

Dreamer

When I initially thought about writing this sermon, I thought, "What could I say about Dr. King that had not already been said?". Volumes had been written about the man. After all, his life speaks for itself. Yet I began to ponder about certain things about King that people may or may not have known about him.

In my seminary years I had the good fortune of studying Systematic Theology with Dr. James Cone at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Dr. Cone had written a book called, *Malcolm and Martin in America*, and I highly commend it to you. In the book he talked about Martin being more upper middle class in his up-bringing and how his father, Daddy King, had always taught Martin to beware of capitalism and its class system. I had read so much about Martin on my own and in seminary, but I didn't really know him the way I wanted to know him, as a man and as a human being.

For instance Martin was 5 feet 6 inches tall.

His favorite hymn was *Precious Lord*, and he love gospel singer Mahalia Jackson's rendition of the hymn, and he often invited gospel singer [Mahalia Jackson](#) to sing it at civil rights rallies to inspire the crowds; at his request she sang it at his funeral in April 1968. King's last words were, just before being shot, was for the musician that evening to play it "real pretty," at a rally he had planned on attending the night of his assassination. He was a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity. He pledged while attending Morehouse College and was initiated while attending Boston University. Of course he was a Nobel Laureate. Had he lived, he would have been 89 years young this January 15th. But what else can we know about him?

For example, what if anything did he drink? On one occasion it was an orange juice and vodka. Yes, King was a smoker. I have read that Martin's skin was so sensitive that he shaved with what my dad used when I was growing up; a concoction called "Magic Shave," a smelly powder that would leave an odor in our entire home growing up that smelled like eggs gone bad. His sexual athleticism and appetites are common knowledge now, mostly due to FBI tapes and Ralph Abernathy's 1989 tell all book, "When The Walls Come Tumbling Down."

Martin's birth name was Michael King. The Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Bearing The Cross*, by author David Garrow, tells us that King was very heavily involved in an interracial relationship while at Crozer Seminary after graduating from Morehouse. Crozer is located in Upland, Pennsylvania. The seminary mostly served as an American Baptist Church School, training seminarians for entry into the Baptist ministry. Garrow writes that King dated regularly while attending Crozer, and one of his companions was a white girl of German origin whose mother worked for the school. This relationship raised concern with both African Americans and European Americans alike as it was a serious relationship. King and the young lady were in love and talking about marriage. (*Bearing The Cross*, p.40)

Yet King's colleagues offered stern advice that if King wanted to return south to pastor a church, an interracial marriage would create severe problems in both the black and white communities. After 6 months, King took the advice of his friends and ended the relationship on amicable but painful terms. (*Cross, p. 41*).

King never really could make his peace with capitalism and really leaned toward a more Democratic Socialist political philosophy as well. This perspective led to King being labeled a Communist by friends and foes alike. Theologically, King did not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus and saw it as a metaphor for the message that life and love will always conquer death. He was also a big fan of the opera, as his wife Coretta had aspirations of becoming a professional opera singer at one point in her life. Martin was also a brilliant intellectual, earning his PH.D in Systematic Theology at the age of 23 years young.

These are just some things about this man that you may or may not have known. Much of this information comes from Clayborne Carson's collection of the King Papers and other writings. This info is in the public domain and I encourage you to do your own research on whom Professor Michael Eric Dyson calls the most influential American of the 20th century. Martin Luther King, Jr. was many things. He was an educator, a husband, father, minister, revolutionary, and prophet; and yet there is a saying that a prophet is never recognized in his own country. More importantly, at least in my mind, is that Martin was simply a man. Martin was a human being. An extraordinary one, but a human being just like you and me. King wasn't perfect but then again he never claimed to be.

His dream of racial equality and justice still haunts us today. His rich baritone voice still reverberates down through the corridors of time. His message echoes and finds room in our hearts and minds. The truth has a way of doing this even though we at times ignore it. Many are called but few choose to listen. His message of love and forgiveness was, and still is revolutionary, and make no mistake, King was a revolutionary. For some his dream was a nightmare. Dreams can be dangerous things for those who live in fear. In the book of Genesis 37:19-20, we read these words about Joseph and his brothers, "Here comes the Dreamer. Let us slay him and see what becomes of his dream." As it was with Mandela, many who opposed him back in the day, now praise him. Sure, people can have a change of heart, but some are riding the coat tails of those who have gone on before them. Unitarian Universalist Clinton Lee Scott writes, "Always it is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision. It is easier to blindly venerate the saints than to learn the human quality of their sainthood. It is easier to glorify the heroes and sheroes of the race than to give weight to their examples. To worship the wise is much easier than to profit by their wisdom. Great leaders are honored, not by adulation, but by sharing their insights and values. Many times the grandchildren of those who stoned the prophet sometimes gather up those same stones to build the prophets monument. Always it is easier to pay homage than to heed the direction of their vision." There is another saying from an anonymous writer which states, "Now that he is gone let us safely praise him. For he cannot challenge the image we have made for him, for it is easier to build a monument than a movement."

I too celebrate the Holiday we share to commemorate his life but I must admit that sometime times I too share the sentiments of Brother Scott. We have come so far as a nation and yet have such a ways to go.

Martin comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable. His dream was as dangerous then as it is now for it was a dream that was anti-empire. It is not a utopian, let's all sing Kumbaya type of dream. It takes work. It takes sacrifice, it takes risk, and for some it did and will continue to take lives. Not that all of us who resonate with the dream will have to suffer physical death; but we will have to sacrifice and to risk for the dream to become a reality. We will many times have to put other first instead of ourselves.

The words of Henry David Thoreau come to mind when he writes, "If you have built castles in the air, that is where they should be. Now you must put foundations under them." So it is with this dream. You see during the Civil Rights movement, the dominant culture in power, whether they reacted for good or ill at the time, were still only reacting. Reacting to one of the most astonishing, beautiful, and spontaneous uprisings for justice the world has ever seen.

King was a patriot. Now we don't hear that word much in conjunction with a non-violent activist. We here it more now about military feats or elite groups like the Navy Seals, or other U S military Special Forces. Yet King was a patriot in the best sense of the word, for he was a spiritual warrior. He loved this country and believed in the meaning of its creed. He just dreamed of a different way of getting there; a way without violence. King used to say that peace is not the goal. Peace is the tool we use to achieve our goals. He knew then what we are really just beginning to grasp now. The choices before humankind at this juncture on planet earth are not non-violence versus violence, but non-violence versus non-existence. These are the choices we face today. He had an abiding hope for America that we could actually be true to what we said on paper; that all human beings are created equal. King learned his lesson well from the teachings of Gandhi that if you really want to create change in a society, people had to move from group force to the Sanskrit word, *Satyagraha* which means love force or soul force. Gandhi used this technique in the Indian Independence Movement against The British Empire and it worked. You can see how powerful this force of love can be. You can also perhaps see what made King such a dangerous revolutionary. He spoke of creating a vision of community out of a "stone of hope." Now you know you can't have hope without having a little faith. Even the faith of a mustard seed can move mountains of despair, and bigotry. How? Because we don't have to do it alone. Why? Because we can't do it alone. We need each other. St Augustine once said that faith is to believe in what we do not see, and the reward of that faith is to see what is believed.

The Rev. Jim Wallis of Sojourner's magazine says that hope is believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence disappear. King said faith was taking the first step when you don't see the rest of the staircase. What do we say about faith and hope? How do we define it for ourselves and for our respective communities? You see the same is true of individuals as well as nations because there may be a time when someone can see something for you that you cannot see for yourself. That will be the

time when you have to believe in someone else's vision and potential for you until you can believe in yourself. This is what King saw in America and this is what we must see as well, if we are to survive and thrive as a nation, for where there is no vision, the people perish! When was the last time you spoke about what is right about America? When was the last time you even thought about it? I confess I don't do it as often as I should. This doesn't mean we don't need change but it does mean that we may need to appreciate what we have. We must all admit to ourselves that yes, there may be better places to live, but there sure are worse places to live as well.

We must see the kingdom and queendom of God within ourselves in order to create the world we want to live in. We must answer the bell as co-creators of our own collective and individual realities and pledge to become more self-evolved, more transformative, more creative, forward thinking, more authentically forgiving, and more loving human beings. In short we may have to give up the, ...well you know I tried it last time and it didn't work then..., attitude about life. For nations and individuals alike, there is fate and there is destiny. Fate is what happens to you. Destiny is what you do with it. We cannot continue to put old wine into new wine skins, attempting to solve 21st century challenges antiquated tools just won't work. Yes, we can and must learn from the events of the 50's and 60's. We must keep the dreams alive of our elders and ancestors. And we must find our own way. It's a new day. The simple truth of the matter is that nations like individuals will reap what they sow. That's just the law of life. It's not personal. We all know that, at least on some level. It's just really difficult to remember sometimes. It's really difficult in certain situations where we have the choice to be right or to be kind, to remember to choose being kind. It's really difficult. It's really difficult to preach our good news, or Gospel, and only use words when necessary, to quote Francis of Assisi. You see it's how we live our lives that will be the greatest sermon anyone will ever see or hear.

King challenged us as most revolutionaries and prophets do to consider our identity. Who are we anyway? What is it that we truly want? What is our point anyway with our lives? What does it really mean to be an American; what does it really mean to be a human being? King realized what James Baldwin so eloquently stated when he said that if I am not who you say I am, then you are not who you think you are. That's why this is not strictly an African American Holiday! In fact, I believe it would be a statement of fact to suggest that in the 20th century, in this country, our white brothers and sisters had no greater friend than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to others? We love to hear his "Dream" speech, but fail to note the change in his thinking later in his life. One of the lessons King spoke about was the next phase of the Civil Rights Movement as he saw it. In 1968 when asked by Merv Griffin if the Civil Rights Movement was over, since King's message focused more on poverty and a redistribution of wealth, his response was that he had come to realize that it was easier to integrate a lunch counter than it was to guarantee an annual income, and we all know how difficult it was to integrate a lunch counter. It was easier to get someone to sit at a counter to get a cup of coffee and then to discover that he or she didn't have the money to pay for it. King, in a moment of candor and despair towards the end of his life remarked that he had been thinking that getting folk of color to integrate into American society maybe just like

asking folk of color to integrate into a burning house. He was fatigued, frustrated, and in despair.

He was very much aware that the dominant culture as Americans must first risk being uncomfortable in order to heal and to grow and to love; especially, but not limited to those already in positions of power. King spoke out against unfettered capitalism, racism, poverty, and military adventurism in Southeast Asia. No doubt if alive he would speak out against how our legions are deployed all over this planet, to protect, "our way of life." You see it was Vietnam that killed him. As long as he spoke out against racism he was a nuisance, an annoyance, and embarrassment to the United States. But when he spoke out against the War in Vietnam and called for folk to burn their draft cards, he was dead in a year. On April, 16th 1967 King delivered a sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA entitled, Why I Oppose the Vietnam war (he also delivered the same sermon at Riverside Church in NYC on April 4th, 1967) a sermon which Stokely Carmichael attended. On April 4th, 1968 he was dead. Do you think that was an accident or coincidental? President Lyndon Johnson referred to him during this time as, "that damned nigger preacher," because Johnson felt betrayed after working with King and other African American leaders to pass the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act, when Martin spoke out against the war. It must have appeared to Johnson and other political leaders that Martin had forgotten his place. He was now meddling in our nation's foreign policy. It took courage for King to do this, as friend and foe alike turned on Martin. His interests were only to be limited to Civil Rights. But King knew then what only some of us are discovering now that all oppressions are linked together. "We are caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all of us indirectly. We are all interrelated. So you see it wasn't the marching that killed him or the beatings he took. It wasn't the harassment from our government's security agencies or the long time away from home and family that killed him. Sure, it no doubt contributed to the stress and strain of living his life's mission and sense of mission. When Martin died his autopsy report stated that at the age of 39, he had the heart of a 60-year-old man. But no, that wasn't enough to kill him. But in the end it was his challenging the military, industrial, technological, entertainment, and prison complex of this nation that sealed his fate. It was his talking about a redistribution of wealth in this country that killed him. It was his wanting to put an end to U.S. hegemony and military adventurism in Southeast Asia and other places abroad that killed him. It was his reminding us that of all the forms of injustice, inequality in healthcare was the most shocking and inhumane that killed him! If he were alive today he would remind us that suffering from hunger is not a game. If he were alive today he would have much to say about both the progress and the work yet to be done that America has to undertake to create the beloved community. No doubt he would celebrate our first President of color. No doubt. I believe he would have counseled then president Obama and remind him and us of the sorrows of Empire and the lessons we need to learn from other crumbled Empires if we are to survive and to thrive as a nation. I can imagine Martin asking our President if after winning the Nobel Peace Prize, could he have not found another strategy to counter sending 30,000 more legions to Afghanistan that same week? I'm just imagining now, don't be haters. He would remind American the lessons of Vietnam that the back bone of any military power can be broken. He would remind us of what the Soviets discovered in Afghanistan, and

Germany discovered that bitter winter on the road to Stalingrad. But he is not here with us today; at least not physically. This is all a part of the dream Martin dreamt about. Not that there would be no challenges but that ordinary everyday people would respond to those challenges. And so what would he say to us today?

All of us are not called to be Dr. King's in this lifetime but we can still be the best we can be. Martin would say along with Pablo Picasso that the meaning of our lives is to find our gift and that the purpose of our lives was to give it away. He would remind us that it is up to each and everyone of us to create the world we wish existed. He would tell us to speak the truth even if our voice shakes.

No doubt he would urge us to keep hope alive and to stay creatively maladjusted. He would speak out against Empire. He would remind us to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. He would remind us in the words of Thomas Stearns Elliot that it is easier to light a candle than to curse the darkness. He would remind us that he or she who would be the greatest among us shall be a servant. King would remind us that we don't need a college degree to serve. He would remind us that you don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity. He would remind us that you don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics or quantum physics to serve. He would remind us that blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. He would remind us that you only need a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love, and then you can be that servant. And then finally, he would remind us that when fear knocks at the door and faith answers, no one is there! Martin Luther King, Jr. was a man, a human being. No more and no less. At the end of his life he could say to his god the words in the Gospel of John 17:4. "I have glorified your name upon the earth. I have finished the work you have given me to do. I am reminded of the words of Shakespeare's masterpiece, Julius Caesar; Mark Antony at the death of Brutus remarks of him, "...the elements so mixed in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world-- This was a man!"

And so once again we gather on this special day, not to bury Martin, but to praise him---
Long Live The King....

May it always be so.