

MLK Weekend Worship Service
First Covenant Church Minneapolis
January 15, 2018

Introduction to MLK Programming:

Today we pause from our series in the book of Ephesians to reflect upon the life and legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We acknowledge on this MLK weekend that there is both much to celebrate in the struggle for justice and equality in our nation, there is also much of Dr. King's dream that has been left undone, that injustice persists, that bigotry, hatred and violence remains, that there is much to grieve. We also acknowledge that we cannot sit by idly, hoping that the legacy of Dr. King will somehow fulfill itself, but that the work ahead of us is OUR work. And so today, we have invited a number of voices to speak as we seek to carry on this work; voices for justice from our past and voices from our present, voices of giants that will echo through the ages, and voices from within our small and humble congregation. So as you listen and participate this morning in moments of both celebration and sober reflection, I invite you to ask yourself, *where are you finding your own voice in the struggle for justice?*

Abundant Hope
By Maya Angelou

Reverend Martin Luther King

The great soul
Flew from the Creator
Bearing manna of hope
For his country
Starving severely from an absence of compassion.

Martin Luther King

The Great Spirit,
Came from the Creator
Proffering a sparkling fountain of fair play
To his country
Parched and deformed by hate.

The whole man came forth
With a brain of gentle wisdom
To persuade quiet
Upon the loud misery of the mob.

A whole man stood out
With a mellifluous voice

To bind the joints of cruelty.

A whole man came
In the midst of a murderous nightmare
Surrounded by demons of war
He dared to dream peace and serenity

With a heart of faith
He hoped
To resurrect his nation.

*I open my mouth to the Lord,
And I won't turn back.*

Martin Luther King

Faced the racial
Mountain of segregation and
And bade it move.

The giant mound of human ignorance
Centuries old
And rigid in its determination
Did move, however slightly, however infinitesimally,
It did move.

*I will go, I shall go
I'll see what the end will be.*

Martin Luther King

Brought winds of healing
To his country
Reeling unsteady
With the illness
Of racial prejudice,
Screams of vulgarity
Could not silence him.

Fire bombs and dogs
Could not take his voice away

Ona my knees,

*I told God how you treated me
Ona my knees.*

He knew himself
A child of God
On a mission from God, and
Standing in the hand of God.
He spoke to the hideous hearts
And to the bitter monstrosities
And asked them to transform
Their ways and thereby
Liberate his country.

Representing the grace of heaven
He spoke to the evils of Hell
Representing gentleness
He sang to brutes.

He brought the great songs of faith
Persuading men and women
To think beyond
Their baser nature.

*Lord, don't move your mountain,
Just give me strength to climb it.*

He hummed the old gospels
Encouraging the folk to act
Beyond their puny selves.

*You don't have to move
That stumbling block,
Lord, just lead me around it.*

Leader to those who would be led
And hero to millions.

Martin Luther King

Was father to
Yolanda,
Martin, III,
Dexter, and,

Bernice.
He was lover
Friend, and
Husband
To Coretta Scott King.

He spoke respectfully
Of the Torah.
He spoke respectfully
Of the Koran.

In India, walked in the footprints
Of Mohandas Mahatma Gandhi.

Christianity made him patient
With all religions
And his tremendous heart
Made him believe
That all people
Were his people

All creeds and cultures
Were comfortable in
His giant embrace
And all just causes
Were his to support and extol
Through sermons and allocutions
With praise songs and orations

He preached fair play and serenity
From hand cuffs and prison garb
From leg irons and prison bars

He taught triumph over loss
And love over despair
Hallelujah over the dirges and
Joy over moaning.

Fear not, we've come too far to turn back
We are not afraid, and

We shall overcome
We shall overcome

*Deep in my heart
I do believe
We shall overcome
Someday.*

Congregational Prayer:

God you are the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end,
And yet, we find ourselves here in this in-between time,
In this time when all is not right with the world, when all is not right within us.
God we confess that we are disheartened,
that many of us have grown weary, cynical, and apathetic
We want to believe with Dr. King in a world where all Your children are judged
not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.
We want to trust that this moral arch that Dr. King spoke of does indeed bend toward justice,
But we have to confess that it's a bit tough to see it,
Too hard to believe it in the midst of this darkness.

God, Alpha, Omega, your vision is wider, your hope burns brighter than ours.
Remind us today that we see but through a glass dimly,
And fill us with hope that the vision of the beloved community,
the Kingdom that Jesus spoke of, is not only possible, but is on the horizon.
In the midst of our world that sometimes feels forsaken of your hope,
show us a glimpse of your justice,
give us a taste of your presence
And in so doing, turn our gaze NOT to the heavens, but to ourselves.

For truly, we confess that without you, we are without hope,
But the hope to which you've called us is NOT idle,
No, you have called us to an audacious hope,
A hope that struggles,
and suffers,
and does both the difficult, soul-searching internal work
and the selfless, risk-taking external work of transformation
Fill us with that hope Lord God,
with a bold hope that requires more than mere celebration and remembrance,
A hope that causes us to take up our cross and re-make our world.

**A Dead Man's Dream
by Carl Wendall Hines, Jr.**

*Now that he is safely dead,
Let us Praise him.*

*Build monuments to his glory.
Sing Hosannas to his name.*

*Dead men make such convenient Heroes.
They cannot rise to challenge the images
We would fashion from their Lives.
It is easier to build monuments
Than to make a better world.*

*So now that he is safely dead,
We, with eased consciences, will
Teach our children that he was a great man,
Knowing that the cause for which he
Lived is still a cause
And the dream for which he died
Is still a dream.*

“Now That He Is Safely Dead” is the poignant poem that was written by black poet/musician Carl Wendell Hines soon after Malcolm X’s assassination in 1965. The poem has been appropriately – and perhaps more meaningfully – associated with the murder of Martin Luther King and King’s legacy of nonviolent struggle for black liberation, freedom, equality, voting rights, job opportunities, economic justice and the pursuit of happiness.

Ignoring Dr. King’s governing principle of unrelenting struggle against injustice with gospel-inspired, non-homicidal, resistance to evil, America has – since his murder – posthumously awarded him a national holiday, a statue in DC and frequent references to the moving “I Have A Dream” speech from 1963. And in the process, a major point of his mission has been lost.

The establishment, with the help of the deeply ingrained, “institutional” white racism, has managed to keep in check the demands for real reforms for blacks and other minorities by repeatedly focusing on the very worthy Dream speech rather than on King’s more radical messages. One can sense the wink-wink, nod-nod and the tip of the politician’s hat towards lady justice while continuing to delay and deny justice for yet another legislative and Supreme Court session. The congenial Martin Luther King of 1963 is easier to deal with than the fire-breathing, more militant, antiwar King of 1968 who knew he didn’t have all that much time left to teach and preach and inspire.

By Dr. Gary G. Kohls, Global Research, January 21, 2015

Reflection by Saran Sidime

Side note: Before I begin, I must confess that all week, it’s felt like I’ve had a lump in my throat and it just wouldn’t go away. Preparing for this Sunday’s introduction led me into a series of reflections about MLK, the current state of our country and our world. The more I reflected and learned, the darker it got. The news cycle didn’t help either. To quote Andrea’s sermon from

last week, it does seem like the evil powers of the age are winning, doesn't it?

Allow me to resume.

When we make heroes out of people, we diminish their humanity. We, instead, focus on individual triumphs rather than the structural evils in place that led them to war. Thus missing the point of what they came to teach us: how to be fully human. Jesus was crucified; Mandela was jailed for 27 years, MLK assassinated. We're either in desperate need of a reality check or we're just really bad at taking advice.

We uphold these "heroes" as martyrs, prophets, saints, and yet learn so little of the courage and dignity they display, their profound example of faith, their staunch commitment to self-determination in a world too interested in conformity and most importantly how they came to change their minds. We miss learning from their personal transformations.

Today and tomorrow, halls and churches will be filled with enthusiastic celebrants, pastors, and congregants and of course politicians. There is no better holiday to prove that you have transcended racist attitudes and are down for the cause than on MLK day. Overdone MLK quotes will be thrown around, empty promises will be made and people will clap and nod and smile. #MLKday2018 will be trending on Twitter (I'm a millennial y'all, I had to include that one).

Oh and let's not forget that there will be talks of hope and reconciliation and the beloved community. After all, that is the entire message MLK came to teach us. He will be elevated as an oppressed person who through faith, endurance survived it all. In others words, if MLK can do it so can you? Not how can we avoid the killing of more black men who keep reminding us how much work we have left to do?

I say we can do better. We can engage in a deeper kind of reflection, maybe even weep. At least we have the choice to. We can weep because all of MLK's fight could not prevent the march of White Nationalists in Charlottesville last year. We can weep because dignity, humanity, human right, political participation is still being denied to people of color all over the country today.

A society that does not know to face, grieve and repent wrongdoing will always miss the true cause for celebration. Not a single one of us in this room is untainted by how the US hegemony came to exist.

Today and tomorrow, people will make comparisons between the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter and deem the former "smart" "centrist" "civilized" "dignified" and not once will there be a pause of reflection as to the tragedy of needing a BLM movement today. Again, missing the point entirely.

Ta Nehisi Coates put it best when he said, “whatever symbols they embraced, civil rights activists—much like black activists today - never successfully connected with the hearts of the majority of adults of their own day. The process was neither neat nor particularly unifying.”

Prophets are essential. Christian thinker and theologian, Richard Rohr eloquently frames this for us with the following and I quote, “Prophets, by their very nature, cannot be at the center of any social structure. Rather, they are “on the edge of the inside.” They cannot be fully insiders, but they cannot throw rocks from outside either. They must be educated inside the system, knowing and living the rules, before they can critique what is non-essential or not so important. Jesus did this masterfully (see Matthew 5:17-48).

This is what Martin Luther King, Jr. taught the United States, what Gandhi taught British-occupied India, and what Nelson Mandela taught South Africa. Only with great respect for and understanding of the rules can a prophet know how to properly break those very same rules—for the sake of a greater purpose and value. A prophet critiques a system by quoting its own documents, constitutions, heroes, and Scriptures against its present practice. This is their secret: systems are best unlocked from inside.”

Yes, prophets are essential. They urge us all to answer the following question in our own way: How do we hold systems of oppression accountable without becoming ourselves the oppressors?

I have a two-part response to this.

The first I believe is embracing what theologian Miguel de la Torre calls a theology of hopelessness. According to de la Torre, one of the unexamined assumptions of the Christian faith is a theology that is based on *esperanza*, on hope. “All things work for the good of those who love God, and who have been called according to God’s purpose” (Ro. 8:28).

To hope in English is to expect, to await something good. In Spanish, the word *esperanza* is derived from the word *esperar*. To hope in Spanish, *esperar* means to wait in the apprehension of either good or evil. The usage of the Spanish connotes a darker, more complex meaning that implies fear of what is awaited. To wait doesn’t imply a happy ending, especially if the waiting drags on for centuries.

Like de La Torre, I have no problem with a hope in God. I too find it problematic to hope that all things will work out for the best. La Torre claims and I agree that history and personal experience prove the contrary. Good, decent people of faith suffer calamity, humiliations over and over again, financial collapse, hunger. Bad things happen to good Christian people. Claiming hope, he asserts, as protection from evil becomes naïve and a cop out.

“If hope is irreducible to the personal, can we instead speak of the eventual hope of the triumph of justice? Does not history lead toward ultimate salvation for humanity? I am not convinced, as was Martin Luther King, Jr. that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it

bends towards justice. What if how we create history and how we remember our past simply justifies the values and social power of those who gets to write history, literally writing their privileged space into the national epic? What if there is no historical movement, leading toward some secular ideal based on enlightenment and reason or some religious ideal based on some heavenly paradise?

What we call history is chaos, with no rhyme or reason, mainly because the events are as unpredictable and contradictive as humans. One is hard press to notice any type of progressive dialectical march toward a better human existence. Modernity has taught us that we, as a species, are moving toward utopia; rather we claim capitalism (a rising tide will raise all ships) or communism (the eventual withering away of the state). Both share a salvation history. Hope exists for that the future, thanks to God or science or human ingenuity, will be more forward thinking and more egalitarian, than the past. But what if there is no salvation history? ...What if the historical dialectic that moves history in an upward spiral is but an optimistic construct forced on a very select history? History instead is not defined through triumphant metanarratives, but instead is a keilodscope comprised of contradictory and complex untold stories and struggles of the very least among us who remain unnamed. History is full of stories of the very least among us who remain unnamed. History is full of stories of evil vanquishing good, brutality- crushing peace. Hopelessness can become the companion of used and abused people.

The virtue and/or audacity of hope become a class privilege experienced by those protected from the realities of deep poverty, racism, and disenfranchisement. The hopelessness I advocate for rejects quick and easy fixes that may temporarily soothe the conscious of the privileged but is no substitute for bring about a more just social structure that is not based on the disenfranchisement of the world's abused. The hopelessness that he advocates for is not disabling; rather, it is a methodology that propels toward praxis. All too often the advocacy of hope gets in the way of listening and learning from the oppressed. But this is never an excuse to do nothing. The disenfranchised have no option but to continue their struggle for justice regardless of the odds against them.”

Side Note: Briefly mention Christena Cleveland who believes the opposite (hopelessness is for the privileged).

Embracing grief or hopelessness in my opinion is a natural response in facing harsh realities. It is impossible to be presented with certain truths and not feel somewhat hopeless. Unlike hopelessness, transcendence looks for a way out while hopelessness, the non-paralyzing kind leads us to seek deeper communion with God. We go on a search for God's heart.

How shall we then bear the weight of crushing realities? Rather than to thirst for alleviation, we can thirst for truth. Like the woman at the well, we can thirst for truth with full faith that Christ will meet us with an invitation, then a revelation and finally a consolation because grace is for everyone. We can trust that no matter the depth of our hopelessness, God is with us. It is poor to the mind and soul to not be opened to miracles (shift in perspectives). Paying attention and listening for those shifts is our responsibility. We learn to make space for truth so that we can

be free to choose love. Redemption in my opinion happens with our participation. It happens in our personhood. We are expanded from within to bear the risk of engaging in dialogue, to focus on goodness. Pastor Sara mentioned this all the time, “when you’ve experienced yourself as beloved, when you believe in your dignity, you are open to protecting the belovedness and dignity of others”.

There is a word in Malinke, my mother tongue, we say to those in grief. It’s the word Sabari. Malinke is a spoken language so translating it into English can become frustrating. “The capacity to bear grief” is the closest translation I could come up with. People are told this because it is believed that they are capable of enduring grief. As Christians, we can bear hard truths because we have in Christ the most tender of consolers. We can do this.

My second response to how the question of we hold systems of oppression accountable without becoming ourselves the oppressors is through self – agency.

Philosopher Amelie Rorty in examining what makes a person wrote, “It is intentions, the capacities for choice rather than the total configuration traits which defines the person.” MLK in his urge that we judge a person by the content of their character and not the color of their skin was to a certain extent referring to this.

Self-agency more than self-emptying is the better spiritual practice for marginalized groups. For centuries, people of color everywhere were denied the right to self-determination. Reclaiming their humanity is a revolution act. This is where Malcolm X, more than MLK, won the heart of the black community. He advocated for their self- love and where Chinua Achebe made it possible for authors like Chimamanda Adichie to imagine Africans creating their own narratives. The world self-emptying could also bring about crippling memories for many women in this room. Women, who were constantly expected to contain themselves, deprive themselves, silence themselves, and accept their fate for the sake of the male superiority complex. Self-agency is rewriting the narrative.

There is no greater advocate for self-agency than writer, editor, and literary critic, Toni Morrison. In response to racism, she wrote the following:

“Know the function, the very serious function of racism, which is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary.”

Morrison is known for ignoring what she calls the “white gaze” in her writing. Her ask is simple, what happens when/if you dare to imagine your work and or sense of being in the world without the oppressor in mind? The entire world is open to you. This is a simple clarity, hard

won but one that is valuable she says.

In the spirit of MLK and in the words of Morrison, I leave you with this: "Inside you is a free person, locate her and let her do some good."

I, Too

By Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.