

Dr. Martin Luther King – 40 years later

Jamaica Plain, April 14, 2008, Rev. Terry Burke

This month, April 4th to be exact, marks the 40th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination. Today, April 13th, is the birthday of one of our nation's founders, Thomas Jefferson. How appropriate to talk about race on the birthday of one who, though he wrote eloquently about the rights of "man," fathered children with his Black slave Sally Hemings.

This past week I conducted three memorial services, a very rare circumstance for me; often I go many months without doing a memorial service. Suzy Saul was 78 years old, Elizabeth Meyer 102 years old, and Cora Heyman was 95 years old. Martin Luther King was only 39 years old when he was shot. His autopsy revealed that he had the heart of a sixty-year-old man, due to the effects of stress on his body (fire bombing of his home, a stabbing, and continual death threats). I have often made statements like, 'If Martin Luther King was alive today, he'd be 79 years old and he would say this about the war in Iraq...' The toll his work took on his body probably wouldn't have allowed him to live anywhere near that long.

After King's death, Coretta Scott King and other Civil Rights leaders led a public movement to convince congress to make his birthday a national holiday. With three children who are products of the Boston Public Schools, I have witnessed many MLK events, and read countless King related school handouts. The hagiography of King as a civil saint focuses on his "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington in 1963, with its vision of racial inclusion, and then jumps to his tragic death in Memphis.

That school children's version, endorsed by politicians of all types, ignores the last five years of King's ministry. In 1966, King moved his Southern Christian Leadership Conference's activities north, to Chicago. This move confused and alarmed some of his white northern liberal supporters: 'Why, WE aren't racists.' Facing deeply entrenched de

facto segregation, King eventually withdrew from Chicago without any major victories. Jesse Jackson stayed behind to lead economic boycotts of large chain stores.

In April 4th, 1967, exactly one year before his death, King spoke out against the Viet Nam War at Riverside Church in New York City. Never again would President Lyndon Johnson end a televised address to the nation with “And we shall overcome.” King’s act of conscience dried up many of his sources of financial support, and he was reviled by many former liberal supporters.

At the time of his death, King was working on plans for what was called “Resurrection City.” This “Poor People’s Campaign” was the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference alone; other Civil Rights groups like the NAACP, Urban League, and CORE were not involved. King envisioned a huge gathering of poor people of all races and ethnicities coming to Washington. Once there, they would engage in massive civil disobedience, shutting down the government until they won a ‘Poor People’s Bill of Rights.’ The Reader’s Digest predicted “insurrection.”

King was from the Middle Class, a prince of the Black intellectual elite. He took a new direction with the Poor People’s Campaign. While still deeply concerned for the rights of Black people, he was speaking up for ALL poor people. After King’s death, a scaled down version of Resurrection City still took place. I remember watching on television as a stunned Rev. Ralph Abernathy tried to implement his friend Martin’s vision. Eventually, the encampment on the Washington Mall was dismantled by armed authorities. The poor were driven out and sent home empty handed.

I found myself fantasizing the other day about what Martin Luther King might have done if he had gathered his huge congregation of the poor in our nation’s capital. Sharecroppers, hotel dishwashers, domestics, Gee’s Bend quilters and day laborers might have chained themselves in the seats of U.S. Senators. The Lincoln memorial might have been occupied by poor people of all races named for Lincoln. Those whose family ancestry included violation by a slave owner could have sat in at the Jefferson Memorial.

In the reading room of the Library of Congress, the elderly poor of all races could have staged a wisdom teach-in. So much for my fantasizing. In the 40 years since Resurrection City, I have yet to hear another proposal for a "Poor People's Bill of Rights."

Forty years after King's death, Barack Obama, a Black man, is making a serious bid for the U.S. presidency. Obama's address at Constitution Hall in Philadelphia last March was entitled "A More Perfect Union." The senator from Illinois was responding to charges that his long-time United Church of Christ pastor in Chicago had made racist and inflammatory remarks. I hope that none of you are ever held responsible for my remarks! His speech showed great intelligence, as well as skill in writing and oratory.

Obama spoke of Black anger at lack of educational and economic opportunities, and white "working class and Middle Class" anger at loss of good jobs, whites unfairly blaming Blacks for the results of corporate policies. He called for Black and white to work together for common goals of justice, to understand that we are all "our brother's keeper, our sister's keeper." You will remember that this is an allusion to Genesis 4 and Cain's remark after killing Abel, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Obama downplays the systemic nature of white racism articulated by his pastor. The United Nations Human Rights Commission certainly found "endemic" racism in our country. Only 25% of students graduate from high school in Detroit. In a recent article, church member Chuck Collins points out that Black family income was 53% of white income in 1968; last year it was still only 57%. Obama's speech did acknowledge the continuing importance of the issue of race and sought to address it; I give him enormous credit for trying to talk about race as a political leader.

Obama doesn't particularly mention the poor. In contrast, MLK's speech at Riverside Church on April 4, 1967 spoke about economic and racial justice for the poor of the entire world's people. Of course, King wasn't running for office! He spoke at Riverside Church of his "vocation of agony" in coming out against the Viet Nam War. When re-reading this amazing speech recently, I had the image of King nailing himself to the

cross. Now I'll put the nail in my right wrist. Obama writes with elegant, thoughtful sentences; King wrote with his blood. He knew all too well that he would gravely wound his movement by speaking his conscience.

King's sermons and speeches would make a great subject for a church study group. King rooted his opposition to the war in a number of sources. As a Nobel Peace Prize winner, he felt a "commission" to work for the "brotherhood of man." As a Christian minister, he is called by the model of Jesus to love his enemies and work for peace. "Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed" is the vocation of "sonship" of the "Living God." (Remember MLK wrote before feminists raised awareness of inclusive language). Beyond all religions, "Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality."

King wrote that "I am as deeply concerned about our troops there (in Viet Nam) as anything else." Acknowledging that in a free election the National Liberation Front would probably win, King called for asylum for those who had supported the U.S. Viet Nam was a symptom, and King prophesized that if we do not align ourselves with worldwide movements for freedom, we would be fighting for generations in other countries, perhaps Guatemala, Peru, Mozambique and South Africa.

King argues that, rather than simply helping the man attacked on the Jericho Road, like the Biblical Good Samaritan, we must transform the Jericho Roads of the world. His best defense against Communism was an offense against poverty, racism, militarism and materialism. King ended his sermon with the words of Unitarian James Russell Lowell's poem, "Once to Every Man and Nation, Comes the moment to decide..."

If we had listened to King forty years ago and tried to address poverty and oppression world-wide, would we be dealing with militant Islamists today? While fiercely anti-communist, King privately described himself as a "democratic socialist." I was struck by the irony that one of today's readings, Acts 2:42-47 from the Revised Common

Lectionary, speaks of the members of the early church sharing all their possessions in common, according to need.

My goal for this church has always been that we be a congregation that is Black and white, Asian and Latino, gay and lesbian and straight. That's still a tall order in a society that strictly segregates itself on Sunday morning. Church gurus like Carl Dudley say that congregations that truly cross society's boundaries usually are those that have a compelling shared mission.

Somehow, the various threads of the Boston tapestry unite around the Red Sox in their sports mission. What would be a unifying justice mission? Can we try to unite people around the desperate mission of dealing with climate change, an issue that will gravely affect the poor of the world in a far disproportionate manner? Forty years after Dr. King's death, we still need to realize his vision of one society, with a "Poor People's Bill of Rights," one world, with hope for all. Like Martin Luther King, we need to be willing to give up some of our Middle Class privilege and orientation. Together, Black and white, Asian and Latino, we need to work for a response to climate change that includes the rights of the poor. Then truly, we will glimpse Martin Luther King's Resurrection City, the city where Love unlocks the door.