



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Three Quotes_ - The Feast of Martin Luther King, Jr.- 1_16_2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

AT&T provides our cell phones, and for whatever reason they give us HBO Max for free. So I like it because it's an on-demand subscription, and you can just put it on your TV and watch things at your leisure. They also have this really cool thing where they indicate an HBO Max, when whatever they're offering is going to go away. They're rotating their life. So it says like going, going, gone or something like that. So you can see the things that are going to pop off very soon, so I tend to watch those.

So Troy and I, my husband and I, we have documentary date night. And so we watch these documentaries. So I was on HBO Max, and sure enough, in they're going, going, gone section, there was a documentary that was going to disappear on January 10th, so we watched it. And it was called The Fists of Freedom. And it was made by HBO Sports in 1999 and it told the story of the young Olympic US team, the track team in 1968, during the summer Olympics in Mexico City.

Now 1968 was a very turbulent year, right? It was the year that Martin Luther King was assessed. It was the year that Robert Kennedy was assassinated. It was the year where there were protests against the Vietnam War. It had just finished in 1967, the long, hot summer where cities erupted in riots and uprisings. In October, 1968, the US track team broke six world records and they took home 12 gold medals.

There were two US sprinters, Tommy Smith and John Carlos, and they won medals for the 200 meter race. And so they were joined on the Olympic stage with the silver medal winner who was Australian, Peter Norman. The US winners were black and the Australian was white. When the US National Anthem began to play because Tommy won the gold, the two US track team Olympians raised their black gloved fists and stood on the Olympic stage. The whole place went silent as the Anthem played. And as soon as the Anthem stopped, the stadium erupted into jeers, into boos, into rude things that were being said, and immediately they had to take the Olympians offstage.

The iconic gesture, which the black Olympians did on purpose as a sign of solidarity with the black community that was struggling at home, it was seen as a threat from the black power movement. And the punishment against them was swift and it was long. The men were expelled from the games. They were evicted from the Olympic village and they were condemned roundly for their actions at home, and indeed for the rest of their lives, they had to deal with negative ramifications for that action that took two minutes on the world stage.

Now what's less known is what happened to the sole white man onstage, it was Australian Peter Norman. Now he didn't raise a fist. He had a button, just a little button, and it said "Olympic Project for Human Rights." And he wore it along with his black colleagues. And he was roundly condemned for his actions by his home country, which was dealing with its own version of racism against immigrants and native Aborigines. And he was never allowed to join the Olympic team again and he died without recognition from Australia for his achievements. It was only in 2012 that Australia finally apologized to him posthumously.

These were steep prices to be paid by our black and white predecessors who stood up against the idea that there was an inherent difference between the races that made one inferior to the other, that made one less deserving than the other, and insignificantly that made one less human than the other.

What was interesting to me about the documentary was, of course, it was telling a story after - after the enactment of those juggernaut acts of legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which is why we remember and celebrate Martin Luther King in this nation. His work in the deep south for dismantling Jim Crow segregationist policies and practices, and giving all the people the right to vote, it's been transformative for us today and it's changed the way that we look at American democracy.

But who was King after the Civil Rights Movement? What was he like? And is this a King that maybe we have something in common since we to live post civil rights? So I was curious, what was he like before he was assassinated in 1966, in 1967, and 1968? And so I went to my Kindle and I downloaded the final book that he wrote before he was killed. And the title asks a question that was necessitated because of the Civil Rights Movement, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*

Now it was written in 1967, so I thought, oh, this is going to be very dated. And, you know, King was dead before even I was alive. So this is a long time ago. The Civil Rights Movement is now over 60 years old. And you and I know that much has happened after that. We are living in the years post George Floyd, when it became clear to so many of us that the role race plays in societal norms needs to be changed. But to me, Martin Luther King is still relevant to the church and it is

worth dedicating a whole weekend, remembering the most famous American martyr in the church.

And it's not just because he dedicated his life to the poor, to the downtrodden, to the huddled masses, yearning to be free. And it's not just because he was killed while fighting for the justice of all of us and denouncing the sinister nature of dehumanizing people. We remember him because he's a witness to us. He's teaching us still how to embody and live a life that gives credence to those words that Jesus uttered centuries ago: love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.

King refused to believe that he was less accountable to those utterances of Jesus Christ, even though he was jailed 29 times by white authorities, his house was bombed by whites, he got death threats regularly by whites, and more devastating to him, he felt that the liberal whites acquiesced to the status quo. Nevertheless, he believed that the way of Christ was a way of living for the sake of the other. And so he still has a lot of lessons for us to learn today.

Now what struck me most about the book, *Where Do We Go from Here* was how much work King did to make it utterly clear. There can be no success for the black race without the participation of the white race. And the reverse is true. No one who is white can have their full dignity and humanity if they continue to believe that an image of God who is black is less than in any way, shape, or form to a white person.

In the book, King tells the story of what is thought to be the inception of the black power movement, The 1966 Meredith Freedom March from Tennessee to Mississippi. It happened after the Civil Rights Movement. Now, after the Civil Rights Movement, there was a growing contingent of blacks who did not see their conditions improving. There was no money that was given to help black communities. There was no federal work program to help register black voters. So this disillusioned group believed that separation from well-meaning whites was necessary to empower blacks. King was adamantly clear. He would not participate in the freedom March if whites were excluded.

Now, why did he take that stance? It did not come from sentimentality or feeling loyalty to the whites who fought alongside him for civil rights. And it didn't come out of strategy, believing it would help if whites came alongside. It came out of his conviction for white people, that their wellbeing was linked to the wellbeing of blacks. As he criticized the black power movement, he offered this in the book,

"In the final analysis, the weakness of black power is its failure to see that the black man needs the white man and the white man needs the black. However much we may try to romanticize the slogan "Black Power," there is no separate black path to power and fulfillment that does not intersect white paths, and there

is no separate white path to power and fulfillment short of social disaster that does not share that power with black aspirations for freedom and human dignity.”

Now, by the same token, King was also not afraid to remind us how much devastation, centuries of treatment of human beings as property, and the terror and dehumanization of racism perpetuating the myth of an inferior race made the white community responsible for the pain and suffering experienced by the black community. Blacks and whites need each other, but he excoriated us for condoning chattel slavery for so long while we spoke so strongly of liberty and justice.

And then he pointed to our expectation that those who were finally given freedom through the Civil War and the Civil Rights Act were not given any kind of meaningful help to begin. Again. The legislation that was passed in the '60s was never meant to be a culmination, but a giant step in a different direction. So he says,

“An ambivalent nation freed the slaves a century ago with no plan or program to make their freedom meaningful. The Congress passed a Civil Rights bill in 1964, and to this day has failed to enforce it in all its dimensions. In 1965, the Voting Rights Law has passed and then permitted to languish with only fractional and half-hearted implementation.”

To me, this is the power of King's version of the gospel. He was not afraid to tell us the whole truth, but he did so being adamant in the hope that we could indeed, as Thomas Paine said, begin the world again. What do you think? This is nothing new for us Christians, though it's not easy to hear. We fall short of how we should be, but we also know that God can make us who we can be.

And I look at Moses from our old Testament reading who was in the same boat as all of us. Who am I, Lord? Who am I that I should go save America from its past sins? And God's response, I will be with you, saith the Lord. I am sending you. I am equipping you. I am shaping you. So I will be with you.

Now what's interesting about Moses and what's interesting about us is that even though we ask that legitimate question, why me, Lord? Why should I go? Why should I be the one who does this great thing? Why should I try to change centuries of evil? Why should this burden fall on me? This actually has little to do with you or me. This has to do with the fact that God has been listening to the cries of the ones who are in pain. God has been listening to those who have been ostracized, demonized, harassed, excluded, and experienced injustice. God hears those cries of those living under the pain of poverty and injustice and the Lord God intends to fix it. The Lord God intends to right it.

This isn't about you or me. This is about God's work in this land. This Lord is a righteous Lord. This God is a God of peace and God will not allow beautiful humans that God has made to be discounted or trashed or killed for any reason. So you and I better not make a mistake here. This is not a God to be trifled with. And so He says to Moses and He says to each one of us, I have observed the misery of my people. I have heard their cry. Indeed. I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them, says the Lord. So of course, of course the church has to go and participate in the restoration and dignity of all races of people because God's making it happen.

There's a story of a white Episcopal, Bishop, Bishop Paul Moore, who wanted to participate in that same Meredith Freedom March in 1966, the one where King was at, but was told that they weren't going to allow whites to March. He told them this: I don't care what they say. That March is protesting a moral evil, an evil detrimental to me and every American. I'm going down there, whether they want me or not.

Now, besides the vision that blacks and whites need to save each other, in his final book, there's another biblical strain that King addresses that I think is worth mentioning. One of the most enduring and lasting refrains in the Old Testament and in the New Testament is God's promise to care for the poor and lift them up. God's dedication seems to be to save those who are impoverished. So Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." I think it pays for every Christian to ask themselves why God cares so much about the poor.

Now, not surprisingly, King makes an impassioned plea for us to eliminate poverty, especially in a land as well off as the United States of America. His constant refrain in a land of plenty, there's plenty for all. But what's so significant about this is his insistence that this lifts up all Americans from the debilitating grasp of being poor. All Americans who are poor need to be saved from being poor. Now here are some well-known facts today. Today, there are 39 million people who are poor in the United States. Do you know, that's only, only 11% of us? That's totally doable. Even if we halved that number, God would be so delighted. To be poor in this country means that you're making \$25,000 for a family of four, or as an individual making \$12,000 or less. So think about that, \$1,000 a month, and you've got rent to pay 500 bucks. You've got a car, you've got insurance, you've got food to get. Pretty soon you realize this is not sustainable in order to live.

Now here's another fact of those 39 million people, 8 million are black, 10 million are Latino or Hispanic, 17 million are white. The problem of poverty is a problem for all of us. It's a problem for all of us, especially all Christians to fix. Our calling is as clear as Moses' was on that fateful day when he ran into that Burning Bush. But today, God comes to us in a voice of a black preacher. You

have been called. You've been called, black and white and brown, to heal racial pain and to eradicate the inhumane way of living without enough. Where will you go from here?

So let's take some advice from our saint for the day, blessed brother Martin, "Our most fruitful course is to stand firm with courageous determination, move forward nonviolently amidst obstacles and setbacks, accept disappointment, and cling to hope."

Amen.