this ground by what we feel; it rests with what we do. A fellow UU once said to me that he didn't want to just be another white person in a rich area writing a check for good causes, and he challenged us to get our hands dirty. He is right - on the money as it were - I - we - talk great

games but it is what we do that matters. King's sermons and speeches were great but what brought about the change was his marching down streets. His speeches were remarkable for what they inspired others to do.

The emphasis in religion in America, including Unitarian Universalism, has always been on what is believed or thought. Somehow, we became a nation of creeds and not deeds. We have become separated from our deeds. King asked us to change - be what we do. And he died for this challenge. He died while in Memphis supporting a garbage collector's strike.

What I am groping at here - for this is not wholly clear to me - I am not offering conclusions or wisdom but sharing my struggle with something, trying to get at this scar which lies so deep within me - what I am groping at is to learn how to live closer to my deeds. This is what King did, I think. I think this is what Wendell Berry means.

Last week after the service, someone came up to me and shared her struggle with doing enough in life, wondering whether her efforts were good enough. How do we know? Are we living as we should? What is enough? Should we, as Jesus commanded, sell all we have and give it to the poor? What is enough?

This is a very hard question, hard for each of us and hard for us, here, as a community. What should this congregation be doing? What would King have us do?

I am reaching towards a vision of social justice and outreach here at Neighborhood church. It has much more to do with service than with advocacy - as important as advocacy is. I do not mean this as an either/or at all. But I do believe that it is what we do - when we volunteer at Union Station or Young and Healthy, when we support our local schools, when we publicly

and proudly celebrate the marriages of people regardless of gender. These things.

I remember eating lunch with the Black laborers in Rockville. They had reached out to me for no other reason than friendliness; they would not have felt slighted if I had refused; I was free to do as I chose. The carpenters always complained about how they were getting cheated by one thing or another. The Blacks rarely did - even though theirs was the harder life. The carpenters had originally invited me because I was white like they were; they assumed I needed them. The Blacks assumed I was free. They reached their hands out to me.

And those laborers were as free a group of men as I have ever known. They could all do for themselves. They were by no means wealthy but they were able to take joy in what they had; they did not need more things in order to be happy, though they often wanted more. Their enjoyment had primarily to do with their neighbors and friends, with music and with dancing, with food, with sex, with alcohol drunk mostly for enjoyment and not for escape, and in their religion. They knew sorrow and wanted nice things but they did not expect to find happiness or meaning in those things. They never sought sorrow but knew they could not avoid it. They were both noble and petty, not heroes but men - fully human. They did not pretend to be more than they were or better than their lives.

And it has always seemed to me that theirs was a wisdom greater than that of the value system and culture I have adopted, for it often seems that I have sought the freedom to have rather than the freedom to do, but it is in the freedom to do that my life's meaning will be found. Too often I have placed myself above the regular work of stewardship. Too often I leave the clean up for others. That's no good, or not good enough.

Clearly what we have matters less than the joy we can take in the things we do - whether it be the things we do with our hands, or our hearts, our minds or our souls.

It is, I believe, somewhere in this whole complex where our racial wounds are hidden. From the beginning this culture of ours sought to avoid work and so we used slaves to do that work for us and we became estranged from our own ground. We used African Americans to do the work we needed but despised. We demeaned ourselves and them in the process.

This problem is deeper than skin color and it is deeper than cultural or legal discrimination. It has to do, in the end, with what we believe is of worth and what we hope will offer us salvation. If we seek freedom, it ought not to be what we seek now - mostly the freedom to do as we please and be idle and have many things. That is the freedom of affluence. Perhaps we could instead seek the freedom to take care of ourselves and others.

If we seek prosperity, it will only be found in the prosperity of our neighbors and community and in the sustenance of our land. If we seek racial harmony, we should seek the harmony of strong local communities that seek to be equal to their needs. As long as we feel that we should be superior to our condition, to be forever able to escape the necessities of life and work, we will find some group to debase and make them our slaves.

The lesson for us is in the lives and history of Black Americans, not in us. May we open the doors of our hearts to that history and that experience. Perhaps then this ground will be consecrated and perhaps then we will all get to that mountaintop where we might all see our children of all colors walking hand in hand.