

## **The Right Question**

### **1-14-24 MLK weekend**

Ninety-five years old.

Ninety-five.

That's the age Martin Luther King Junior would have been tomorrow, January 15, if he still walked among us.

But of course he *does* still walk among us.

Martin Luther King's voice is still heard among us.

His voice is heard in the words that are now part of our collective memory.

All of us in this room have grown up hearing

the words of his dream,

that one day children will live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Though none of us were there,

all of us can see him on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial

as he called for justice to run down like waters

and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Though none of us stood in the crowds before him,

we can hear him as he proclaims that

the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Martin Luther King,

just shy of his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday today,

*does* still walk among us:

his life is etched forever in the memory of this country,

his witness is forever woven into our nation's fabric.

This weekend we honor an icon and a hero.

But above all else, and before all else,

Martin Luther King Jr was a person of profound faith,

who found his solace and salvation in Jesus Christ.

What Wendy just sang for you was his favorite hymn,  
a hymn that reminds us that our strength is from beyond ourselves –

*Precious Lord, take my hand*

*Lead me on, let me stand*

*I am tired, I am weak, I am worn*

*Take my hand, precious Lord, Lead me on.*

Christ was Martin Luther King's strength,

And Martin Luther King was a preacher of Christ.

Above all else, and before all else,

he was a pastor and a powerful preacher,

a profound theologian, and steeped in scripture.

Rooted in the gospel.

So today, I'm choosing to use this sermon time  
to share with you reflections on what was one of his favorite  
gospel passages to preach from.

Time and again, Martin Luther King turned to the scripture that Becky just  
read to you.

It was this scripture that was the basis of the last preaching he did,  
on the night of April 3, 1968, in Memphis,  
24 hours before that shot rang out on a hotel balcony.

It was this scripture that shaped his final preaching,  
his last exhortation to a congregation about what it means to truly live as  
Jesus would have us live.

The story of the Good Samaritan.

You heard Becky tell you the story just now.

It all began, the scripture says,  
with this young man who was following around after Jesus,  
listening hard.

And at one point he raised his hand and said,

“Jesus, I got a question.

What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?”  
In other words, how do I get myself to heaven,  
how do I know what God wants me to do, to be, to say?

And Jesus, like any good teacher, tossed it back in his lap.  
Well, what does scripture say? he asked.  
And the young man says,  
well, it says you should love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, mind  
and strength,  
and you should love your neighbor as you love yourself.  
You got it, said Jesus. Just do that. Do all of that.

And that’s when the young man said,  
all right, fine, but -- who’s my neighbor?

And, as Jesus often did, he answered with a story.  
There was this guy, Jesus said,  
walking from Jerusalem to Jericho.  
And he got robbed, he got beat up and robbed and left by the side of the  
road.

And the people listening to this story would have been nodding,  
because that road was notoriously dangerous.  
So he’s lying there, Jesus says,  
and along comes a priest.  
And the priest *should* do the right thing, but he doesn’t.  
He just walks on by.  
And a Levite comes along, a holy man,  
and he *should* help the guy out, but he doesn’t.

And then along comes someone from Samaria, says Jesus.  
And at this point the crowd probably gasped,

because back then Samaritans were *known* for their hatred of Jews,  
Jews like that beaten-up man lying by the side of the road.  
Along comes a Samaritan, says Jesus,  
and you know what? *He* does the right thing.  
Goes to the wounded man, gives first aid, takes him someplace to be cared  
for, pays for the care.

And then Jesus turns to the young man and says,  
so -- who's the neighbor in my story?  
Who was the neighbor?

I get it, said the young man. I get it.  
The one who didn't pass by someone in need.  
The one who showed up and stepped up.  
The one who showed mercy. That was the neighbor.

For Martin Luther King,  
everything you need to know about how God calls us to act toward one  
another  
is right there in that story.  
Everything you need to know about how we're meant to *be*  
is contained in this one story,  
the scripture story he turned to in his preaching again and again.

Usually preachers focus right in on the Good Samaritan himself,  
the one man who stopped to help.  
But Dr. King asked his listeners to think first about the two men who didn't  
stop.  
He asked people to think through what must have been in *their* minds,  
as they hurriedly passed by on the other side of the road,  
not wanting to get involved.

Here's how Dr. King put it, in that last sermon he preached:

*“Now you know,  
we use our imagination to try to determine why the priest and the Levite  
didn't stop.*

*We wonder whether they were busy getting to a meeting  
and they had to get on down to Jerusalem so they wouldn't be late.  
Maybe they had to go organize a meeting of the Jericho Road  
Improvement Association.*

*But I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me.*

*Those men were afraid.*

*The Jericho road is a dangerous road.*

*It's a winding, meandering road.*

*It's really conducive to ambushing.*

*In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the Bloody Pass.*

*And you know, it's possible that the priest and Levite looked over at the  
man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around.*

*Or it's possible they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking,  
to lure them there and seize them.*

*And so the first question that the priest asked,  
the first question the Levite asked was*

*“If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?”*

In other words, King was saying,  
it's not that these two men were bad men particularly,  
not that they were heartless,  
but they were afraid.

Afraid of what might happen if they got involved.

Maybe not so much lacking heart,  
but lacking courage.

Which makes what the Samaritan does even more extraordinary.

Rev. King called it “excessive altruism”,

this incredible burst of compassion that makes him stop,  
lift up the wounded man in his arms,  
tenderly care for him and carry him away to find help.

The question the priest and the Levite asked was this:

“If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?”

But the Samaritan, Dr. King said, the Samaritan reversed the question.

What he asked was this:

“If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”

If I do not stop, what will happen to *him*.

And on that night in Memphis, April 3 1968,

Dr. King said to the crowd before him:

“That is the question before all of us tonight.

Not “if I stop to help those who are in need, what will happen to me?”

But “If I do not stop to help, what will happen to *them*.””

All these years later,

on the eve of his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday,

Dr. King’s question is still the right question.

It’s still the question that has the greatest claim on us

as people of faith,

as those who seek to follow Christ in the way of compassion.

Not “if I help, what will happen to me,”

but “if I do not, what will happen to them.”

It’s that question that draws us out of inaction

and into the way of service;

it’s that question that leads us out from our hesitation

and onto the path of Love.

If I do not help, if I do not speak, if I do not act, if I do not witness,

what will happen to those who need my love, my witness, my compassion?

Last Sunday, at right about this time,  
 nine of us returned from an eleven-day journey to India,  
 where we spent all day, every day,  
 with the people whom the church helps  
 through the little charity that David started forty years ago,  
 Friends of Christ in India.

And what we witnessed, every day,  
 were Samaritans at work, every day.

People who had asked themselves  
 “if I do not help, what will happen to them?”

We were with people whose commitment to service awed and inspired us –  
 those who find their joy in working with the children of the slums,  
 those who tenderly care for the forsaken elderly.  
 You’ll be hearing the stories in the weeks ahead,  
 but for today I just want to tell you about Swarnalatha.

Swarnalatha – I love saying that name –  
 is a woman whose compassion would rival the Samaritan’s and then some.  
 For years, Swarnalatha worked in a home for  
 the developmentally disabled in the town of Madhira, India.  
 In rural India, services for the disabled are almost non-existent;  
 families care for them as best they are able,  
 but it’s not uncommon for them to be left at home behind locked doors  
 while parents go out to their day labor jobs in the rice fields.  
 The home that Swarnalatha worked for provided care for dozens of children  
 with severe mental and physical challenges --  
 or at least it did until the owner moved away and the place was abruptly  
 closed.  
 Swarnalatha suddenly had no job –  
 and even worse, there was now no place for the children she had grown to  
 love.

So, she brought them to her home.

All of them.

And because they could not all fit,

Swarnalatha and her husband took out a loan they could not afford –  
seven thousand dollars –

to build another room onto their home,  
so that no one would be turned away.

And every day, all day, Swarnalatha and her husband  
care for those whom no one else would care for,  
love the ones whom others turned away from,  
sacrificially, whole-heartedly, tenderly.

She's doing it because she knows it's what Jesus would do.

She's doing it because instead of asking

“If I help these children, what will happen to me?”

she asked the question the Samaritan asked:

“If I don't help these children, what will happen to *them*?”

And when we were there,

in that room still smelling of fresh concrete,

when we saw the smiles of kids who knew they were safe and cherished,

we knew we were in the presence of the holy,

we knew we were witnessing the living presence of Christ

in the person of a young woman

who refused to walk away from need.

*If I don't help, what will happen to them?*

This is the *excessive altruism* that Dr. King spoke of,

this is the love of neighbor which Christ taught two thousand years ago,

this is the compassion that we are called to, each one of us.

On this weekend when we honor the memory of Martin Luther King,

we honor him best by our commitment to following



the Savior he followed.

We honor him and we honor Christ  
by loving our neighbors beyond all boundaries,  
and by never walking by on the other side of the road.

We honor him and we honor Christ  
by remembering the question we are meant to ask:  
not '*what will happen to me,*'  
but '*without me, what will happen to them?*'

Amen.