

**Haydenville Church, Haydenville, MA
Reverend Matilda Rose Cantwell
January 15th, 2012**

**“The Problem with MLK Day
Samuel 3:1-20/ John 1:43-51 and 14:12-17**

I am proud to be an American on Martin Luther King Day.
I am proud that we have made the day into a National Day of Service, and that president Obama has tried to deepen our commitment to making the Holiday a day *on* and not a day *off*.

But still, there is a problem with Martin Luther King Day.

Michael Eric Dyson, author of I May Not Get There With You, The True Martin Luther King Jr. says that The U.S has, in his words “whitewashed” the life and work of King, disseminating an image of him to schoolchildren and culture at large which is of just “a feel good hero” rather than the radical reformer and threat he was to the status quo.

And Tyson, rather than lifting up only King's profound kindness and attention to everyone he met, his rhetorical genius, his brilliant oratory power, his amazing intellect and the depth of his study of theology and politics, his commitment to and passion for freedom, justice, and equality; Dyson lifts up Kings' shortcomings.

For me, King is the most compelling Christian person of the 20th century, --I am deeply inspired by his work, and I am thrilled and moved even when I hear recordings of his rolling, powerful voice. What he did as a Christian and a minister are completely and totally exemplary... So why do his shortcomings matter?

For Dyson, and I have come to agree-- his shortcomings matter because ignoring all of who King was is the root of the problem of Martin Luther King Day, because it shortchanges all of who he can be for us.

We make King Day about idealization and not reenactment.

Our day of service and our marking of the national holiday mean a lot—But on a deeper level in the United States as a whole the way King Day is commemorated robs us of the opportunity King Would have wanted us to take.

We memorialize his face, his image,
Some of his most beautiful and moving turns of phrase,
But at the expense of his real legacy...

Dyson says, let's do what King would want us to do and instead of celebrating an image, trapped in time, let's celebrate him with a view towards his progressive evolution, his radical viewpoints,

And most importantly how dynamic, how-ever-struggling and changing--By necessity-- he was as a human being.

Martin Luther King was a human being, doing with others, God's work. Dyson says that King's allies as well as his detractors have played a large role in watering down his legacy—because no one wants King to be accused of being unpatriotic.

But there is no question about King's Patriotism, or for that matter—His religiosity.

King was in close communion with God, was what Jesus scholar Marcus Borg calls a 'spirit person' and had a particularly charged connection, An intensified capacity for visceral communication with the divine. But he was made of flesh and blood, and like Jesus, human.

The whole point of the humanity of Jesus is that it calls us to an experience of our own dual nature—we are human beings, with the capacity for relationship with God so deep that it becomes part of the very fiber of our human bones and skin. Paul Tillich says that Jesus is the God that points beyond himself to all human beings. Jesus manifested his capacity for complete connection with God. In that manifestation, he revealed his divine nature. But it is dormant in all of us. By the same token, King was one man whose rhetorical genius and powerful intellect and indescribable commitment and passion and faith and charisma brought to fruition so much of God's work. But King points beyond himself—to us.

Dyson says we do no honor to King by pretending that he did wrestle greatly and at times, surrender to his own sins. But his failures actually magnify his humanity and give us a better sense of what obstacles he had to overcome in order to achieve his greatness....A Christian saint should not give us a sense of our own moral incapacity and inadequacy. A Christian saint should show us a picture of a person getting up every morning facing tremendous odds—some of those odds right inside us--and yet—overcoming them.

King was a Saint, I believe, and a martyr. But the problem with King Day is the wide cavern that is created between him and us, probably not by accident, that removes us from real engagement with the struggle that was happening then, that is still happening now. It makes it appear as though the problems he and his compatriots faced in the civil rights era were so much more egregious than the ones we face now...they were egregious and yet—what about torture, the treatment of immigrants, our destruction of the environment, not to mention the ongoing reverberations of racism that our Civil Rights heroes addressed to begin with. We have come so far, but we have so far to go....

So we cannot afford to make King a saint resigned to history. We need to re-member his legacy—and make it part of the re-visioning of society right now, Sunday, January 15th, 2012.

We cannot afford to celebrate a Saint whose ethical record we feel we can never live up to.

We need the inspiration, the motivation, the model,
of a once living, breathing, realistically rendered and remembered,
Martin Luther King.

Perhaps we can look to the *human* King himself, re-member him
In celebration of King Day as a *reenactment* of justice
and the carrying out of God's work in the world.

There are three things I have noticed about King that I think both exemplify his spiritual nature and his mark as a deeply faithful Christian. And these are things I think we can strive to imitate.

First, there is no question among biographers of King and scholars and historians that he did not work alone, but drew on the wisdom of others in history and community. King did not work in isolation but was part of a movement. He listened to allies and adversaries alike -and listened and heard, listened and heard. He read theologians, politicians, other preachers--vociferously. He was throughally and deeply grounded in his black Baptist tradition of preaching which was call and response—the preacher gained ideas and momentum from the congregation as well as the reverse.

King's famous "I Have a Dream" Speech given at the steps of the Lincoln memorial in 1963 during the March on Washington For Jobs and Freedom was in fact particularly inspired by fellow Civil Rights activist and singer Mahalia Jackson who reportedly called out in the middle of the speech "*Tell them about that dream you had Martin!*" It was in response to her that King responded and crafted on the spot what became one of the most famous speeches in US history--

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.

King drew on the wisdom of others and community.

Second, as Dyson explores, King was not a person for whom life was easy. He struggled with self-doubt, depression, and despair. But he went to and through the hard places, becoming stronger in the places he was broken.

In 1956, when King was still a young man, in the midst of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he feared for the safety of his family and doubted all of what he was attempting. History tells us he sat at his kitchen table with a cup of coffee in the wee hours of the night and told God he was giving up. He said "*Lord, I'm here taking a stand for what I believe is right. ... I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage... I am afraid I have nothing left...*"

As he prayed alone in the silent kitchen, King heard a voice saying, "*Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world.*" There were so many moments like this through King's life, as the movement got more complex and as he marched deeper into the roots of the problems of this country, through segregation into war and poverty.

King he went *to* and *through* the hard places, becoming stronger in the places he was broken.

And finally, I have observed, or at least like to think, that King thought in threes. Preachers are trained to say things three different ways, and if you listen to King's chillingly beautiful oration you will notice how he repeats things, in very particular rhetorical and strategic ways.

But I have begin to think that King actually *thought* in threes—while society teaches us to think in twos-- faced with a conflict, we think we have to do *this*, or we have to do *that*. King's commitment to nonviolence meant a constant faith in being able to uncover a third way—always looking at a situation thinking—we must not fight, we must not take flight—so let us find a third option.

King thought in threes.

So there is a problem with King Day, as it is.
But there doesn't have to be.

Because to celebrate this holiday is to reenact God's call to King,
as God called Samuel in the Scripture reading for today.

It is to celebrate and investigate and enact God's call to us.

It is to say as Samuel did "*Here I am.*"

To celebrate King day is to believe what Jesus said to Nathanael—

Because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than this.... It is to hear the word of Jesus recorded in the gospel of John—*who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and greater works than these ...*

To celebrate King day is to be so inspired by Kings humanness that we take deep stock of our own—

our faults, our flaws, our most painful struggles,

go deeply into them and become stronger there. To celebrate King day is not to live in isolation and righteousness, but listen and learn from everyone around and before us. It is to cultivate the kind of moral imagination to think in threes.... And it is to say, *Here I am, Lord, send me.*

So today, I will invite us back together for a responsive mode—a practice of our own celebration of King day in which we recognize *our own* call in this world to work as king did, in our own way, in our own places, in spite of, and because of, our own foibles, failures, and shortcomings...

I invite us now to say together a responsive reading which you will find in your bulletin:

Responsive Reading

Samuel was called three times before he recognized God's voice. So we too struggle with disbelief that we are called forward, sent by God into the travails of this broken but beautiful world.

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly, so here I am God, send me.

We are tempted to ignore the human shadows; we are tempted to avoid the rocky places within ourselves. We often cling to being right, we flee from trouble, and we retaliate, becoming hardened and bitter.

But darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. So here I am God, send me.

Rosa Parks, alone but drawing strength from others, followed a call to the front of the bus. King listened to a call he sometimes had to strain to hear, as segregation persisted and the mounting obstacles of war and poverty and showed themselves.

So let us too listen to from where the voice that calls to us. It calls from immigrants, from those unheard and unseen. It calls from the upswept corners of our country and our world, from our own hearts, from dreams too long deferred. So here I am God, send me.

When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.

Awake us from slumber, as you did Samuel, draw us forward to where we can hear your voice, and where we can answer: Here I am God, send me.

Prayer

Oh God in our lowest moments, our times of bone searing weariness, our aches of unworthiness and anxiety, let us remember the aching, praying, getting up and continuing on, Martin Luther King. Let us investigate, let us look deeply at, let us re-member his call by God that is issued to every single one of us.

Let us not be fooled into thinking we are so different from our moral exemplars let us remember they are human examples.

No matter how small, how flawed, how scattered, how tired, how lost we are, we are part of a blessed, sacred human family with work to do, so let us Claim our place and continue.

To use a Haydenville metaphor and a king quote, *we all come from different ships but were in the same boat now.*

So let us take the oars of our hopes and our dreams, and know of the firm hold in our hands of the arc of the universe, bending toward justice, freedom, and peace. *Amen*

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