

Some are Still More Equal

Rev. Victoria Ingram
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This weekend, we honor the life and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday has become a national holiday. In the words of his wife, Coretta Scott King, this holiday commemorates the life of a man “who brought hope and healing to America, as well (as) the timeless values he taught by his example – the values of courage, truth, justice, compassion, dignity, humility, and service that so radiantly defined (his) character and empowered his leadership.”

Listen to these words from Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech from 1963:

“Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we’ve come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we’ve come to our nation’s capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the “unalienable Rights” of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned.”

Those words filled our ears for the first time over forty years ago. The words of Dr. King’s speeches, the stories of his trials and triumphs, and the examples of his life are available still to all of us. They are taught to our school children. They form the inspiration for much of the work for justice, equality, and human dignity that has been a part of this nation’s healing and reconciliation in the years since Dr. King died at the hand of an assassin.

And yet, despite his call to action in service to equality, despite his clear articulation of the differences between black and white in this country, despite his urging that this nation address its history of bigotry, slavery, and discrimination, some of us are still more equal than others.

I know you’ve seen the pictures and heard the reports from Haiti on the devastation following the earthquake. I know Haiti isn’t the United States, but those stark pictures we’ve seen this week of the heartache, pain, and suffering in that country – a country not so distant from our own – brought back the realization that, in the world, some of us are still more equal than others. I’ve shed tears more than once this week over the fear, grief, and despair I see in the eyes of those caught in the chaos that is Haiti after the quake.

And, those pictures from Haiti remind me of other pictures, pictures of the 9th ward in New Orleans and the faces of those whose lives were devastated by Hurricane

Katrina, for example. We have made progress, but the dream is unfulfilled, here in our own country, all around the world.

I took the title of today's sermon is taken from sentiments in George Orwell's novel, **Animal Farm** - "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." Ostensibly about a group of animals who take over a farm from their human owners, in truth, Orwell's story is a commentary on human society and our ability to brutally tyrannize our fellow humans through cruelty, indifference, and the imposition of power or privilege on another.

"Isms" – like racism, sexism, ageism – result when we have a preference, or prejudice, for one kind of trait or quality over another AND we have the power to act on that preference to the detriment of those who possess that trait or quality. I can have whatever thoughts I want about a certain kind of person. But, when I have and use my ability to act out my bias by blocking someone else's access to life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness, I've moved into the realm of "ism." In large ways or small, I've then exerted my perceived power or privilege over someone else, impacting their lives, not based on some objective standard or qualification, but simply because of my own bias. We've made progress, but racism is still alive and the dream is unfulfilled.

Of course, now, in 2010, questions of who is more equal don't refer just to whites and blacks. Now we must include the rights and the worth and dignity of many diverse people in our conversation. For one example, we must include our reaction and response to immigrants. How do we integrate the people who come here to do the work that allows us to have the food we eat, the clean hotel beds we sleep in, and the landscaped yards we play in? How do we appreciate the people who bring with them not only their knowledge and desire to work, but also their culture, their religion, their language, and their unique worldviews to our shores? What do we offer them – what do we owe them – for the role that they play in our well-being, for the part they play in making our lives possible as they? What does it mean to be an "American" in these changing times? What does it mean to think of the United States as "our" country? Who decides?

Once again, our nation is facing a time of change. As population demographics, economic conditions, and a multitude of other factors shape the realities of our existence, as each of us faces the changing circumstances of our lives, we will inevitably experience discomfort and conflict. Change is always filled with the opportunity for the new, interesting, and advantageous. It is also filled with opportunities for uncertainty, fear, and discord. The King holiday is a reminder of our national and individual need, in these times and at all times, to refocus and recommit to the values of nonviolence, unconditional love, tolerance, forgiveness and reconciliation. We needed his words in 1963, and we need to hear them again today.

More from Dr. King:

"We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy.

Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children."

We need to hear and engage with Dr. King's inspirational message again and again, to remind ourselves of our better selves and the ways we can live our day-to-day lives in accordance with these larger values, in spite of our uncertainty and in the face of our fears. We need to hear the message again to remind ourselves to keep our "eyes on the prize" and to respond with conviction and urgency to the opportunities we have to create a better world for everyone.

We know there will be setbacks. Dr. King reminds us to keep trying, to keep striving. Dr. King told us that "the arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice." We know there will be conflicts, but Dr. King's message reminds us to approach those conflicts with a commitment to nonviolence and reconciliation, to ask ourselves, "What is the most loving way I can resolve this conflict?"

Unitarian Universalists are lovers of humanity; it is part of our Seven Principles and a commitment of the heart as we serve one another and work for justice. We are lovers of democracy; it is an important part of our ongoing commitment to each other in how we govern our communities of faith. We take our commitment to the worth and dignity of all and to the democratic process into the larger community through our political and civic activism.

Remember these inspiring words that closed Dr. King's 1963 speech:

"And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

And when this happens, when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Dr. King called us to put ourselves in service of our values, to act in the spirit of helping, reaching out to others and making a difference where we can. Our community of faith is a community of remembrance and accountability. Here we are reminded of our highest values and our commitment to seeing our Principles made visible in the world. Unitarian Universalists have influenced the arc of history and we have seen progress. We have reason to hope, and the dream is still alive. The dream is not fulfilled. In our community of faith, we remind each other to take our part and do what we can to make sure that justice prevails.

Please open your hymnals to responsive reading #732, **For Martin Luther King, Jr.** I'll read the portion in plain text. You will respond with the words in italics.