

Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday – Saint Paul and the Redeemer – January 19, 2020.
The Rev. Jaime Briceno

Sometimes it is hard to feel shielded. It is particularly hard these days to feel like legacies continue to be respected. That the work others had done for justice was sufficient, or that we can protect the legacy of those work fought and died for us beyond just remembering.

I kept wondering as I prepared to write this sermon, what would Dr. Marting Luther King jr have said if he knew there would be a day to recognize his legacy...If only I could ask him what you would like me to say...and then in that prayerful moment I kept wondering what I would say to him...Would I feel ashamed to say...guess what? Things got a little better, but we are still dealing with many of the same problems you described.

White supremacy is still here, and people don't even feel the need to parade with hoods. The abhorrent inequalities that plagued people of color in your time are still here.

Some things are better, but people of color are still fighting for space--fighting for just a second to say something and be heard--fighting to recognize the beauty of their many cultures and traditions. We are still living in two Americas, one of the haves and one of the haves not, one white and one colored. And yet we still trying to live into the true brotherhood that you so loved to preach.

I struggle -- deeply, with the way some of your words got weaponized towards inaction. I still wonder how to move closer toward justice. I wrestle with the hardest realities of the race dynamics of our time: police brutality, the lack of economic development for communities of color, the poor state of public education in black and brown communities.

What question could I ask Dr. Martin Luther King Jr if he would not have been killed for standing up against the powers and principalities of white supremacy?

I think the key here for us is that no matter what we do when standing up against the powers and principalities of this world, anything we do. Be it peaceful or not; it's a disruption.

Being disrupted is at the core of the life Jesus had in this world. -- - Jesus coming into this world was already disruptive.

- Offering forgiveness and love to this world is disruptive.

- Living into an open table eating with sinners, and those, where everyone no matters their place in this world are invited, is disruptive.

- Seeing a God of love acting in this world is disruptive.

In many ways, I can see how Dr. Martin Luther King jr life was disruptive for its time and its place. His legacy and the legacy of those involved in the civil right movement continues to be disturbing to many. But we continue not to let it die. We continue to take this work forward. We

continue to hope that the needle of justice will move just a little closer to where our God-given dignity is calling us all to take it.

The problem is that if we are to imitate this form of disruption, there is very little that we can do that cannot be labeled or seen as a confrontation. Such is the hardest part of the work for justice: particularly in our time, when trying not to offend anyone seems to be the church's wish. We are called to be disruptive enough; we are called to be confrontational enough; we are called to be blunt enough, that no one would ever tend to conform to evils of this world. Whatever they are, whether they are the sin of racism, white supremacy, ableism, misogyny, sexism, homophobia, or the destruction of our planet by our own doing, or selective inaction.

What type of church are we? Who are we to be as a church that reflects and honors the call to do better? Our role is to live fully in this kingdom given to us. It is to live in this world and reflect something different. That we should not mirror the evils that plague our society, that, at least in our midst, we are reminded that we should name and confront evil.

Dr. Martin Luther King jr let us with this metaphor when calling us to be a transformative nonconformist church. He said we as a church should not be thermometers that record and abide by the majority opinions of the people. Instead, we should be thermostats that can transform and regulate the temperature of society.¹

Dr. Martin Luther King jr talked of a nonconformist church, and he suggested some guidelines of what the church could do:

1. to heal the broken
2. to free the captives
3. to fight for the suffering, especially those suffering from discrimination and segregation.²

And what better example of this evil that our city of Chicago. With our extreme segregation and excessive inequalities between our neighborhoods of the north, south, and west. The inequalities that are evident in our episcopal church communities, the lack of resources to invest in ministry, and our inaction to even invest in the spiritual and physical well-being of all our communities fairly. I made this comment not overwhelm you, but to embrace our role as a church. That we should look in, evaluate ourselves, and see our part in this inequality, and then move on to work hard to dismantle whatever injustices are close to us. While always having as a banner our role to heal, to set captives free, to fight for justice, to end segregation and discrimination.

I hope that we are compelled to change and transform our own lives. Change in this world can happen if we all feel responsible and feel like whatever little we can do--will help. I hope that we are able to look into the realities of our world, and feel sad, disappointed, feel the pain of our

¹ Michael Warner, *American Sermons: the Pilgrims to Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1999), 843.

² Martin Luther King, Clayborne Carson, and Peter Holloran, *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Intellectual Properties Management in association with Warner Books, 1998), 105.

neighbor that suffers due to rampant inequality. This is supposed to make us feel uncomfortable. Being reminded of the evils that plague our society should be disruptive.

But I get it if you feel overwhelmed.

The work to end racism and inequality is so hard. It is work that seems never-ending. It is work that had cost our saints their lives. That has destroyed our world, continues to destroy our communities, continues to be a threat to the dignity of every human being. And if it is not hard enough, we now had witnessed how this work appears to be so easy to destroy and so easy to be rolled back.

But we can,

We can be a disruptive church.

We can be a nonconformist church.

We can be a church that heals, that fights, that frees.

As a church that reminds each other of the work that is needed, we will be able to respond with zeal and determination. We as a whole will be able to live into our covenant of love for each. We will be able to see our neighbors where we failed before. We will be able to welcome those that never had a seat in our midst. If only we try, we will be able to see the potential of those in our neighborhood that continues to be ignored.

I want to say to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr that his death was not in vain. That even as we see that the road to justice is steep and hard, we will continue to make our way to it, even if we need to crawl, even if our knees and hands hurt. I want to tell him that the bar he left is really high, but together we can reach it, we want to reach it.

Together we can be a nonconformist church,

Together each of us can embrace our own form of disruption,

Together we will fight for a more just world.