

For MLK Day 2022

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Text 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Now concerning spiritual gifts, siblings, I do not want you to be uninformed. <sup>2</sup>You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. <sup>3</sup>Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>4</sup> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup>and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup>and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. <sup>7</sup>To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. <sup>8</sup>To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup>to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, <sup>10</sup>to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. <sup>11</sup>All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Sermon

It seems to me that we often cling to the good parts version of Jesus: the Jesus who heals the sick and comforts the afflicted. Jesus the baby in the manger, and Jesus, risen and floating on a cloud of glory. We emphasize easy Jesus more often than Jesus the prophet, who said this was what was fulfilled in him:

<sup>18</sup> 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,

<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' (Luke 4)

We pass quickly by Jesus who stood on the side of the poor and said words that shook an empire. We turn from the repentance preached by the one who came with a winnowing fork and a refiner's fire.

I admit that I do this.

As recently as last week, I skipped the refiner's fire portion of our gospel reading altogether. You probably noticed.

I think of Paul's words on spiritual gifts as perhaps applying to Jesus, in this way: while Jesus' followers don't have all these gifts, Jesus himself had all of them.

Jesus was both wise and smart, was connected with God in faith, had the gift of healing and the gift of miracles, and spoke a prophetic word more powerful than any teacher we have known. He could discern the work of the Holy Spirit, speak to the one taken over by chaos, and understand the meaning of the most marginalized.

And he did all of this for the common good.

To look at Jesus only as a wisdom teacher without calling to mind the way he healed leaves out something crucial. To look at Jesus only as one who could turn water into wine without calling to mind the poor on the hillside who were fed by him leaves out something crucial. And to skip over his prophetic witness against injustice, interpersonal and systemic, leaves out something crucial, in the words of biblical scholar Obery Hendricks:

“Jesus the political revolutionary, the Jesus who is as concerned about liberating us from the kingdoms of earth as about getting us into the kingdom of heaven. Yet the Gospels tell us that is who Jesus is, too....Yes, Jesus of Nazareth was a political revolutionary. Now, to say that he was ‘political’ doesn’t mean that he sought to start yet another protest party in Galilee. Nor does it mean that he was ‘involved in politics’ in the sense that we know it today, with its bargaining and compromises and power plays and partisanship. And it certainly doesn’t mean that he wanted to wage war or overthrow the Roman Empire by force... To say that Jesus was a political revolutionary is to say that the message he proclaimed not only called for change in individual hearts but also demanded sweeping and comprehensive change in the political, social, and economic structures in his setting in life: colonized Israel.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus' Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted. Obery M. Hendricks. Kindle Edition

On this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, it seems to me that we often cling to the MLK who had a dream that you can paint with with pleasant colors, quote on a billboard that makes you smile to see. We agree almost universally in that every person should be measured according to the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. We share the dream of children of all races and ethnicities holding hands together in unity. This weekend many of us will find some way to volunteer, making this a “day on instead of a day off,” remembering his words that everyone can be great because everyone can serve.

Dr. King is, in 2022, almost universally admired. A saint in the US psyche, martyred in his prime and remembered only as beloved.

I submit to you that we often overlook something crucial in our remembrances of Dr. King.

We have set aside the prophetic witness of the last two years of his life, when Dr. King’s leadership turned to addressing what he called three evils: “the evil of racism, the evil of poverty, and the evil of war.”<sup>2</sup>

We largely skip over the phase of Dr. King’s life in which his calls for change would make us uncomfortable even today.

I think it’s particularly challenging to hear Dr. King’s words on economic justice: “We must honestly admit that capitalism has often left a gulf between superfluous wealth and abject poverty...”<sup>3</sup>

Dr. King’s last great efforts came at the intersection of racial and economic justice as he advocated for the poor in cities across the United States and was a founder of the multiracial Poor People’s Campaign.

“The real reason that we must use our resources to outlaw poverty goes beyond material concerns to the quality of our mind and spirit. Deeply woven into the fiber of our religious tradition is the conviction that men are made in the image of God, and that they are souls of infinite metaphysical value. If we accept this as a profound moral fact, we cannot be content to see men hungry, to see men victimized with ill-health, when we have the means to help them. In the final analysis, the rich must not ignore the poor

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<sup>2</sup> In a speech entitled “[America’s Chief Moral Dilemma](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/martin-luther-king-hungry-club-forum/552533/).” re-printed here: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/martin-luther-king-hungry-club-forum/552533/>

<sup>3</sup> Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? (King Legacy Book 2) Kindle Edition

because both rich and poor are tied together. They entered the same mysterious gateway of human birth, into the same adventure of mortal life.”<sup>4</sup>

In remembering Dr. King, we rarely travel to Memphis with him, where he stood beside sanitation workers. We forget that the week before he died he had a 25% approval rating in this country. His ideas were too prophetic, too political, too radical, too close to the wallet. He preached not just equality among people, and not just voting rights - a subject I'm all too aware we are still struggling with today - but also changes to the economic structure of our nation.

And yet to cling only to the manger or the dream is to ignore the fact that the deepest, most provocative prophetic witnesses of both of the great leaders remain unfulfilled, incomplete and perhaps even uncomfortable to contemplate.

What then, might we do?

This week I re-read Dr. King's final book, published posthumously, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, to get a better sense of how his thinking evolved. It's a worthwhile book, and alongside it, I think his reflection offered at the Riverside Church, *Beyond Vietnam* is a profound examination both of that war, and militarism.<sup>5</sup> And yet, reading these works today, you're as likely to feel challenged as folks did in 1967 and 1968.

If you are thinking more about this moment and this place, please consider the course *Dismantling Racism in Our Town*, offered here in Lexington. Having taken that course last year, I found it profound and provocative. And I learned just last week that there were some Pilgrims involved in the development of that course. You can participate in a sample of this program tomorrow at 4pm - signup at [Lexingtonmlk.org](http://Lexingtonmlk.org) .

My point here, folks, is that every year on this weekend, we lift up and laud Dr. King, and offer words celebrating his dream. To truly rise to the challenge of his prophetic witness at the end of his life, we need to go deeper. We need to consider things that might be harder and more uncomfortable and involve more sacrifice than simply speaking for racial equality. So that's the invitation, this MLK weekend, to dig deeper into the even harder work that Dr. King would ask of us.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (King Legacy Book 2) Kindle Edition

<sup>5</sup> <https://archive.org/details/BeyondVietnamATimeToBreakSilence4467>

For the Pastoral Prayer:

Oh God, our gracious, heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the creative insights in the universe. We thank Thee for the lives of great saints and prophets in the past, who have revealed to us that we can stand up amid the problems and difficulties and trials of life and not give in. We thank Thee for our foreparents, who've given us something in the midst of the darkness of exploitation and oppression to keep going. And grant that we will go on with the proper faith and the proper determination of will, so that we will be able to make a creative contribution to this world and in our lives.

Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right or your left side, not for any selfish reason. I want to be on your right side or your left side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition. But I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so we can make of this old world a new world.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Thou, Dear God": Prayers That Open Hearts and Spirits (King Legacy Book 6) Kindle Edition