

## “To The Mountaintop”

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at  
First Congregational Church of Lebanon  
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*Romans 12:1-8*

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.*

Once again we find ourselves at the third Sunday of January, observing Martin Luther King Day weekend. It's become part of the rhythm of our lives, something we plan for and around, a nice long weekend that perhaps seems a bit much after the hullabaloo surrounding the extended holiday season, which began back in November with Thanksgiving and will end tomorrow with the observance of King Day.

Of course, Martin Luther King Day this is a fairly recent development and our own state was the very last one in the Union to adopt the holiday. As many of you may remember, there was a great deal of resistance to the idea, and New Hampshire grudgingly acceded to the idea after the halfway house of a Civil Rights Day was deemed to be inadequate. Some of you may remember things differently, but this is what I recall having listened to the debate down in the environs of Boston, where I then lived.

Now, given Boston's own tangled and difficult history of race relations, of Louis Day Hicks, bussing, and the resistance to integration of any kind in

Southie, I know not to point fingers. Infamously, our beloved Red Sox passed on the opportunity to sign one Jackie Robinson before Branch Rickey and the Dodgers struck and Boston was the last Major League team to sign a black player, the immortal Pumpsie Green. Jackie Robinson and Ted Williams could have played for the same ball club. Think about it. The missed opportunity – it makes one want to cry.

Now the reason I raise all this is to suggest that what sometimes can seem like ancient history is actually a bit more current, that what seems like something others dealt with is our own still-to-be-addressed problem, that while we can be grateful that things are much better now than they once were, we still have much work to do.

You may ask why am I giving this topic any sermon time at all: after all, this isn't a church issue or a bible issue, it's a political issue, some might say, and there's no good reason to address this during worship. Yet I would remind you that this is indeed a matter for Christians, that it was Christian leadership that put the issues on the national agenda, that it was a recognition that one can not be a follower of Jesus Christ while bowing at the altar of Jim Crow.

I would ask you to remember that the holiday we will observe tomorrow is in honor of the *Reverend* Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a minister of the Word. He had a doctorate in theology. He was a Baptist preacher right through the moment he was struck down by a craven assassin's bullet at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. He died offering encouragement to sanitation workers who were on strike, seeing his civil rights work as an extension of his ministry, just as the prophet Isaiah saw the opportunity to witness to the God of Israel and his justice at the court of the king of Judah where he was a well-placed official. The Lord's word wasn't to be confined to the sanctuary, to just one hour of the week, but to all the situations in which we find ourselves, at all the times of our lives.

King was a preacher and Scripture inspired his teaching. Yes, he learned from those beyond the Christian tradition, from Mahatma Gandhi and Rabbi Martin Buber but he was first and foremost a Christian. We in the church should be proud of this history just as we are challenged by the example. We should look to how our faith can be made real as we grapple with the

problems of our world. And we should know that we need not be giants of the stature of the memorialized, lionized, historicized, sainted Doctor King.

We can be people living in a community, asking whether we are prepared to take a risk, to make a stand, to speak out. We need to start somewhere. Before he was The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Junior, the man who spoke with presidents, the winner of the Nobel Prize, the leader of the March on Washington, the source of inspiration to so many, the object of heated debate, he was simply Martin Luther King, Jr. a young preacher at a Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama, swept up in the great events of his day.

Remember the reality of those times: segregated busses, among other things, still running after the Brown versus Board of Education decision of 1954. 'Separate But Equal' had been ruled unconstitutional yet there were still state governments and private businesses, hiding behind loopholes and local laws, enforcing this heinous concept. As we know now and can now confess, 'Separate But Equal' was anything but.

Montgomery, Alabama was the first capital of the Confederacy, and beliefs about racial supremacy found fertile ground there, persisting into the middle of the Twentieth Century. The New South, then as much an idea as much as a reality, was far, far away. This is not to say that there weren't whites who believed in equality of the races in that place but those who were affiliated with White Citizens Councils and the Klan were all too common, their pernicious ideas still far too prevalent.

It was in this segregated environment that young Martin found himself. Atlanta, Sweet Auburn, his hometown, may have been segregated, but that city aspired to something more. Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he grew up and his father preached must have felt a million miles away, though how far away must Boston University have seemed, that intellectual oasis where he studied for his doctorate and engaged with the ideas of men like Paul Tillich. Martin was a cosmopolitan in the sticks, a man who dreamed great dreams of breaking away from the Old South and its hidebound ways and now he was not only back there, he was in its heart.

And he was presented with a test.

The bus boycott began with the arrest of Claudette Colvin, a young high school student of principles with dreams of her own, then moved to the arrest of the redoubtable Rosa Parks, and ultimately the huge protest action that unfolded over more than a year. Workers, mothers, students, people dependent on the bus system refused to ride, choosing to walk, to use the low-fare black cab system that sprung up, to ask their white employers for rides to and from work. So many people whose names we do not know, so many people standing for what was and is right.

And it was into this fight that King was drawn, this situation where he was called to offer prophetic and pastoral leadership that would ultimately take him down a road that would change not only Montgomery, not only the South, but the United States of America.

King was at a church meeting one evening when the call came through: an explosive device had been thrown at his house, onto the porch, adjacent to the living room where his wife Coretta, a friend and the King's young daughter were watching television. Hearing something land outside, they retreated to the back of the house and escaped the explosion.

King learned of this attack at church and called for calm, then he returned home, comforted his wife and was faced with a quandary: what should he do?

He continued the fight.

Later he was arrested for speeding – doing 30 in a 25 mph zone – and went to jail. He was soon released, but he'd feared for his life, wondering if he'd share the fate of other black men who were apprehended and later lynched. There was another church service. People wondered how he was. He offered the congregation words of reassurance. But then he received a late night call: a racist threatening King with death if he didn't leave town.

Think about that: you, a racial minority and an outsider, have been speaking out in public ... and your house is bombed. Your life is threatened. What would you do? What would I do?

King chose to pray, and sitting at his kitchen table late at night, he offered everything up to the Lord, all of his questions and fears and doubts, and then he waited for an answer. And he believed that he received one, that God, the God of Jesus Christ, the God he had worshipped as a youth in his father's church, the God he sought to understand whilst at graduate school, the God who had sustained his forebears through the centuries, warmed his heart and made himself known to him. And his course, through the boycott and its confrontations with white bigots and unsure blacks, with people of both races who sought to preserve their position and influence, through the great confrontations and demonstrations, through Montgomery and Selma and Washington, had been set. King knew not specifically where he was going, but he marched with faith to the music of the Lord.

Martin Luther King, Jr. heard the words of Paul to the Romans. He preached on that text, lifting up the words to his congregation at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church: *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.* Now imagine these words preached to blacks in the South of the 1950s. Hear the words he spoke: Don't let the disciples of Jim Crow tell you what you are, don't heed the message of the segregationists, don't let the White Citizens Councils tell you your place. God – the Lord Almighty himself, the one who delivered the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt and gave them a land and a future – wants you, *you*, to be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern His will for you and the world.

The letter that Paul wrote to the Romans in the first century still had fire in it. It still had the power to move people, to remake them if only they would hear it. It laid down a challenge, not just to those ancients but also to the men and women of 20<sup>th</sup> century Alabama: You count before God. You can make a difference. You need only see yourself as God sees you. That challenge remains in effect today.

This interpretation of Paul can be unsettling to white people. King preached to a black congregation. He preached *against* a white power structure. Mostly, let's be honest, that's you and me. But as Americans and of course as Christians, we should welcome King's words. We must all heed the summons to service, to opposing injustice, to fighting racism and anti-Semitism and any

ism, anything that seeks to diminish *any* child of God. For we are all created in God's image, all of us, equally and we are beloved, beloved of the Lord, who made Adam and Eve, commissioned Abraham and Sarah, who worked through Moses, and lifted up the prophets Isaiah and Amos and Micah, and called us to repentance in the preaching of John, favored Mary, and finally came to us in Jesus Christ. This is the God who spoke through Martin Luther King, Jr. whose life and ministry we celebrate this day.

Before he was a monument, before he was a holiday, before he was a historical figure, before he was a man on the public stage, before he was a world-famous Nobel laureate, Martin Luther King, Jr. was a preacher, a Christian faced with a call and a summons, who had to answer the question: what should I do?

Before King could reach the mountaintop, he first had to decide to scale the mountain. He had to choose to set out from base camp and work his way up. Back in Montgomery, Alabama, Martin Luther King looked up, not to a peak, but to God, and he saw something that compelled him to move forward. As we know, King did not climb Everest, but his own Calvary. Still, he reached that mountaintop. And there he saw a future that still beckons to you and to me, a world where we recognize that we are all one, that we rejoice in the fact that, black or white, brown or yellow, we are all God's children.

It's a grand vision, one that will be realized only by each of us taking small steps. Before the Mall in Washington, there was the Boycott in Alabama. Let's remember that. Let us be inspired. Let us never be satisfied with the status quo, but be ready, always, to work for the beloved community, the holy, sacred Kingdom of God.