

Sunday, January 17, 2016  
All Saints Episcopal Church  
San Leandro, California  
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon

### **Feast of Martin Luther King, Jr.**

My upbringing in the heart of inner city Detroit, the first ten years of my life, would not be the background you'd expect of a lower middle class, redheaded, Scott's Irish white guy leading an Episcopal Church. While the elementary school I attended was considered a 'blue ribbon' school, it was still a part of the Detroit Public School System, which meant I was one of only a handful of Caucasian students in my class in a predominantly African American school. The congregation I grew up in was an inner city Episcopal parish just two blocks from our home—named Church of the Messiah. The parish was unique in that it was committed to racial reconciliation and was connected in the 70s to an inner-city intentional community, which was where my parents met. Our home—a three-story brick house (with a basement) was a former mansion, divided into two different homes after the white flight, when whites were driven by racist motivations to leave the city for the suburbs. The first wave of this was in the 1940s and again in the 1960s. Some of the homes on the street where I grew up were amazing—now reduced to values under \$60,000 because of racism and the city's resulting economic decline. My dad shares memories of the 'white flight' of the 60s when his family was left, the only remaining white family on the street. My grandpa refused to leave the city, as many of his dearest friends were black, and he lived in that home on Helen Street in Detroit until the day he died. The home eventually sold for less than \$20,000.

This was the world I knew and being brought up in this inner-city culture every February—in honor of African American History Month—in school we learned about the great African American leaders, pioneers, and prophets who shaped the world we live in. I remember learning about Harriet Tubman who was part of the “underground” railroad that guided slaves to freedom. We learned about Booker T. Washington, a renowned educator, author, orator, and advisor to the presidents of the United States. Then there's John Washington Carver who revolutionized the farming industry teaching about crop rotation and popularizing numerous uses of the peanut since legumes like peanuts are good at restoring nitrogen in soil. The leaders we learned about who most impressed me were the civil rights leaders, particularly Rosa Parks—who retired to a quiet private life in Detroit where she lived until her death in 2005—and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. These two leaders impressed me because of their nonviolent, yet firm and resolute, refusal to participate in systems that they saw as unjust. Both Rosa Parks and Reverend King were devout Christians, the latter an ordained Baptism minister. Reverend King's speeches magnify that his work for racial equality and social justice was deeply grounded in his faith. “Every human being has etched in their personality the indelible stamp of the Creator . . .” he writes, “And any law that defiles the divine image, degrading the human personality is an unjust law . . .” His words resonate deeply with the words in our Baptismal Covenant that we will “respect the dignity of every human being.” This Baptismal Covenant first appeared in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, published eleven years after Reverend King's assassination.

Abolitionists like Harriet Tubman who fought to bring an end to slavery and prophets like Reverend King who worked to confront institutionalized racism had in common a hope that was

rooted in the Gospel and in the message of the prophets—that message of God’s redemption, God’s concern for the oppressed, and God’s image being within each and every human. When Jesus went to the Jewish temple one day, he unrolled a scroll from the prophet Isaiah, and read these words, “he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners . . .” Jesus told him that these words have been fulfilled in their hearing it, pointing to himself as the fulfillment of that messianic prophecy. Elsewhere in the Gospel of John Jesus says, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends . . .” If God is our friend, than how could any man be our master?

My mind goes back to Rosa Parks refusing to get up and go to the back of the bus. And to Reverend King and his nonviolent resistance to racial injustice whose famous “I Have a Dream” speech was given at a march on Washington DC called the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a march which called for civic and economic rights for African Americans. In many ways, King’s dream has come true, but the work is not finished.

According to US Census Bureau data, in 2007 median income for black Americans was just over \$40,000, while for a white family it was over \$64,000. In 2007, 10.6% of the white US population lived below the official poverty threshold of \$21,000 for a family of four, whereas this was more than double, 24.4%, for the black population. And according to one report, in 1995, average white households had \$18,000 in financial wealth, while Black households possessed a total of only \$200. Black men are 6% of the country’s population, but more than 40% of the population on death row. Statistics across the board are discouraging: home ownership, health insurance coverage pre-Obamacare, and incarceration rates. In health, economy, criminal justice, and even education, the racial lines are drawn in the sand.

If we are committed to our baptismal vows to respect the dignity of every human being, these statistics and cultural realities become quite disconcerting. In the words of Reverend King, “Noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as our cooperation with good.” The Gospel message calls us to a concern for the oppressed, the broken-hearted, the captives, and the prisoners. So what can we do to confront these social evils? In our day-to-day life neither you nor I can bring about overnight a reform of the criminal justice system, of the education systems that are still invisibly segregated, or the long-established economic chasms that have lingered since the days of slavery. But that does not mean there is nothing we can do. In fact, Rosa Parks—one woman—and Reverend King—one man—have each made a lasting impact. I believe we can too—when we confront injustice against anyone, anywhere.

This is the work of the Gospel, the work of our baptismal commitments to how we will live out the faith, the work of honoring God’s spirit alive in each of our brothers and sisters. And the famous words echo: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’” May we continue to work towards King’s dream, in all arenas and places of injustice—against racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, classism, so that we truly may draw near to the Kingdom of God, where we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. And giving Reverend King the last word, in his Letter from the Birmingham Jail, Reverend King writes, “Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice

everywhere.”

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