

Dr King: Building Temples

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Martin Luther King Day 2006 Sermon

Throughout the worship calendar each year there is no greater honor for me than preaching on Dr. King weekend. As I develop in my ministry and return to core theological issues I am moved ever more deeply by Dr. King's understandings of humanity and the divine – his grasp on the transformative and saviorly powers of the universe. What would the conversation be like Dr. King were alive with us today?

Legendary jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis evaluated Dr. King's contributions by saying, "When I think of King, I think of a man who was the single person in the 20th century who did the most to advance the meanings and feelings of the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights. He is the single most important person in America's fight to be itself."¹ I agree with Mr. Marsalis. Dr. King gave cosmic insight and inspiration for how we as Americans and as human beings can realize our greatest potential in democracy, freedom and justice. King knew and transmitted wisdom like only the greatest spiritual giants including, but not limited to Jesus, Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and Thich Naht Hahn.

On this weekend in pursuit of our own renewal and fulfillment we benefit from examining King's words and life. In this spirit I lift up a King sermon entitled "Unfulfilled Dreams". In this sermon he used the text of the eighth chapter of First Kings. In this scripture King David has decided that the best way for him to demonstrate effective leadership is to construct a great temple for his people. David feels clarity that this is what he wants to do and he sets forth with the significant project.

¹ Michael Eric Dyson, I May Not Get there with you. P. 8

The chapter in First Kings reads, “And it was in the heart of David to build a house for the name of the Lord God of Israel. And the Lord said unto David, “Whereas it was in thine heart to build a house unto my name, thou didst well that it was in thine heart”. The point that struck Martin Luther King, Jr. was that God went on to say, “David you will not be able to finish the temple. But I bless you for trying.” Dr. King preached many times on this passage because God was telling David “it is good that it is in your heart to build the temple. You won't finish, but you have the desire to work. You have the intention and for that you're blessed.”

The agony in many of our hearts will never stop missing him, but if Dr. King were here with us today we would have to say to him that in our current modern context we know about the disappointment and sadness of uncompleted temples of justice, peace and equality, for which people have worked so hard for so long. Dr. King would not be surprised, but we would tell him that at all levels of society we often come up short by solving our problems with standoffishness, revenge and violence instead of committing ourselves to the soul work of conflict mediation and peacemaking. We continue to allow racist systems of white privilege to crush the souls of people of every color. Oh we have so many unfinished temples in America today.

In our country we continue to allow massive amounts of wealth to stay at the top while painful poverty strickens the lives of millions. “Since the last minimum wage increase was passed in 1997, the real dollar value has eroded by more than 15 percent. To have the purchasing power it had in 1968 – when King was killed- today the minimum wage would have to be \$9.05/hour. That would be an increase of \$3.90 over the current minimum wage of \$5.15/hour.²” We know many people have to work two or three jobs at a time just to put food on the table and try and make ends meet. Some people struggle to stay awake suffering from exhaustion in second and third jobs. We know many people have to take the bus for a two or three hour roundtrip, because we have more of a

²UUA website Jan. 12, 2006

commitment to the auto and oil industries than we do to the environment and public transportation. When we talk about the common good and our Mother Earth we have so many unfinished temples.

Thankfully people of morality across the country have it in their hearts to continue working on temples of righteousness. This year the Unitarian Universalist Association and the UU Service Committee are working in coordination with various grassroots organizations pressing forward with the Living Wage Campaign. The campaign is named Let Justice Roll and it has “two particular moral propositions: first that work should be rewarded (fairly), and second, that no one who works full time should have to live in poverty.³” The prophet Amos provided the theme for this campaign when he said, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an overflowing stream”. (Amos 5:24) On certain pieces of this project we know that many of us will not be the ones to finish the job. Nonetheless we are called to make efforts.

This is a truly appropriate way to carry on with the legacy of Dr. King. Many remember the 1963 March on Washington as the time when Dr. King gave his “*I Have a Dream*” speech. It is important to know that one of the key goals of that specific march was to pass a national minimum wage act that would give all Americans a decent standard of living. King was later killed in Memphis, Tennessee while supporting a labor strike of garbage collectors.

The LET JUSTICE ROLL campaign is working to raise the minimum wage at both the federal and state levels. At the federal level, the campaign is supporting legislation currently before both Houses of Congress. At the state level, plans are underway to support ballot initiatives and legislation in eight states including Pennsylvania (find specific information). Recently Americans have given financially at historically generous levels in response to crisis- most specifically in the wake of

³NYTimes Magazine, Jan. 14, p. 40

Hurricane Katrina, but for also earthquake and tsunami victims. Part of building the temple involves becoming proactive about paying folks a living wage so they don't have to fall into individual disasters. A true temple of justice would allow folks who work full time to keep up on the rent, car payments and the basic bills. A true temple of justice would allow folks to work only one full time job and to be able to afford classes to continue with education, or simply to spend decent time with their families.

Intensely Personal Religion

To connect with the true spiritual genius of Dr. King, however, one must consider that he was not limited to societal concerns. For King, religion was also intensely personal. In his sermon "*Unfinished Temples*" King focused on the battle of good vs. evil, which he thought existed in the heart of every human being. King said, "I don't care who you are, I don't care where you live, there is a civil war going on in your life. Every time you set out to be good, there's something pulling on you, telling you to be evil. It's going on in your life." King quoted the Latin poet Ovid who said, "I see and approve the better things in life, but the evil things I do." He cited Saint Augustine who wrote in his book *Confessions*, "Lord, make me pure, but not yet."⁴

This is the inescapable connection between the social and the individual. We can't only focus on what is going on at the larger levels of how we interact as communities. The question must be asked of each person "is your heart right?" You might think of this as getting right with God. Or, you might think of this as getting right with your conscience. You might think of this as monitoring the battle between good and evil. Or you might think of this as the struggle between selfishness and greed on the one side vs. being loving and empathetic on the other side. King said "If your heart isn't right, fix it up today, or get God to fix it up."⁵ In fixing up your heart you can also get help

⁴Unfulfilled Dreams", MLK, from Knock at Midnight sermon series

⁵Unfulfilled Dreams

from a community of people. You can engage in a drumming circle, yoga, or journal writing.

King said that he himself didn't want to be talked about as if he were a saint. He was not. He said he was a sinner like all of God's children. The confessional pulpit allows me to say I too am a sinner. But I want to get right with God. I want to be a good man. I want to know that I am accepted and blessed by the spirit of life because I am trying. I want this to be a church where all people feel welcomed to confess their wrongdoings and to be supported in getting back on the right track and trying to do good.

For years we have had a ministry on homelessness. This week many of us cooked, served dinner and stayed the night. We have an ending racism team, which this coming year will help us to look at how the oppressions of racism haunt the psyche of this community and how we can move forward with sharing, healing and growth. Together we can engage in Martin Luther King Day service projects such as sandwich making, volunteering at UU House, or park beautification. We can bring back our tutoring project at Lingelbach School.

This community serves as a sanctuary where many folks charge their batteries in order to be energized to go out to jobs and volunteer assignments making the world a better place. It is good that this is in our hearts. As individuals we don't have to be perfect or complete all of your efforts for self-improvement. In our communities and families we all make mistakes and digressions. But we can all be honest with ourselves and each other by reflecting on the true arc of our lives.

Conclusion

With almost haunting foresight the night before he was killed Dr. King seemed to know of what was to come. He said, "We've got some difficult days ahead." "But that really

doesn't matter to me now because I have been to the mountaintop." "and I've looked over and I have seen the promised land. Like anybody, I'd like to live a long life, but longevity has its place." "I'm not worried about anything now," he said. "I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the lord." That night in his final speech Dr. King who gave his life to the ages said, "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the Promised Land."⁶

I believe the spirit of life blessed Dr. King's heart. And I believe that If he were here with us today I believe he would say, "bless you hearts for trying." AMEN

⁶ ibid. p. 2