

Unity Church of North Easton

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Martin in His Time and Ours

Stephen Colbert joked in his satirical book, *I Am America, And So Can You*, that racism was a serious problem in America, then Martin Luther King came, and now the problem is solved. Mike Pence quoted Martin Luther King while Vice President, white people these days love cherry-picking comments on nonviolence completely devoid of context to shame any form of protest or unrest that makes them vaguely uncomfortable, and we have this misguided cultural notion that America loved him in his day. I was born a decade after his assassination while there are people here today who lived in his lifetime, so you know more than I how flawed an understanding of history the present notion of his sainthood and hallowed stature is compared to the reality of his life and ministry.

The FBI had investigated King during his life, since it was during the time of the Red Scare and McCarthyism. Despite a significant and profound rejection of communism which you just heard in King's own words near the end of his life, he was very much considered a communist or communist sympathizer by a good portion of America, including the American government, during his active ministry. King was no saint, and he would have been the first person to admit that fact. He was a human, flawed as humans are. Claiming sainthood makes our understanding of his life about him as a figure while obscuring the very real work he participated in that helped transform the country and the world. By naming places MLK Boulevard or MLK Square we can divide the man from the work and continue forward mouthing the name while perpetuating the same social injustice that necessitated the ministry.

King isn't the only figure in history and now is not the only time when humanity has engaged in a duplicitous activity based on professing a name while ignoring everything that name taught and did. Tolstoy included a story within a story in *The Brothers Karamazov* about the Grand Inquisitor. Jesus returns as a shock to Seville during the time of the Inquisition. Jesus performs miracles but never for his own glory or aggrandizement. The Inquisition arrests him, and the Grand Inquisitor comes to speak to him. The Grand Inquisitor chastises him for not taking up the temptations Satan had for him in the desert. If Jesus had only turned the stones into bread, the hungry would have been fed. If Jesus had only worshiped Satan, he could have ruled the world. If only Jesus brazenly manifested supernatural powers in front of the world, his glory would be plainly manifest. Instead, Jesus showed freedom, conscience, and faithfulness. The Grand Inquisitor posits Satan offered the better deal. People don't need conscience and freedom; they need to be ruled. People don't need faith;

they need bread. Jesus listens through the whole of the Grand Inquisitor's screed, saying nothing. In the end, he kisses the Grand Inquisitor, forgiving him of his sins and treachery, and in a fit of wretchedness, the Grand Inquisitor has Jesus leave to never again return to Seville. Christians during the Inquisition subverted their faith while saying the name of Jesus. Christians today subvert their faith when saying the name of Jesus when they condemn immigrants, condemn the poor, and claim triumphant national identity over and above a universal humanity.

It was controversial at the time King gave his address at Riverside to come out against the Vietnam War. It was controversial for reasons including the indictment of global capital forming empire building and attacking the consumer mentality that still fills our foreign and domestic policies. King wasn't only calling on America to stop engaging in unjust foreign wars, he was calling on America to change its ways and its values.

Since November many corporations have ended their diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Recently, Mark Zuckerberg stated his opposition to in his words the "emasculatation of American culture" in addition to ending fact-checking throughout all Meta platforms. Billionaires invested millions into inauguration celebrations for Trump and I do mean invested and not donated, while the target of conservative hate and ire, Taylor Swift, instead has donated over 10 million dollars in donations for those impacted by the wildfires in California. For all the buzz on the news about "diversity hires" being dog whistle language for outright racism, sexism, and homophobia, we have absolutely unqualified people being put into positions of leadership in this nation and a circus show on the media where disgraced crook George Santos gives makeup tips to disgraced crook Matt Gaetz for another salacious headline on our nonstop news cycle. As a church that believes in the moral and spiritual values of diversity, justice, and inclusion, I am absolutely at odds with what is happening. As a church that believes in love at the center of our values, I am at odds with choices and paths America chooses to follow.

Some claim that any critique of America is unpatriotic. For King, it was a challenge his opponents often laid on his ministry. When I listen to the words of his Riverside address, I don't hear a hatred of America. I don't hear a refutation of America. I hear a profound love for America, but that love is mixed with a father's discipline where moral correction is one of the most sacred duties of a parental responsibility. Allowing injustice, flourishing corruption, and evil power-hungry opportunism over moral action is never the proper way. Claiming that justice and diversity are emasculatation is such a weak and fragile masculinity that deserves condemnation. King didn't rule over his people in his ministry, he inspired them, and he inspired his opponents to become better people. My pity extends to such fragile men, but that pity is not acceptance but rather a challenge for such insecure men to be better.

George Wallace loudly proclaimed "Segregation now. Segregation tomorrow. Segregation forever." Then he transformed and went to the many Black communities of Alabama, met

with their leaders, and apologized for his actions. The old George Wallace led Alabama on the exploitation of its black communities. The morally regenerated George Wallace used his political power to fund those poor and exploited communities. Even as his Parkinson's Disease and arthritis afflicted him in his last years of life, he would meet with African American political leaders in Alabama and still profess his apologies while working in support of their efforts. It isn't a statue or monument of Martin Luther King that makes such a radical transformation, it was a ministry of justice that morally transforms and regenerates even the staunchest of critics. It is a strong and bold masculinity to work for what is right and what is true even in the face of dire consequences. Jesus was not a weak or emasculated man. King was not a weak or emasculated man. The gas guzzling compensation wagons of people fueling climate change with their full-sized trucks all while working desk jobs and worshiping at the altar of the Second Amendment show profound insecurity in what it means to perform masculinity. Patriotism is a love so deep that as we morally mature and grow we bring our nation with us on the journey to an ever-more perfect union instead of conceding patriotism as a weapon wielded by American fascism.

I love this nation. I love this nation deeply because it opened its arms wide to my people who had to leave their homes out of aristocratically forced starvation. I love this nation because it inspired a flourishing of democracy locally and globally. I love this nation because for all of its historical flaws and injustices, it does not shy away from the harsh truths of our past where our children are taught the evils of slavery and the barbarism of what we did to the indigenous of these lands, not only on the trail of tears but throughout our unjust empire building. We did wrong historically, we did wrong recently, we will do wrong in the future but we do not try to paint that wrong as right. We become better people. We become more moral people. We learn from our mistakes and misdeeds and we apologize not with some performative erection of statues and monuments but with more moral ways of being. We learn that our circles of justice and our circles of community grow wider. We learn that our notion of liberty can become ever more robust and that taking our nation on that journey is an essential duty of patriots.

What I do not love is our hypocrisy. What I do not love is the way we make everything into opposition and binary us/them, insider/outsider dynamics time and time again. King drew his opposition in and inspired their moral imagination as part of reform. Jesus brought in those who were socially despised, the widow, the orphan, the leper, the tax man, and upended the social hierarchy of the ancient Near East's caste system. All of us were part of community. All of us were of value and worth. All of us were included. Do not tell me you worship in the lineage of Jesus when you mock diversity. Do not tell me you value the life and legacy of Martin Luther King when you mock inclusion. Do not speak to me of your patriotism when you mock equity and justice. For America to be faithful it cannot lie about what it is and what it values. It cannot shut away in the shadows its misdeeds and atrocities. It can't hide from missteps, nor shirk the burden of its responsibilities to this world.

For the richest nation in human history to have a renaissance of the Gilded Age where robber barons no longer are industrialists but rather are tech bros, we have a problem. It isn't the best of us who are leading but rather the wealthiest who accumulated their vaulted positions not out of service but out of exploitation. The little league coaches and volunteers at community libraries, the crossing guards and the community organizers arranging for local artist community displays are the foundation on which America is built. America is built on the backs of immigrants coming and laboring with the sweat of their brow and the unique knowledge and skills they possess. We as a nation will need to enter a new time of repentance, atoning once again for the proliferation of human greed.

King's message was not only for his time. It is for our time. King's life and legacy are not things only for the annals of history and the period on a horrid past of American racism and class division. King's message is for now, for an America of division and separation, an America overcharged on animosity and filled to the brim with bitterness. It is not that we need a second coming of Martin Luther King. It is not that we need a new leader to rise up with his charisma and prophetic voice. What we need is a society that listens to his message, proliferating just peace centered on love, even when that proliferation appears as revolution. We do not need to give into the temptation of control and dominion when we have the power to live with liberty, choice, and moral growth. We do not need to give into the temptation of sating only the hunger of the world when it is more imperative that we sate the spiritual and moral starvation of our times. It is a cause to which my life has long been committed, and so have the lives of so many here this morning, let us go then, and do the work.