

Civil Rights: Struggling Still
A Sermon to ASUC, Sunday, January 14, 2001

[Choir]:

“Nigger Baby! Nigger Baby! Janie’s got a Nigger Baby!”

The words -- flung out in the exuberance of an afternoon’s street game -- hung ugly and confused in the darkening sky of a late fall afternoon.

I grew up in a New York suburb, just over the New York City line, where the paved streets offered fun and games for that gang of elementary school-aged kids who lived on my block then -- now fifty years ago.

One of our favorite games -- not surprisingly for this bunch of kids born before and under the cloud of World War II -- was called, “War!”: we drew a chalk circle on the macadam and then divided it into as many pie-shaped wedges as there were kids, each wedge labeled with the name of a country chosen by a player.

“I declare war on France!” “It” would shout -- whoever “It” was -- bouncing the pink Spaulding Ball hard onto France’s wedge, and then, running like heck to get away before France caught the ball -- returned to her Gaul -- and called, “Halt!”

Everyone stopped where they were, dead in their tracks. France took studied aim and tried to hit one of the frozen players with the ball. If she were successful, the person hit became the new “It”; if not, France got a “Nigger baby,” -- a little stick figure drawn on France’s tarred battlefield.

That afternoon in late fall -- almost too dark and cold to be playing in the street after school -- somebody (my friend, Janie Heinsohn) threw the ball, missed her target, and the exultant cry went up:

“Nigger Baby! Nigger Baby! Janie’s got a Nigger baby!”

An elderly black woman, carrying a furled umbrella and a large cloth satchel, her beret stretched tightly over her gray curls, her rimless glasses shielding her eyes, was trudging by on her way to the bus stop two blocks further along.

We had no black families in the neighborhood; she must have been one of the women who cleaned the homes of the Jewish families who lived two blocks down the street in the opposite direction -- or maybe -- but less likely -- she worked for the Irish or Italian Catholics who lived two blocks over on either side.

But here in the middle was the cross-ruff. Here in the middle, I was one of the handful of Protestants who learned early the humor-cloaked hatred behind the joking taunts on St. Patrick’s Day: “Orange Man! Orange Man! Jeannie is an Orange Man!”

The woman that cold afternoon in 1951 was perhaps 20 feet beyond us on the far sidewalk as our words poisoned the air. I remember the imagined bolt of lightening -- the comic-book "Shazam!" - in my shocked realization of what we had said. The other kids felt it, too, because we all fell silent and turned to stare at the woman's bent back as she trudged along.

She took only a few more steps before she stopped, turned, and walked back towards us. Her face was calm, but stern; her glasses braced on the end of her nose. She headed straight for me. Had I been the one shouting?

I remember my stammered (appa-low--gia) -- the explication, reiteration, justification of one's actions -- the apology that somehow never gets around to saying, "I'm sorry."

I tried to explain that this was "only a game" -- we were just playing a game.

I can't remember her exact words -- but I'll never forget my burning shame as she -- with such deep weariness -- told us that ours was a game of hatred -- a game that had no winners. How did we think it possible to divide up the world, hurl down hatred and war -- and not be hurt ourselves?

A game -- it was only a game, I repeated -- now in a whisper.

But, "Woe!" says the Prophet Isaiah, "Woe! to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" (Isa5:20)

Two years ago just about this time, I was standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee -- standing on the very spot on which the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated -- 33 years ago, this coming April.

Built in 1925, the Lorraine Motel was one of the few hostelrys in its day catering to African-American travelers. Today it houses The National Civil Rights Museum -- a collection of three-dimensional life-size dioramas depicting the struggle of Black Americans to achieve equal enjoyment of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" -- spelled out in such commonplace "liberties" as the right to drink from the same water fountain -- flush the same toilets, sit at the same lunch counters -- ride on the same public buses -- be educated at the same public institutions of learning -- vote with the same freedom at the ballot box. In short, to enjoy the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in the nation founded on the principle of "freedom and justice for all."

The Museum's exhibits re-create such moments in time as the Freedom Rides; the Birmingham Jail in which Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his famous letter read earlier; the violent end -- now remembered as "Bloody Sunday" -- of the first attempted March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama to protest "Jim Crow" voter restrictions; and -- the final exhibit -- the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike -- the occasion which brought the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Memphis -- and the end of his life at the age of 39.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born on January 15, 1929, the son of a Baptist preacher -- a "Preacher's Kid" -- his father the pastor of the elite African-American Ebenezer Baptist Church, in

Atlanta, Georgia. The younger King had entered Morehouse College in Atlanta at the age of 15 and graduated with honors in 1948 at the age of 19. He graduated first in his class at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania and received his doctorate from Boston University -- the alma mater of both my younger daughter, Sara, and her father.

King was thrust into the forefront of the civil rights movement after accepting the call to his first church -- the Dexter Avenue (now King Memorial) Baptist Church in Montgomery -- the capital of Alabama.

King was only 26 years old and just 15 months into his first pastorate when Rosa Park was arrested on December 1, 1955 for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus to a white male passenger. The Montgomery Improvement Association was organized in protest -- and the intense, eloquent, polished young pastor from Atlanta by way of Boston was asked to be their spokesman.

The demands of the Montgomery Improvement Association seem modest by today's standards:

- 1) more driver courtesy toward black passengers who paid their fares at the front of the bus, then had to get off, walk down the side of the bus to the rear entrance where they got on and took their seats at the back of the bus;
- 2) a first-come, first-served seating on the city buses -- from front to back for whites, from back to front for blacks;
- 3) the hiring of black drivers for routes serving black neighborhoods.

None of these demands challenged the basic status quo -- or called for an end to segregation. Yet they were rejected by the city. And so the Montgomery bus boycott began. Blacks -- who made up half of the 60,000-80,000 daily passengers -- refused to ride the buses for a year and 16 days -- only agreeing to end their boycott when the US Supreme Court ruled Alabama's segregation laws on public transportation unconstitutional.

With that victory, King's leadership was established.

Around the corner from King's Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery -- is The Civil Rights Memorial at the Southern Poverty Law Center. Guarded 24-hours a day by armed security police, this shrine -- designed by the same young woman responsible for Washington, DC's Vietnam Memorial -- honors 40 martyrs killed in the cause of civil rights. The monument's imposing black granite wall -- water cascading down its face -- is inscribed with one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s favorite verses from the prophet Amos (5:24):

“Until Justice rolls down like water,
and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

A circular granite table fountain in the foreground chronicles the history of the civil rights movement in lines radiating like the hands of a clock -- beginning with the 1954 Supreme Court

decision striking down school segregation (Brown vs. Board of Education) and ending with the death of Martin Luther King, Jr -- April 4, 1968.

Of the 40 lives memorialized on that black sacrificial altar, only five were white. One of those five, the Rev. James Joseph Reeb, was a Unitarian minister from Boston who had responded to King's call to clergy of all denominations to join the second proposed 45-mile, five-day march from Selma to Montgomery in support of equal voters' rights.

Hope Holway's History of All Souls Unitarian Church of Tulsa, 1921-1971 tells about that time. She writes:

“While All Souls membership was mindful of the nightmare situation that existed in parts of the South -- and (was) regularly reminded of our own shortcomings by (the Rev. Dr. John) Wolf -- the inequities closer to home claimed the action of relatively few...The march in Selma, Alabama, became uglier (after “Bloody Sunday”) and Dr. King sent forth a call to the clergy of America to help (as he said), “bear the burden” in this “struggle for the soul of the nation.”

Among those to take up this challenge was the Rev. James Reeb, Unitarian minister, then in the employ of the American Friends Service Committee...

(Reeb) joined clergy and (lay people) gathering in Selma on March 9, 1965. That evening, as he left a Selma restaurant with two other Unitarian Universalist ministers, Reeb was attacked from behind by four white men -- and so brutally bludgeoned that he died thirty-six hours later -- March 11, 1965.

Two days later -- March 13, 1965 -- Holway continues, “we at All Souls were host to this city's first-ever ecumenical service, organized by our own, John Wolf...”

Seven hundred men and women of all faiths and races attended the Reeb memorial service. Seven hundred men and women testified by their presence that “bigots and racists must not be allowed to triumph.” Seven hundred silent protests declared against the injustice of the denial of voting rights, of ballot boxes padlocked against men because of their skin.

At the end of the service, the congregation adjourned to the steps of the Holy Family Cathedral where others joined them. In a police-escorted parade, they marched 1000 strong down Boston Avenue to the old Federal Building Post Office...

That evening, President Johnson, at a joint session of Congress, called for legislation protecting (Blacks') voting rights...”((136-8)

John Wolf brought together in this sanctuary -- on this chancel -- from this pulpit -- the Rabbi from Temple Israel who invoked the ancient Prophets Isaiah and Amos -- the minister from First Baptist Church who read from the Old Testament Hebrew Bible and,-- the priest from Church of the Madalene who read from the New Testament.

For the first time in Tulsa, Oklahoma -- Protestant, Catholic, and Jew -- black and white -- shared a sacred hour in common purpose. John -- at 39 -- the same age Dr. King would be just three short years later when he was murdered.

John Wolf, a living hero in the cause of civil rights --

James Reeb, Martin Luther King, Jr. --and those unknown others whose names are inscribed on that Civil Rights memorial slab in Montgomery, Alabama -- dead martyrs to the cause.

Did these all struggle in vain?

Or were their voices -- these Prophets crying in the wilderness to "let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream"--were these --and all who are struggling still -- not the crucial pivots upon which history turns?

Such voices as those heard this week protesting capital punishment and the first execution of a woman in the state of Oklahoma -- the first black female executed in the US since 1954. Joined voices once again -- clergy and lay together -- Catholics calling for a moratorium on executions in the state of Oklahoma -- Rabbi Charles Sherman of Tulsa's Temple Israel reminding us that the death penalty "brings to justice" mainly the poor, the minorities, the uneducated -- hardly a system fair -- just -- or equitable.

We must not silence the prophetic voices -- despite the old, worn charges -- familiar to Martin Luther King, Jr -- familiar to the Rev. Jesse Jackson -- denouncing "outside agitators." As King wrote from his Birmingham Jail cell -- there can be no such thing as an "outside agitator: -- for "Anyone who lives inside the United States can ever be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

Prophetic voices -- these -- and the one heard 50 years ago on the streets of New York -- the voice of a weary, wise, black woman on her way to the bus stop -- who found the courage -- the quiet dignity -- to turn and face a gang of white kids -- delivering her sermon on that cold pavement, under a darkening sky -- her words falling on fertile soil, on ears that could still hear -- changing the thoughts -- changing the life -- of at least one who heard them -- mine.

Prophetic voices like that of the man whose life we remember this weekend -- Martin Luther King, Jr. -- who would have been 72 years-old tomorrow.

They could kill the man, but they could not kill the dream -- the dream, as King said -- so deeply rooted in the American dream...

Last year, the US Catholic bishops proposed Martin Luther King, Jr. for the Pope's list of 20th-century martyrs -- a usual first-step in the process of canonization for sainthood.

But Martin was no saint -- his personal life the cause of concern -- pain -- and sorrow to those who loved him most.

But -- despite -- or perhaps because of -- the fatal flaws -- his “shadow” side -- he was led to lead the struggle for human dignity -- even unto self-sacrifice -- even unto death.

But that’s what he said would happen:

“Some may lose their jobs in the struggle for economic justice: BUT WE SHALL OVERCOME.
S

ome may lose their friends, their quiet respectability, in the struggle for a just and humane treatment of all people: BUT WE SHALL OVERCOME.

Some may lose their freedom, spend time in jail, so that others may know equal treatment under the law: BUT WE SHALL OVERCOME.

And some may lose their lives that others may know life -- have life -- live life more fully --
AND WE SHALL OVERCOME!”

On this weekend honoring the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., let us commit -- and re-commit -- ourselves as people of good will and courage -- struggling still -- to keep struggling until justice for all people rolls down like water -- and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Prayer:

Please join me in a moment of prayer:

Oh, Spirit of Life, Help us to see that “In all men -- in all women -- in all children -- in all colors, sizes, shapes -- (b)ehind all outward dissimilarities, contradictory valuations, rationalizations, vested interests, group allegiances and animosities; behind fears and defenses, behind the roles we play and the masks we wear, we are all so much alike -- all good people who want to be rational and just -- who still must account to ourselves -- and to whatever-is-God-for- us -- and say -- even when things go wrong -- that we wished to have them right -- and we will struggle to make them so.” (adapted: Myrdahl, *An American Dilemma*, 1023)

There is a universal spirit of truth pervading all -- even when we do not and would not hear it -- a still, small voice calling us to integrity, wisdom, and compassion.

It is the voice of conscience -- compelling us to choose the good and the right in our relations with the world.

It is the spirit of love, guiding us, drawing us together to be one --

One in all the pain and glory and mystery of this one sweet, sad, magnificent existence.

Come, draw us into the circle now -- to call back the ugly words of hate -- for how could we divide ourselves on this one small beleaguered, beloved planet -- hurl down hatred and war upon one another -- and not be hurt ourselves?

It was never -- is never -- never will be -- only a game -- when “the rules” of tacit discrimination -- by color, class, race, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender or age -- theological, philosophical, or political perspective -- are ever mistaken for the truth.

“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil...!”

Here in our hearts -- alone -- seeking light in the threatening darkness -- let us promise -- in a world demanding civil rights but riven by uncivil wrongs -- to be instruments of peace -- to seek peace, love, and justice with mercy -- to be healed -- to be whole and holy people.

If there is to be peace in the world, let it begin within me. Amen

Hymn #121 “We’ll Build a Land”

Announce Benediction Response: 1st verse, #169: “We Shall Overcome”- sing with choir.

Closing Words:

“This is our hope. This is (our) faith...
With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountains of despair, a stone of hope...
Be able to transform the discord of our Nation into a symphony of Brotherhood.
For I have a dream, that one day every valley shall be exalted;
That every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places made plain,
The crooked places made straight, And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed
And all shall see it together.” (adapted from MLK, Jr.)

So may it be.

Go now -- with a prayer for peace in your hearts and the work of creating justice for all in your own hands.

Go in Peace -- to be Peace. Shalom. Amen.

Civil Rights: Struggling Still-Reading

Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963
The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

My dear fellow clergymen:

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities “unwise and untimely.” Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statements in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against “outsiders coming in.” I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia...Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a non-violent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary...

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here...Just as the prophets of the 8th century BCE left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their home towns...

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned by what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds...

One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken in Birmingham is untimely...

Frankly, I have yet to engage in any direct-action campaign that was “well-timed” in the view of those who have not suffered (directly) from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity...

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights...Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging dart of segregation to say “Wait!”

But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your 20 million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your 6-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park...when you have to concoct an answer for a 5-year-old son who is asking: “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored,” when your first name becomes “Nigger,” your middle name becomes “boy,” (however old you are), and your last name becomes “John” -- and your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”;

When you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”, then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance

runs out, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience...

...If I have said anything in this letter which over-states the truth or indicates an unreasonable im-patience, I beg you to forgive me.

If I have said anything that under-states the truth or indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, then I beg God to forgive me...

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Prayer and Meditation: Some words are prayers all by themselves. Let us join in a moment's silence to honor these words of Dr. King. [Silence] Choral Amen.

Offertory: "Peace Like a River"

Civil Rights: Struggling Still-Reading

Tulsa Ministerial Alliance, June, 1921

"We, the Pastors of the City of Tulsa, urge that a thorough and complete investigation of this outrage be made immediately, and that where-ever the guilty ones may be found, and whoever they are, white or black, that a full punishment be meted out. Good citizenship can not condone and tolerate vandalism, looting, and such other lawless acts as both black and white were guilty of May 31st and June 1st. We believe that the possession of firearms and ammunition, especially rifles, revolvers, and such should be made a felony.

We call upon the officials, both county and municipal for a full enforcement of the Law. We call for a readjustment of our moral and civic life, placing it on the plain of decency, righteousness and justice.

We appeal to the Christians of Tulsa to be more faithful in exemplifying the true meaning of Christianity in word and deed, to refrain from all questionable practices, and to give themselves over to the practice of Christian virtues and general Christian living.

We appeal to the unaffiliated Church members to take membership at once with their respective churches, for in so doing, they will strengthen the moral fibre of the Community. This is no time to hold aloof.

We also deem it the part of wisdom that there should be a closer co-operation between the religious and business forces of the two races in Tulsa, so that at all times there shall be a better mutual understanding making it possible for both races to work together to achieve the highest

ideals. As an example of what we have in mind, we have invited the pastors of the colored churches to associate themselves with the Ministerial Alliance in this city.

We believe most emphatically that the Church is the only hope for the City of Tulsa, and without her moral influence, there can be no security no matter how many or what laws are enacted, or how well-policed the city may be. The observance of all law depends upon the moral consciousness and the Church is the only Institution in our Society whose sole and only business is the creating of that Moral Consciousness.

The Church stands between Society and destruction. What are you doing for the Church?

Tulsa Ministerial Alliance