

## Barbara's sermon for 2/21/2021

During Black History Month I, I immersed myself in the mission, writing and speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It has been a compelling experience that filled my heart with pain and hope. I offer these reflections with the hope that you and I together will respond in loving action to the message of his dream.

On August 8, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood at the Lincoln Memorial during the historic "March on Washington for Civil Rights" and proclaimed, "I Have A Dream." With these visionary words he called black and white Americans to rise up and end the horrific violence done to black people for over 400 years. He called his listeners and each of us to become all of who we are: people of peace, people of justice, people of non- violence and most importantly people of love.

As we come to the end of Black History Month I can think of nothing better than to remember these liberating words of the one who called himself "a drum major for righteousness."

Dr.King was a prophet, a minister of Hope, a man of faith who experienced God calling him to respond to the terrible suffering of black people. As I thought about his awareness, I was reminded of Jesus who read from Isaiah at the beginning of his mission:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because He has chosen me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

To set free the oppressed and to announce that the time has come

when the Lord will save his people.

His experience of being led by God stands at the center of his efforts to eradicate racial injustice. He believed that the meaning of Christian discipleship was at the heart of the African - American struggle for freedom, justice, and equality.

When Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat on the bus to a white man on December 1, 1955 she was arrested. The black community was ignited and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's exploded. Dr. King organized a black boycott of the public bus system which was successful in giving black people the right to any seat they chose. Two years later he was instrumental in forming the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957. Following his vocation in behalf of black people he limited his ministry at the Ebenezer Baptist Church to half time so he could devote more of his time to black freedom. It was his profound understanding of the egregious cruelty done to black people that gave him deep spiritual insight against violence and for justice. The force of his personality and the message he proclaimed spoke to the hopes and dreams of black people whose lives were drenched with pain.

In his oft quoted "I Have a Dream" speech he sought to dramatize a shameful condition by protesting the manacles of segregation, the chains of discrimination, and the lonely island of poverty. He called Americans to act boldly in the fierce urgency of the present moment

and “rise from the resolute valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice” He believed that God was calling black and white Americans to examine their consciences about the state of race relations. As a man of profound faith, he often turned to the words of Scripture that welled up from the depths of his soul. Repeating the words of Psalm 83, he asked his listeners, “who will succor the homeless, the orphan, those cast aside by decisions based on greed. Who will speak up on their behalf?” With great passion, he summoned all Americans to rise up in love.

Dr. King practiced and preached non-violence , a practice of change centered in love. This powerful means of social change aimed not to defeat the opponent but to awaken their moral shame, to meet physical force with social force. In this act of change the momentum is directed to the forces of evil rather than to a person, Non-violence is a practice of resistance involving a strong active spirituality directed to the creation of friendship and understanding. Dr. King’s preaching against violence and for justice made him an internationally known Christian

proponent of nonviolent social change. He believed that non-violence was the very nature of God.

In this memorable speech, this charismatic minister urged a moral, political, economic and spiritual transformation. His dream of the redistribution of wealth and resources was threatening to many. His powerful call for racial justice encouraged his followers to resist unlawful laws. His dream meant radical changes in established institutions that were built on the oppression of black people. After one civil rights demonstration he was arrested and jailed in Birmingham, Alabama in April 1963. When I visited Birmingham in 1978 only fifteen years later I saw the jail where he was held. I stared and stared held by the memory of Dr. King isolated in a tiny cell writing that memorable statement, "Letter from the Birmingham Jail. I thought about the sacrifices he endured to end the suffering of black people and strengthen their efforts to achieve freedom. He asked his followers "Are you ready to accept blows without retaliating or endure the ordeals of jail?" When I think about his bold commitments for racial justice, I felt a challenge to increase my own efforts.

*In this letter he set forth considerations to shape the freedom of black people. He knew that privileged groups seldom give up their privilege voluntarily, that justice too long delayed is justice denied and an issue must be dramatized so that it cannot be ignored. He emphasized that human progress takes tireless efforts, persistent work and a willingness to be co-workers with God.*

Dr.King held to the truth that oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually arise. He wrote deeply about his dream “ that little black girls and little black boys will be able to join hands with little white girls and little white boys”. He embraced love as the means to lead to that peace. He wrote,“Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” As he stood with the disadvantaged whose lives were broken by unspeakable horror, he shed tears of love. His faith to guide lives by love was steeped in the Great commandment,

“ Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

Driven by a passionate love for racial justice he faced the reality that bitterness and hatred was shared by both races. He called black and white hearts to a transformative love with words that can be passed on and tell us who we are. The words of the black author, James Baldwin, reflected his belief that “black freedom will make white freedom possible.”

Calling for a bi-racial movement, Dr. King imagined “a beautiful symphony of brotherhood” He cautioned black people that they cannot walk alone. He held to the hope that his revolutionary movement for racial justice involving black and white people’ “could shake the foundations of our nation until the day of justice emerges.” In the words of Scripture his dream was that “one day every valley shall be exalted, every mountain and hill shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory

of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh will see it together. This is our hope.”

On April 4, 1968 Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated. The world suffered a grievous shock and mourned the death of this dedicated minister who preached the Gospel of Justice, Love and Freedom. I believe his dream still lives in us, a dream of hope and courage, a dream of love among all people. As he preached so vigorously:

Let freedom ring in every village and hamlet, every state and city  
Where all hands black and white join together in the words of the  
Negro Spiritual “free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we  
are free at last.”

In closing I invite you to pray with me, a prayer in the Spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Loving God we ask your blessing for our efforts for racial justice.

May we be people of prayer and peace

May we be visible signs that black and white people can live together in  
God's love

Make our hearts wide enough to join with black people for their freedom

Enable us to listen to their stories of suffering and oppression and be  
changed

Above all, O God may we be a presence of Justice and Love in the  
world

With compassion and hope for all. Amen