

January 15, 2012
The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Observance
Sponsored by the Franklin Interfaith Council
Hosted by St. John's Episcopal Church

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May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be ever acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Please know what a genuine honor and privilege it is for me to welcome all of you to St. John's this evening. On behalf of the wardens, vestry and members of the parish, you are most welcome and we are delighted you are with us for this important remembrance tonight.

It has often been said that each generation stands on the shoulders of others who have gone before. This idea is particularly true for any of us here tonight who are active at any level in issues surrounding human rights. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., by God's grace, came along at a time in the history of our country where he found his voice, found a message, found an audience and found a calling way beyond what he anticipated as a young man.

His message of hope, hard work, sacrifice and unbounding willingness to confront the evils of economic, social and racial oppression continue to inspire us today. The "60's" were some time ago now. Some of us remember those days, as adults, as young adults, as children and others of us know of that decade from books we have read and video we have seen. The civil rights movement, of course, goes way back before the 60's, but the tsunami of civil rights washed over our nation in those years and, thanks be to God, we have never been the same since.

The legacy of Dr. King is not about protest for the sake of protest. His legacy, for me, is about protest for the sole purpose of promoting change to improve the lives of those who cannot speak for themselves. It does take some courage to stand with a placard in a picket line or in front of some embassy or business. This is true. However, it takes much more courage to stay the course, to organize, to develop the relationships with the politically powerful and economically advantaged to bring home a message to them that exploitation of citizens and workers is not in their best interest.

It takes endless patience to engage in conversation with those who do not want to hear what you have to say. Placards have their place, but the message must be heard in the halls of every level of government and in the board rooms of multi-national corporations. The legacy of Dr. King for me is about relationship and the persuasive power of developing relationships built on mutual respect, insisting that we are all in this thing called life together – our survival is dependent upon one another. The sooner we have respect for one another, regardless of economic, social, racial, ethnic or religious distinctions, the sooner more people will be at work, the sooner our schools

will be improved, the sooner more homes will be out of foreclosure, the sooner health care will be a right and not a privilege. We are in this together. Those who live lives of arrogance and exclusivity believe that they are somehow immune to the taint of being in touch with poverty, disease and political oppression.

Mr. Mubarak thought this a year ago in Egypt. Others thought the same in Tunisia, Algeria, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria . . . the so-called “Arab spring” was fueled by the despair, anger and hopelessness which takes root among people who see no future for themselves or their families. We are now facing the anniversary of the revolutions which have turned huge portions of the world upside down. People, young and old alike, yearning for a future where mutual respect and understanding have a place. People yearning for freedom to explore their own God-given potential. People yearning to be free of the political and economic oppression which fosters social and intellectual stagnation. People who want to engage with the world and break the bonds of isolation which limit their vision and limits their hope for the future.

Many of these people know of the civil rights movement in our country. Many of these people know of the inspiration which Dr. King provided as he spoke out, organized and galvanized a nation to say enough is enough. That poor young man who set himself ablaze in an otherwise unknown part of Tunisia on December 17, 2010 would have no idea what he started.

Mohammed Bouazizi, 26 years old, a vegetable vendor pushing his cart had had enough of petty government interference in his life. He was publicly humiliated by a policewoman who slapped him around for the crime of selling some vegetables without a license. Mohammed Bouazizi may not be a household name here, but he is elsewhere.

Vegetable cart, lunch counter, bus, you never know when someone who has had enough will say so.

What of Dr. King’s legacy today in our country? Have we had enough? Apparently not. The protest movement “Occupy Wall Street” has been struggling to make a statement that might be taken seriously by government and industrial leaders, thus far with minimal results. The “Protester” is Time’s choice for Person/People of the Year for 2011. There’s a lot of discontent and frustration out there, or so it seems. And yet, the discontent seems to be treated by too many as a curiosity, a parlor game, a passing fad which does not affect mainstream America. Is this because of complacency or that we are in an election year? This may be true, but I think there is more to the story.

It seems to me that fear has taken a choke-hold on our nation. My wife and I lived in Jerusalem for the past three years and the country changed in that time. American self-confidence has been shaken. Fear is in too many eyes. Afraid of speaking up for fear of not being politically correct; afraid to speak up for fear of losing our jobs; afraid of the future; afraid of not having adequate health care; afraid of losing our homes; afraid of Iran; the Taliban and the new family next door.

Fear promotes paralysis and embraces isolation from other people, ideas and prevents the recognizing of problems which need to be solved. Fear has the capacity to crush hope. This is disturbing.

Is it possible to defeat fear which is so remarkably and effectively marketed by any variety of politicians and talk-show hosts? Is it still possible for us to reach back into Dr. King's drive and motivation, courage and faithfulness to move our people and our religious institutions to engage the social, economic, racial, and international crises of our own time? What antidote might there be for fear?

Well, Dr. King spoke about some dreams he once had. A dream that all men are created equal; a dream that the powerless and the powerful will sit down at the table of brotherhood; a dream that all children will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

The dream of all people living with mutual respect and with opportunity for the future of their children; the dream of a health care system in which caring for the sick, the frail and most vulnerable of our people is among the highest calling of a civilized nation; the dream of capitalism which is in the business of building opportunity for the many and not just the few; the dream of foreign policies which promote peace and understanding working towards reconciliation and away from violence; a dream of an end to racial profiling; human trafficking and sexual exploitation; dreams of a fulfilling future whether you live in Franklin, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, or remote parts of Kansas; a dream of a government which is for the people, by the people and not just some of the people.

Dr. King's legacy is about being engaged; staying motivated, focused and organized to confront the human evils rooted in greed and arrogance. Let us not be daunted by fear, but dream the dreams which inspire us to move beyond our comfort zone, to embrace a future in which, as Dr. King wrote, we reject "the racism, materialism and violence that has characterized Western civilization and especially by working toward a world of brotherhood, cooperation and peace."

Fear cannot survive in the face of such dreams.

In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.