

Justice Everywhere
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“Justice Everywhere” Pilgrim Church UCC January 18, 2015—Second Sunday after Epiphany/
MLK (Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18)

It's Awards season, so I watched the Golden Globes the other night to see who would win and to see comedians Amy Poehler and Tina Fey host their final show together. As usual, their jokes were spot-on—with one joke revolving around the movie *Selma* about Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Civil Rights March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965. Tina Fey quipped, “The movie *Selma* is about the American Civil Rights movement, that totally worked and now everything's fine.” Cue the laughter since most of us know a little bit better than that.

As tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day, it's important to think about his life and lasting legacy and I'm going to use the movie *Selma* to do so. I saw *Selma* because I love history and I was assigned to report back to my mother whether or not it would be an appropriate movie for her AP U.S. History class to see with her. It's truly a remarkable movie that many of you who lived during the 1960s would likely appreciate as it doesn't just feature Dr. King and his inner circle but also looks at President Johnson and Alabama Governor George Wallace and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover makes a cameo. You sense frustration that President Johnson was all about making deals and Dr. King just wasn't interested in delaying the Civil Right Movement for political reasons. The most common criticism of the movie is the depiction of President Johnson, but there's a really entertaining showdown between President Johnson and Governor Wallace that certainly shows that these two Southern politicians were quite different in the way that they saw the world.

The March from Selma to Montgomery was centered around voting rights and eventually led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Oprah Winfrey plays Annie Lee Cooper, a Selma resident who repeatedly tried to register to vote only to continually get turned away. She dresses in a suit and goes down to the Registrar's office to wait patiently. The Registrar calls her name and threatens that he'll tell her boss at the nursing home that she's causing problems. Annie Lee Cooper respectfully responds that she'd just like to register to vote, that's all. He asks her to recite the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution—and she does so beautifully. Next, he asks her how many county judges there are in the State of Alabama and she responds 67. Correct answer. Then he looks up in irritation and triumph and says, “Name them” and stamps REJECTED on her voter registration form. Annie Lee Cooper was a real person whose story we witness in *Selma*.

One begins to see what's at stake—as most of us can agree that voting is an essential right that we have in our democracy. For folks who may think that this doesn't matter so much today—the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act just in 2013. Nine states, mostly in the South, can now change their election laws without federal approval.[1] Minority communities are often those who suffer most with changes in election laws, as was the case of Annie Lee Cooper attempting to register to vote in Selma, Alabama. The conversations in our country about Civil Rights aren't going away because we still have a ways to go despite some of the progress that has been made since Dr. King led that march from Selma to Montgomery decades ago.

It's important to realize that before Martin Luther King Jr. was a minister or held a Doctor of Divinity degree or became the President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he was simply a Christian who did his best to follow the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When he began

the community work that would shape not only his life, but the destiny of our nation—he was twenty-six years old.[2]

At one point in Selma, Dr. King's in jail with his supporters after dozens of them show up at the courthouse to register to vote and were subsequently arrested for disturbing the peace. In jail he shares his worries with Ralph Abernathy, one of his associates. Abernathy begins quoting the Gospel of Matthew: "Look at the birds of the air . . . consider the lilies of the field . . . so do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." [3] Dr. King looks at him with a twinkle in his eye and says, "Yeah, and this jail cell's probably bugged anyway." And then the two men just start laughing in the midst of so much anxiety.

It's striking when a person so many admire and see as a real pillar of strength in the face of adversity has moments of despondency, deep sadness, and doubt. People often said that being in Dr. King's presence could take the fear right out of you. Though in his more subdued moments, you wonder how he dealt with everything coming at him all the time. In the movie, he makes a late night phone call to his friend Mahalia Jackson, the famous singer, as his fear for what Selma will hold for the Civil Rights movement takes over. Mahalia Jackson gets out of bed and sings over the phone "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" which may have been Dr. King's favorite Gospel song. Going back to his faith to sustain him is what often got him through tumultuous times. It's a lesson for all of us when we face those moments of hopelessness—our faith can anchor us in the midst of stormy seas. Before he was so famous that we dedicated a national holiday to honor him, Martin Luther King Jr. was a devout Christian just doing his best to follow in the Way of Christ.

Today the Psalmist helps us anchor our faiths when we hear: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away." [4] Like so many times in the Psalms you have to wonder if this is a hope or a certainty the author is voicing. There's an expressed difference between Creator and creature, between God and humanity.

Yet doesn't it bring comfort to realize that God knows us wholly and completely, that we're living our lives from beginning to end walking in God's light? We are fearfully and wonderfully made by God who knows all our ways. There's no hiding or pretending to be someone we're not when it comes to God because before we know God, God knows us. And God sometimes calls us to go places and be with people and show forth acts of love that we didn't even know that we were capable of doing. Thankfully God sees our potential and our gifts even if we just can't go there yet.

We watched a video on Dr. King when I was in Arizona with my UCC Next Generation Leadership cohort to learn about leadership in the midst of anxiety and sabotage. Sometimes when leaders have a vision ("I have a dream") and communicate that vision, the family/supporters/friends/confidants/church try desperately to bring the leader back to restore balance and insist on togetherness. So you'll hear—you're wrong, change back, or if you don't—there will be consequences. People often mean well and yet the fear of someone clarifying their own principles and convictions and taking action based on those convictions can be scary for people who fear change. Not everyone responds positively to someone declaring: "I have a dream."

At one point for Dr. King, the leaders of the movement were staying in a hotel and he was speaking about taking action in Birmingham right around Holy Week. Civil Rights leaders protested and demonstrated in difficult places all the time, but Birmingham was especially fraught with danger. Many people who gathered in this hotel room were trying to tell Dr. King to call off the protest in Birmingham including African American business and religious leaders

from the town. His own father reminded him that it was Holy Week and that he needed to be in his pulpit to preach come Easter Sunday.

Dr. King excused himself for a little while so that he could go next door and pray. When he came back, he had changed into a pair of jeans—which was a sign that he wasn't going anywhere. He was in Birmingham to stay, so he might as well be comfortable. The events in Birmingham captured the attention of the American people. Dr. King was jailed and wrote probably his most famous work, Letter from a Birmingham Jail (which we prayed this morning) after he realized, with God's help, that he was right where he belonged. But isn't it something that some of the people who loved him were the very people trying to talk him out of demonstrating for a more just society? If he hadn't taken the time to sit with God and discern what the path forward truly was—how different things might have turned out for our country. This is self-differentiated leadership. As the Psalmist says, "You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways."^[5]

There are few historical figures I admire more than Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. For his stamina and tenacity and refusing to sink down to depths of hatred when he was confronted with animosity—well, the man deserved the Nobel Peace Prize and so much more. What we can't ever lose sight of though is not just the Reverend in front of his name but the depth of his Christian faith that kept him going. Sometimes he needed to step away and be with God to figure out what in the world was the path forward. Hearing and reciting scripture in jail cells, calling a friend to hear that soothing Gospel song when his heart was gripped with fear, delivering sermons and sitting with people in pain, going off on his own to just be with God and pray—this was a person who could say: "I come to the end—I am still with you."^[6] A man who could turn to that beloved Gospel song in times of need: "Precious Lord, take my hand. Lead me on, let me stand. I am tired. I am weak. I am worn. Through the storm, through the night—lead me on to the light. Take my hand, Precious Lord, lead me home." Amen.

[1] Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Invalidates Key Part of Voting Rights Act," The New York Times, June 25, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/26/us/supreme-court-ruling.html?pagewanted...>

[2] Martin Luther King Jr. Biographical, Nobel Prize Website, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html

[3] Quotes from Matthew, Chapter 6.

[4] Psalm 139: 1.

[5] Psalm 139:3.

[6] Psalm 139:18.