

What in the world am I doing here?

I don't mean "What am I doing here at this service?" because I can only remember missing one service in 20 years when I left to care for my father.

I don't mean "What am I doing here singing in the choir?" because I love singing with this community choir. What wonderful music and what an incredible spiritual song leader is Rev. Howard Glasgow. You have been a gift in this church, this community, and my life for 12 years; thank you.

I don't mean "What am I doing here with my brothers and sisters in ministry?" because pastors who are here like our mistress of ceremonies May Etta Hall show me their joy in the gospel and commitment to the faith that makes my love and respect for them overflow.

I don't mean "What am I doing here with you?" because I enjoy greeting you around town and praying for your faith and your church. We have a variety of churches here tonight. While Sunday morning may be the most segregated and separated hour in America, this is one night we are THE church, not separated and segregated, but united together as the Body of Christ.

I don't even mean "What am I doing here on the podium?" because you have been gracious enough to invite me to pray for you and with you in past years and to be the Master of Ceremonies here last year.

I mean "What on earth am I doing here, right here bringing a message tonight?" I don't know! Do you?

Maybe, it's God getting back at me for those years that I said a silent prayer, a silent prayer, "Lord don't let the preacher talk too long" during the introduction although I have always been inspired by past preachers who made the time fly by. Maybe, it's because I don't know how to say to "no" to Mrs. Sylvia Ganaway. Maybe it's because one time I thought, though I vow I didn't tell a soul, that I would like to preach on how the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is such an influence on my Christian faith, life, and journey.

Why should I speak when I didn't know Rev. King? I didn't know Rev. King, but I know Moses who speaks again and again from God to Pharaoh, saying "Let my people go." Dr. King preached, "Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in." (April 18, 1959 Washington DC. One of 14 quotes on the inscription wall of the National Memorial)

I didn't know Rev. King but I do know the prophet Amos and I hear Dr. King's resounding voice when I read, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Dr. King said, "We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. 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." (August 16, 1967 Atlanta, GA)

I didn't know Rev. King, but I do know the prophet Isaiah who says "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners,; to proclaim the year of our Lord's Jubilee." 26 years young, Dr. King was called by God to preach on a national and world stage with his first sermon to the community gathered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in December of 1955 to organize the bus boycott in response to the arrest of Rosa Parks. He said, "Our cause is a Christian cause and our methods will be Christian methods." (CD A Call to Conscience 8 hours of original recordings of Martin Luther King, Jr.). He continued in the Spirit of the Lord for 13 years to his last sermon for sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee who worked 60 hours a week and yet lived in poverty. He preached, "We aren't engaged in any negative protest and in any negative arguments with anybody. We are saying... we are determined to be people. We are saying we are God's children. And we don't have to live like we have been forced to live. It's all right to talk about 'long white robes over yonder,' in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want 2 some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's alright to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey,' but God has commanded us to be concerned about His children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the New Jerusalem, but we need to talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles." (April 3, 1968, Memphis – Part of the "I see the Promised Land", his final sermon).

I didn't know Rev. King, but I know the prophet Micah who says, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own fig trees and no one shall make them afraid." Dr. King preached, "It is not enough to say 'We must not wage war.' It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it. We must concentrate not merely on the negative expulsion of war, but on the positive affirmation of peace." "True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice." (Christmas Eve, 1967 Atlanta, GA)

I didn't know Rev. King, but I know the Apostle Paul who used his time of imprisonment to write letters to churches. Next April 16th will be the 50th anniversary of King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" that I read every year. It was written to eight "liberal" white Alabama clergymen who had published an open letter in January warning that King's nonviolent resistance would have the effect of inciting civil disturbances. In response Dr. King wrote: "You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being.... Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community is forced to confront the issue. For justice delayed is justice denied." (1963; Letter from Birmingham jail)

I didn't know Rev. King, but I know the church of Jesus Christ. King wrote in that letter from jail: "Yes I love the church. I am the son, the grandson, and the great-grandson of preachers. I see the church as the Body of Christ, but O how we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being non-conformists. There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the

mores of society.... The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club. I am meeting young people every day whose disappointment with the church has risen to outright disgust. Maybe I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church as the true ecclesia and the hope of the world.” (1963; Letter from Birmingham jail)

I did not know Rev. King, but I do know something about ethics. 50 years ago, Dr. King preached “I find it necessary to remind you of the responsibility laid upon you to represent the ethical principles of Christianity amid a time that popularly disregards them. Many Christians live by the principle that ‘everybody is doing it so it must be all right.’ As Paul wrote to the Romans, ‘Be not conformed to this world: but be transformed by a renewing of your mind.’ Your highest loyalty is to God, and not the mores or folkways, the state or the nation, or any human institution. When people are surrendering the high values of the faith, you must cling to them and preserve them for children yet unborn. You are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.” (Paul’s letter to American Christians from Strength to Love by MLK, 1963)

“We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience.” (1963 Letter from Birmingham jail – national monument inscription)

Later, accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. King said, “I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.” (Dec. 10, 1964 Oslo, Norway – inscription on national monument)

I didn’t know Rev. King, but I do know about the 2 great commands to love God with all that you are and to love your neighbor as yourself. Dr. King’s sermon about “dangerous unselfishness” on behalf of our neighbors echoes in my mind when I read the story Jesus told when asked “And just who is my neighbor?” King writes, “On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they journey on life’s highway.” (Strength to Love, 1963) King lived out Rabbi Martin Buber’s calling for an “I-thou” relationship with people in community, instead of substituting an “I-it” status of inferiority and superiority that treats people as things instead of children of God, brothers and sisters created in the image of God.

I did not know Rev. King, but I do know about Jesus Christ commanding me to love my enemies so I can be a child of God. Dr. King preached “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” (1963 Strength to Love) “We must recognize that the evil deed of our enemy/neighbor... never quite expresses all that our enemy/neighbor is.... There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we look beneath the surface, beneath the impulsive evil deed, we see within our enemy/neighbor a measure of goodness knowing his evil acts are not all that he is. We recognize hate grows out of fear, pride, ignorance, prejudice, and misunderstanding, but in spite of this, we know that God’s image is ineffably etched into their being. Then we love our enemies by

realizing that they are not totally bad and that they are not beyond the reach of God's redemptive love." (Strength to Love – "Loving your enemies")

I didn't know Rev. King, but I know John who wrote several letters to a church; the first one reads "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." Dr. King preached, "three centuries of being battered by the rod of oppression may tempt us to become bitter and to retaliate with a corresponding hate. But if this happens, the new order we seek will be little more than a duplicate of the old order. We must in strength and humility meet hate with love. Of course this is not practical. Life is 'a matter of getting even, of hitting back, of dog eat dog.' But we have followed the practical way for too long now. For the salvation of our nation and the salvation of humanity (sic) we must follow another way. While abhorring segregation we shall love the segregationist. This is the only way to create the beloved community. To our most bitter opponents we say: 'we shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering; we shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we shall continue to love you. But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process and the victory will be a double victory.' Love is the most durable power in the world. Love, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most portent instrument available in our quest for peace and security. Napoleon Bonaparte, the great military genius, looking back over his years of conquest, is reported to have said: 'Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have built great empires. But they depended on force. But centuries ago Jesus started an empire that was built on love, and even to this day, millions will die for him.'" (Strength to Love "Loving your enemies")

I did not know Rev. King, but I know the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. Upon accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. King said "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant." (Dec. 10, 1964 Oslo, Norway – inscribed on national monument)

I did not know Rev. King but I know about being sent by Jesus into all the world, to preach the good news of reconciliation with God and each other for everyone. 45 years ago, Dr. King preached, "If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective." (Christmas Eve, 1967 Atlanta – inscribed on national monument)

I didn't know Rev. King but I know Jesus who preached that "the Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the good news." If I understand those words, the Kingdom of God is where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. The Kingdom of God is where God is at work right here and now calling and sending people. The Kingdom of God is the dream, the vision, the desire, the plan of God for this world. Our sin holds back that vision and dream of God, but we can repent and believe the good news and work with and where God is at work. That Kingdom of God, that dream of God, that vision of God was profoundly expressed in Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" Speech at the Lincoln Memorial in August of 1963 that Deacon Arthur Gross, Jr. so eloquently read to us tonight.

From the cross Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they do."
We need forgiveness for our ignorance.

So I beg your forgiveness tonight for my ignorance. For I realize now that I DO know the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I never met him, but I know him.

I know him through the scriptures and the teachings of the faith that we celebrate together in this church tonight.

I know him through his words and actions.

I know him through many of you.

Finally, I thank God tonight. I thank God that we have this day set aside for serving others in love as well as remembering the man, the message, and those who journeyed before him, with him, and now continue on in whatever way God is calling you and sending you to work for God's dream for this world.

I thank God tonight, that I can say, "I do know the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. because I know the Apostle Paul who wrote to the Galatians: 'For freedom Christ has set us free... for in Christ there is neither Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female.'"

I thank God tonight that I can be set free – I can be set free. Yes I can be set free thanks to Dr. King. I can be set free from fear, free from prejudice, free from hatred, free from jealousy - to the extent I will let God set me free.

I share the dream we continue to share tonight, when all God's children, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sex, disability, geography, or theological conviction will be able to join hands together and sing the spiritual and Spirit-filled words: "Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty we are free at last."

Rev. Dr. Wallis Landrum

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