

What Would MLK Do?"
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on January 17, 2010

Reading: from Martin Luther King's 1967 address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, titled "Where Do We Go From Here?"

Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political and economic change. ... Now a lot of us are preachers, and all of us have our moral convictions and concerns, and so often have problems with power. There is nothing wrong with power if power is used correctly. And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites — polar opposites — so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love.

What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.

Sermon:

On this day when we remember the life and ministry of the Rev. Martin Luther King, it's impossible for me not to wonder "What if." What if he had lived longer, if his life had not been ended by an assassin's bullet when he was only 39? What would he have done in later years? What would he say to us here today?

I wonder how he might have been changed, over the years, by the work he was doing. You can hear in King's later writings and speeches a shift toward a broader critique of American culture, a realization that there was something wrong with a society as wealthy as ours in which so many people live in poverty; in which the poor are disproportionately the ones sent to fight our wars and black men are disproportionately the ones sent to prison. Though desegregation and voting rights were real progress, by 1967 or '68 it was clear to King that these accomplishments were just a beginning, and there was a long way to go.

What would Rev. King say to our nation in 2010, and what would he say to us church folks? I suspect he would say that yes, we have come a long way. The fact that a year ago this country inaugurated its first black president, that in some ways race is now less of a barrier to success in our society, that each generation seems to be less poisoned by the prejudice of the past--he would say this is progress and something to celebrate, that we have reached at least part of the promised land that he and so many others in the movement worked for.

But I suspect he would be dismayed that the church, which nurtured and formed him as a preacher and a prophet, has become less relevant and less influential in our society. He would lament that a private spirituality is more common these days, and he might remind us that he predicted the decline of the church back when he wrote that famous letter from the Birmingham Jail, when he said,

“So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent -- and often even vocal -- sanction of things as they are.”

He would say to us who are still in the church, “You have a choice to make--to seek to serve the needs of world and stand on the side of love and justice, or to serve your own needs, and become a private faith, an irrelevant social club.” He would say that one reason people gave up on the church is because the church forgot its mission.

I imagine Martin Luther King would ask us, “What have you been doing over these past forty years?” What have you accomplished? We have made some progress here and there, but the big picture hasn't changed that much. We seem to be a nation that's easily distracted, that spends a lot of time on trivial, inconsequential things.

Just two days ago, I saw an article by Richard Benjamin, a scholar who's written about race issues. He said, “Were Martin Luther King, Jr. living,” Benjamin writes, “he would not be bothered by the racial brushfires of late (Glenn Beck's rebuke of African-American as a ‘bogus, PC term,’ Harry Reid's Negro musings, and the Census' use of that label). Instead, he would be appalled by the larger afflictions engulfing this nation, all of which threaten the realization of his dream - not the therapeutic, saccharine dream peddled to us in candle-lit commemorations, but the urgent dream anchored by his gritty work.”¹

Benjamin says King would be focused on poverty and unemployment, health care and financial reform, rather than the more salacious, celebrity and talk show driven issues that take up so much air time. “It's the personal and dramatic aspects of race that obsess us, not the deeply rooted and currently active, political inequalities... (but) we would serve our country better with a conversation about class and racial inequalities than with chitchat about how any given person ‘feels.’”

Back in 1967, Dr. King was already doing this gritty work. In a speech to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, part of which was our reading this morning, that he called “Where Do We Go From Here?” he said,

“One day we must ask the question, ‘Why are there forty million poor people in America?’ And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about

¹ www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-m-benjamin/forget-avatar-and-beck-le_b_424771.html

the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society..."

But you know what happens when leaders start talking this way in America. King was accused of being a communist. When candidate Barack Obama said something about the benefits of spreading the wealth around, he was accused of being a socialist.

Here's what King, in that same speech, said to his critics: "Communism forgets that life is individual. Capitalism forgets that life is social, and the kingdom of brotherhood is found neither in... communism nor... capitalism but in a ... synthesis that combines the truths of both."

In our country the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Those banks we bailed out last year are now passing out huge bonuses to their executives. When will realize that our country's adoration of capitalism is worship of a false idol? I'm not against capitalism--I come from a family that includes several bankers, and I have benefited from capitalism, which has the potential to create wealth and do good. But it needs to be regulated and controlled, in order to help not the few but the many. Even with the current economic problems, we still live in such a wealthy country. This week's earthquake in Haiti is certainly a reminder of that. Aren't those who have more than enough morally obliged to share with those who do not? It seems to me that we could do a little more spreading the wealth around.

Put another way, those with power need to learn what Martin Luther King knew--that "power without love is reckless and abusive." We need to find ways to make the case for love--not sentimental, anemic love, but love that implements the demand for justice.

Martin Luther King made a habit of speaking up, and standing up, for those who needed his help. When he was killed, he was in Memphis to support striking sanitation workers, who had little or no power of their own. I wonder what he would say about the issues of our day. What about the struggle for marriage equality? I imagine he would be willing to take a risk, just as he did when he spoke out against the war in Vietnam. I imagine that we would come down on the side of those without power, gay and lesbian folks who want what I often take for granted--equal treatment under the law. I imagine Rev. King would have something to say about health care for all, and about how much we spend on the military. I imagine he would have something to say about our current economic crisis, and the effects of unbridled capitalism and greed.

He would say all of this from his place as a preacher and a pastor. He would ask, "Where is the voice of the church? Are you silently affirming the status quo, or are you working for positive social change? Are you not only reaching out to the poor and the needy, but working to change a system that creates and maintains a chasm between the haves and the have-nots?"

What would Martin Luther King do if he was still with us today? He'd be in his early 80's, but I suspect he would still be doing what he did back then--calling America to account, being our conscience, calling us to live out the meaning of our nation's creed--that all people are created equal.

Put simply, he would be a leader. This may seem obvious, but leadership is more than inspiring people. To be a leader means challenging the status quo and speaking truth to power. Being a leader making both your friends and your enemies uncomfortable and unhappy, at least some of the time. It means taking a stand and walking your talk.

Martin Luther King, if he were with us today, would remind us to pay attention to power--who has it and who does not. He would be standing with those at the margins and those in need. He would be using his power, and not apologizing for it. He would be calling us to use our power in order to serve the greater good. He would remind us about soul force; what he learned from Gandhi about combining love and nonviolence, the power of putting yourself on the line, putting your faith into action.

Finally, if Rev. King was here today, would ask us to serve. He would say to each of us, that no matter what our abilities or resources, we each have a part to play. He would say to us, as he did back in 1968, "everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love."

I'm going to end with a prayer, that is all about this call to serve. It's written by Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund. It's a call and response prayer, and the response, your part, is "but I care and am willing to serve." Please join in as you will.

Lord I cannot preach like Martin Luther King, Jr. or turn a poetic phrase like Maya Angelou
but I care and am willing to serve.

I do not have Fred Shuttlesworth's and Harriet Tubman's courage or Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's political skills
but I care and am willing to serve.

I cannot sing like Fannie Lou Hamer or organize like Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin
but I care and am willing to serve.

I am not holy like Archbishop Tutu, forgiving like Mandela, or disciplined like Gandhi
but I care and am willing to serve.

I am not brilliant like Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois or Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or as eloquent as Sojourner Truth and Booker T. Washington
but I care and am willing to serve.

I have not Mother Teresa's saintliness, Dorothy Day's love or Cesar Chavez's gentle tough spirit
but I care and am willing to serve.

God it is not as easy as it used to be to frame an issue and forge a solution
but I care and am willing to serve.

My mind and body are not so swift as in youth and my energy comes in spurts
but I care and am willing to serve.

I'm so young nobody will listen
I'm not sure what to say or do
but I care and am willing to serve.

I can't see or hear well, speak good English, stutter sometimes, am afraid of criticism and get real scared standing up before others
but I care and am willing to serve.

God, use each of us as you will today and tomorrow and to help build a nation and world where no child is left behind and everyone feels welcome.

Amen.