

Is A Prophetic Witness Possible in Today's Church

1 Samuel 3:1-2-

John 1:43-51

Today we honor The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., America's prophet.

The best way to mute a martyr's message is to give him a holiday, build him a statue, and before you know it his memory is cheapened with sales at the mall – the American anti-church. It's easier to go shopping than it is to "save the soul of America." When the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was founded in 1957 it adopted the motto "To save the soul of America." Well, if America's soul is to be saved it will not happen at the mall, the football stadium, or your local watering hole. And it surely will not happen in Congress. I agree with President Teddy Roosevelt: **"At the roll call in the Senate, members should answer 'Guilty' rather than 'Present.'"**

What's a martyr to do? He deserves the national holiday no matter how much it irritates South Carolina. South Carolina was the last state to give employees a paid holiday in honor of Dr. King. Before that state workers could choose between King and one of three Confederate holidays.

Dr. King makes me proud to be a human being, proud to be an American, proud to be a Christian, and proud to be a Baptist preacher. I was seventeen years old when I heard him preach and knew that I wanted to be like him. Dr. King was the light shining in the darkness of my racist Redneck soul.

With gratitude I preach about whether a prophetic witness is possible in the church as a way to honor Dr. King. Martin, who was no segregationist, knew that God was not a segregationist. Martin, you see, knew his scriptures. "God has made of one blood all nations of the earth."

Add these words of Dr. King: "If we do not act," Martin said, **"We shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight."**

Dr. King defied a racist culture and a bigoted nation – a 20th century prophet with a message rooted in the really old-time religion – the religion older than dirt, the religion of Abram, Moses, and Amos. Throw in the prophet of India, Gandhi, and the Baptist prophet Walter Rauschenbusch, and you have a sense of Martin's theological grounding.

Look, God gave the office of prophet to the church: "God handed out gifts of apostle, **prophet**, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christians in skilled servant work" (Eph. 4:11). The church is supposed to have prophets, but poof, as soon as the church fell in step with the world, the office of prophet disappeared, only filled in later centuries by outliers – men and women crying as voices in the wilderness.

Prophets give the church **a spine**. Margaret Thatcher once told a Conservative member of Parliament, "The trouble with you, John, is that your spine does not reach your brain." Can you even imagine a church ad seeking a prophet: **"Our church is seeking a prophet who will tell us truth we don't wish to hear, who will tell us when we are on the wrong track, who will expose our prejudices, biases, lies, distortions, and mean spirits. Salary and benefits for the position are highly**

competitive.” Say anything you like preacher, but don’t preach about sex or politics or money or war or race or ecology or greed

A prophet has **courage** to speak out. Samuel told the sons of Jesse they couldn’t be king and anointed the baby of the family, David. A prophet told King David that he was like a rich man who stole the only lamb of a poor man. A prophet told Ahab and Jezebel they couldn’t steal from the poor to make the rich richer. A prophet told Herod that he shouldn’t steal his brother’s wife. A prophet told the nation that they couldn’t even sit in church for an hour without wanting the Sabbath to be over so they could go back to exploiting the poor.

A church without a prophet is a body without a mouthpiece, a community without a highly developed moral consciousness, a people without a heart for the oppressed. Muzzles are for oxen; microphones for preachers. **“Without a vision, the people perish.”** A church without a prophet is an airplane without a pilot; a nation without a prophet will self-destruct in its own lust for national security.

No one takes up the mantle of prophet without a call. God calls Samuel four times before he answers. God drafts prophets because no one volunteers. No one in her right mind announces, “I want to be a prophet when I grow up.” Only God and the community can elect a prophet.

So God made Samuel a prophet. God says to Samuel, **“See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.”** When the prophet appears, the truth hits the fan. Audiences are left gasping for air, red-faced and with burning ears. Prophets talk face-to-face never behind the back. Contrast this with popular preaching: “For the time is coming when people, having itching ears, will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires” (II Timothy 4:3-4).

Prophets are **irritating**. They are like the “angry birds” in that addictive game by the same name – wreaking havoc and destruction wherever their words fly. Care for our poor instead of fighting wars around the world. If America’s soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy report must read **greed** and **violence**. I am a minister of the gospel and I am amazed that you ask me why I dissent from war. The relationship of the Christian faith to peace is so rock solid, so undeniable, so ingrained in the teaching of Jesus Christ, that I can’t imagine the church not being numbered among the peacemakers.

A prophet’s work is **unfinished business** because there are those who try to tear down what has been accomplished. Israel was barely out of Egypt before wanting to go back to Egypt. Back to meals of thin gruel filled with leeks, garlic, and cucumbers – slave food for slaves. We should defy those who want to take us back to 19th century economic theories that didn’t work then and are not working now. Some people, confronted by our nation’s tough challenges want to take us back to some imaginary la-la land where white people ruled and black people knew their place and women were in the kitchen instead of graduating from college.

“What did you say? The good old days? Don’t talk about – good old days. You kidding me? Good old days?”

With the articulation skills of Winston Churchill let us call them the “nasty old days”. (Churchill called the Nazis the “Nasties.”)

Martin preached we should be governed by our dreams and not by our fears. There are those who are trying to dominate America with a message of fear. Some media conglomerates should change their name to The FEAR Network.

Martin preached we should be governed by our love and not our hatred. It's so easy to be mean and stingy and not know it in defense of something unjust. When Alabama passed the most restrictive immigration law in the nation, a state senator said, "I want you to know I am a Christian. I'm a Methodist and I voted for this law. This legislation was written by Christians." That's what the supporters of Jim Crow laws said too. Being Christian doesn't guarantee just legislation.

Martin preached we should be **one common human race**. If we are serious about fulfilling Dr. King's dream, there needs to be a major congregation in this city that is fully integrated, a church where there are black, white, red and yellow, liberal and conservative, for we are all **one in Christ Jesus**. One. "There is **one** body, **one** Spirit, **one** hope, ⁵**one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism, ⁶**one** God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." What part of **one** do we not understand?

[On two occasions, I have been the preacher at the baccalaureate service for Dayton Early College Academy. The service is held here and African American students and their parents enter these doors reluctantly. Why? There are still invisible fences in this community and they are built around our churches. An invisible fence works well for dogs, but remember it requires a collar. Well, it is time for the churches to tear off the collars of prejudice and give all people in this great country a free range.]

In 1969, I went to a bar and dance hall in West Monroe, Louisiana with a fellow Northeast Louisiana University baseball team mate. This was an African American dance hall and it held about 500 people. I was the only white boy in the building. My team mate went to the bathroom and while he was gone, a crowd gathered around me and people starting shouting questions and threatening me. My friend pushed his way through the crowd, put his hand on my shoulder, and said, "He's with me." The crowd dispersed. How many Dayton problems would dissolve if all those who are in reality one in God – black and white, yellow and red, the starved and the stuffed, the rich and the poor, the male and the female – if all were to put hands together on one another's shoulders and say, "She's with me."

Are there Christians prepared to put a friendly hand on the shoulders of teenagers in West Dayton and East Dayton? Will we say "He's with me" to the poor and houseless of Dayton? Will we say "She's with me" to the alien? Let the word go forth that at First Baptist, the left out, left behind, excluded, rejected, the stranger, the alien, the down and out, will be lifted up and received with open arms. If an illegal alien needs a place to lie his head at night, this church will be his refuge. There are no aliens in God's kingdom.

I ask you to help me bear prophetic witness:

1. Invite people to First Baptist Church from every community in this city. Until the churches are centers of reconciliation, until the churches are fully integrated, we will make little progress on race. Go into the highways, the alleyways, the suburbs, the inner city, and invite people of all colors, classes, and creeds to First Baptist Church.

2. Offer a pastoral internship to an African American woman attending United Theological Seminary. We educate talented, gifted African American women to be pastors and then no church will call them. They claim they are not ready or they say they don't believe in ordaining women. It is time to move beyond these prejudices.
3. We can include persons of other ethnicities in our social lives. In Acts 2, we read, "They broke bread at home* and ate their food with glad and generous* hearts,⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." Until we break bread together in our homes, we will not make much progress on race. If, in the 1960's we had opened our churches and our homes to African Americans, we would not be as far from Martin's dream as we are with our strategy of making our children do what the grown people didn't have the courage to do.

Is a prophetic witness possible in the church? Yes. All it takes is ordinary courage and a willingness to live together as family. Together we can be prophetic witnesses.

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