

## 1 15 23—Rights and Responsibilities

Rev. Rita Capezzi—UUFM

### Remarks

Today is a day to honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the words of the Rev. Rolenz, “we gather especially to remember [him] but not only him, for there were thousands of unnamed [people] who put their bodies and lives on the line so that all may be free.” So that all, all, may be free from the multiple oppressions of racism, trans and homophobia, poverty, misogyny, “all of these often unacknowledged realities prevent us from fully knowing one another, from creating the beloved community.” And today is a day to remember that we the people of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato, we, too, long for justice. We, too, long for beloved community. We long for the thriving and creative goodness for all that is not yet evident in this world.

As we remember and honor the Rev. Dr. King’s legacy and desire, we recall some difficult truths about his too-short life. These are truths that we might not recognize in ourselves, truths we might struggle with as we aim to be the best human beings we can be. In the words of Jeff Raikes from *Forbes* online:

Dr. King did not live to see himself become the near mythical figure he is today. In life, the civil rights movement he led was unpopular, as was he. Shortly before the March on Washington in 1963, 60 percent of Americans viewed King’s tactics as harming the cause for Black equality; only 27 percent thought the movement helped. Less than a year later that gap grew dramatically wider with 74 percent of Americans saying mass demonstrations hurt the cause.

And, we know, don’t we, we know very well where the Rev. Dr.’s views got him. We know where his work got him: he was murdered, assassinated. He was understood as a dangerous leader, though the movement did not die with him. There was some miscalculation there about the thirst for justice in our nation, then, and still.

As a people, we have been called to show up for justice, to offer mercy and charity, to be activists in a free society which is not yet liberating for all. We, as a people, we have been called to be citizens, as our story this morning reminds:

A citizen’s not what you are – a citizen is what you do. A citizen cannot forget the world is more than you. [the word is more than you, more than, larger than any of us.] We’re part of a society, one full of joy and pain. A land of latticed people, none of us the same. [And our differences matter—they are good, holding creative possibility, though our differences also demand much from us.] And, if we help just one, help one lonely soul, we open doors, we bring in light, we bind us all and make us whole.

That is the promise, anyway. That is the hope. That is what we teach our children and what we call ourselves to do—to bind us all—in our differences—together, to make us a whole, to make us all whole.

And still, again, as much as we love, now in our time, to hear his “I Have a Dream” speech, we have not always honored all that King stood up for, all that motivated his actions and beliefs. In the words of Jeff Raikes:

In the ensuing years [since his murder], many white Americans have glossed over the totality of King’s message. He warned us about systemic racial oppression and accompanying economic

injustice – the kind of ‘invisible’ white supremacy that doesn’t wear white hoods. The kind that leads to the disproportionate death, illness, and economic insecurity for [Black, Indigenous and people of color] [we have seen] in the wake of the pandemic. [. . . Further], what was under assault in our nation’s capital on January 6, 2021 was multiracial democracy itself. We can’t say “we’ll get to that later,” or leave it to [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] communities to strive for it alone.

If we are to be whole, we are all called to act as a whole, for the whole, all races and ethnicities, all identities acknowledged as worthy, as creating together the whole.

Many activists carry on King’s message today, activists of all colors and ethnicities and identities. To have the right to participate in this collective action toward liberation for all, there is something specific that White activists are required to take some responsibility for: the false notion that King called for a colorblind society, a society where color does not matter. In the words of Allison Wiltz: “[King] worked throughout his life to advocate for Black people, and through his Poor People’s Campaign, he aimed to create a multiracial coalition that could confront the wealth gap for all Americans, regardless of race. But it’s misleading to portray him as colorblind. Martin Luther King Jr. never shied away from acknowledging Black people’s struggle because he witnessed the land of milk and honey turned sour by racism, segregation, and discrimination.” Wiltz goes on to say:

His *I Have a Dream* speech was about how Black people were not yet free, and his dream represented an ideal of what he’d like to see, not how America actually is. Unfortunately, America is in love with a version of itself that doesn’t exist. When White people misquote King, they rob his dream of its meaning while supporting policies that maintain nightmarish conditions for Black Americans.

So ends her words. And still, and still, there is something in the Rev. Dr. King’s legacy that calls us to move for justice, to move for antiracism, to move against oppressions of all kinds. “King wanted to live in a country where race could not divide us. However, wanting to live in a post-racial society and living in one are not the same.” By depicting his message as an insistence on race-neutrality instead of insisting on dismantling racist systems and beliefs, the people who embrace only half of King’s message leave nothing but bleached grains behind.” And still, and still, there is something in King’s legacy that calls us to the diverse multicultural beloved community that supports and values human difference. It is the foundation of nonviolence as a method for change. It is at the heart of his theology and prophetic witness. It is the only things that can turn us toward the mutual respect, care, and compassion that we all need and which we all need to extend to each other and everyone.

What is it? Let’s listen together now. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Fs8vSsJg-A>

### Reflections

The Rev. Dr. King is a Christian, you heard that. And King’s prophesy, his witness and his work, comes from out of the Christian scripture. "At the center of non-violence stands the principle of love." And King, as a pastor and a preacher, he rests in that larger love, more and beyond what all human history has been able to produce, more than any paltry love, any sentimental expression, that any individual

might be all to generate in themselves. You love not because someone is likable but because God loves them. This notion of love is something that might make us uncomfortable, depending on our own relationship with Christian religions, depending on our own understanding of God. This is something we may want to forget about King as well, along with the notion that colorblindness is only a myth. But King says, "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant."

And King held this belief about the creative, transformative power of love even through the disappointments of white supremacy in all its insidious manifestations, as he writes in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" in 1963:

'First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate...who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.'

Paternalism, shallow understanding, lukewarm acceptance. None of this is healing. None of this is justice-seeking. None of this is loving enough to bring about the multiracial, multiethnic, diverse beloved community. King proclaims—in words and in action—a larger love, *agape*: "*Agape* is something of the understanding [not of the sentiments], creative, redemptive goodwill." To love is not simply to like. And hate destroys the hater as well as the hated. Love is transformative. To love is to be transformed, to bear, to welcome transformation. To love is to participate in the bringing about of "one great fellowship of Love throughout the whole wide world." *Agape*—the "more" the beyond, the collective mystery that draws us into life and liveliness and calls us to accept and foster the creative generativity of a universe that gave rise to all of us in a miracle that we have not and may never fully explain. And from this more—represented by King's Christ, by an exemplary human Jesus of Nazareth—King writes that humanity "must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love."

Today, may we be called to this kind of love, to see it as the foundation of our human rights and as the motivation for our human responsibilities. Let us not whitewash King's vision. Let us not be satisfied with weak sentiments and weaker actions. As King writes in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," "The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?" Will we be extremists for hate or for love?

Let us practice this larger love within ourselves, within our families, among us in this Fellowship. Let us be extremists, that our practice will help us to build the beloved community outside our walls, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved—each of you and all of us, you are worthy— all of us in our uniqueness and our differences, you are welcome—you with your differences, your gifts and

your talents, and you, you, you, are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together  
“Amen!”

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffraikes/2021/01/18/what-martin-luther-king-jrs-prophetic-words-tell-us-about-this-moment/?sh=40f9aa64701f>

<https://momentum.medium.com/never-forget-martin-luther-king-jr-s-demands-for-justice-871635b1c2fb>

<https://momentum.medium.com/why-were-sick-and-tired-of-white-people-misusing-king-s-words-db1c8e34a9dc>