

Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday — Clarence Jordan

Jamaica Plain, January 16, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

When Martin Luther King, Jr. was given the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, he was honored as the representative of a movement, the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement was largely a movement of black churches (King's organization was the Southern Christian Leadership Council), with some white churches, Jewish groups, and some secular organizations also involved. The Hindu religious leader Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on non-violent action were an important source of inspiration for Dr. King. Someone once asked the Indian activist what he thought about Christianity? Gandhi, who as a devout Hindu loved the Gospels and the figure of Jesus replied, "I think it's a good idea; someone should try it."

Today I'm preaching about a Civil Rights leader who truly tried to live a radical Christian lifestyle. How many here have ever heard of Clarence Jordan? Clarence and Florence Jordan founded Koinonia Farms in 1942 in rural Americus, Georgia. Clarence had recently graduated from the University of Georgia with an agricultural degree. Koinonia means "community" in Greek, and the intentional community of the farm was from the outset "interracial, interreligious, communal, and pacifist." Something to offend most people of that time. Clarence Jordan is the man with the Bible on the far left of the photograph on the cover of your order of service. Florence is the third person in from the right on the top row. The photograph was taken in the 1940's

Needless to say, neighbors of the farm didn't cotton much to the radical Christian communal experiment in their midst. Derided as Black loving communists, the farm residents lived in a state of siege for decades. The religious challenge of Koinonia's very existence was a lightning rod for hate. Children would be fired upon at play.

Author/theologian Will Campbell, the prototype for Rev. Will B. Dunn in the cartoon Kudzu, writes of his "joy and dread" when visiting the farm. Joy at the attempt at faithful living; dread at learning of the latest tribulation the community was enduring. Campbell

writes of one visit where he collected 50mm machine gun shell cases from rounds that had been fired upon the farm. He took the evidence to the Georgia FBI; such weaponry could only come from a nearby Army base. Though U.S. military guns and ammunition were being used against Koinonia, the federal agents told Campbell that it was a local law enforcement matter.

Experiences like the middle of the night threat of being dynamited off the face of the earth that we heard about in our reading today led Jordan to deep theological speculation. Convinced that most churches tried to put God in their particular "God Box," he earned a Ph.D. in Biblical studies from the University of Louisville. Jordan called his resulting project of Biblical translation/reclamation the "Cotton Patch Gospel." Since most people had no experience of kingdoms, he called the "Kingdom of God" the "God Movement" in his translation. Just translating the exact words didn't necessarily catch the Spirit. As Jordan pointed out, the sentence "We had hot dogs and Coke for lunch, fish and hush puppies for supper, and then set around shooting the bull until midnight" might get translated by some 3967 A.D. Ph.D. with the exact wording of "We had steaming canines and processed coal for the noon meal, and fish and mute immature dogs for the evening meal, followed by passively engaging until midnight in the brutish sport of bull-shooting." In Jordan's work, Biblical situations are changed to contemporary ones; Paul's Letter to the Corinthians becomes a Letter to the Christians in Atlanta, while retaining the basic text. For Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel, the cross and crucifixion of Jesus are replaced by the contemporary noose of lynching. I plan to use more material from Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospels during my Lenten vesper services later this year.

Sympathetic friends like Will Campbell and Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement would come to visit Koinonia, and the farm sold its wares through the mail up North. By 1968, the attacks had stopped. Around that time, Millard Fuller, a millionaire entrepreneur then in person crisis came to visit the farm with his family. Inspired by Jordan, Fuller would found Habitat for Humanity, creating housing for low income families around the world. (Our own Monroe Hyman and John Simpson have been honored by Habitat for their work). Clarence Jordan died of a massive heart attack in

1969 at the age of 57, his death no doubt partially brought on by years of stress and attacks. Millard Fuller recounts that when Jordan was buried, Fuller's two year old daughter sang the only song she knew at his graveside, "Happy Birthday to You."

Black and white continue to live and work together at the now incorporated Koinonia Partners in Americus, Georgia. But race in America remains a struggle. I read several years ago in the liberal Protestant journal Christian Century about issues of worship at Koinonia. Worship there had typically involved sitting in a circle with people informally sharing poetry, Bible passages, songs and hymns. Then, Black members of the farm decided to worship by themselves. Anguished white members asked what they could do so that Blacks would return to a common worship service. The answer, ' Don't wear cut-offs and "T" shirts for church; dress up for worship.' The white members wouldn't do it, so Black and white live and work together, but worship remains separate, even at Koinonia.

Remembering Martin Luther King Jr. and Clarence Jordan and Koinonia Farms, may we as individuals and as a congregation rededicate ourselves anew to the ongoing struggle against racism.

We have a tradition of using Jamaica Pond water in our worship on this Martin Luther King Sunday. Jamaica Pond is a place where everyone, Black, white, and Asian-American, gay, straight, and Lesbian, middle-class, affluent, and poor, young and old, everyone walks, runs, sails, boats and goes fishing together, and everyone belongs. Its water is a sign of our hope for racial justice. In a moment I want to invite you to come forward with your hand in a fist. Then, place it in the water and unclench the fist saying, "I open myself to reconciliation and healing."

Closing words:

We give thanks for the great models of spiritual leadership of Martin Luther King and Clarence Jordan; may we open ourselves to racial reconciliation, healing, and justice, and may we be willing to act upon our beliefs.