Strive for Justice
Honoring the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
On January 15, 2012

“The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause men [and women] everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of [humankind] and fire the souls of men [and women], imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace. Men [and women] far and near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travelers at midnight.”

~from “The Strength to Love”
a collection of sermons delivered by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

It might even be worth the trip all the way to Memphis, Tennessee just to go the Civil Rights Museum there, the only one of its kind in the country. It is an interactive museum with exhibits that places visitors at a segregated lunch counter, walks you through the various marches and protests, the bus boycott, the sanitation workers’ protests, and a host of others. It is scintillating; it’s overwhelming; at times depressing; sometimes uplifting… but nothing prepared me for the final stage of the exhibit.

Before it was the Civil Rights Museum, the building was the Lorraine Motel: the motel where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was staying with assorted colleagues – Ralph Abernathy, and others – when he was assassinated. The last stage of the exhibit lets one look into the room he had been in, and then one steps out onto the balcony. The balcony which is imprinted upon our national imagination by the photograph – of King shot and fallen, Jessie Jackson pointing in the direction of an unseen assassin. The place is a shrine. Standing there, in silence, I wept.

This past week, re-reading some of his sermons, speeches, and letters, I wept again. And again, as always, in the company of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s words, I find myself inspired; compelled to reach beyond my complacent insularity; to confess my silent betrayal of my sisters and brothers of any race or tribe who are oppressed; and to confess my silent betrayal of my own inmost beliefs; then to find new conviction about my own need to speak and act in different ways – the ways of God’s justice and love. Let’s give our thoughts to Dr. King for a few minutes today.

Two essential elements are defining for Martin Luther King’s theology: history and love. History. God has acted, does act, and will act – in and through the deeds of humankind. This is bedrock. God delivered Moses and the Hebrews out of the hands and chains of Pharaoh, and God can and will do it again. King affirmed time and again that “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” His understanding of God in history gave King an inextinguishable hope, and – in his words - “an audacious faith in the future” (“Where Do We Go From
It gave him a sense of his own place in the movement of this river of time; and he was aware of history as a judge, which prompted him to act.

The other core element in King's theology is love. To love one another, as God loves us. The principal activity of King's faith was to strive to love all people. Not just “nice” love, but Jesus’ radical love: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” (Luke 6:27) King knew that to love our enemies was not only the “right” thing – according to Jesus' commandments; he saw that love is transformational, that love has power. Out of his ethic of love, emerged the principal strategic tool for his work of justice-making and civil rights; namely, non-violent resistance.

He did not seek to overcome the evil and violence of racism with more evil and violence; he sought to overcome it with love. Time and again he returned to the mantra that, “the end is preexistent in the means; destructive means cannot bring about constructive ends” (“The American Dream,” p.214). “Through violence you may murder a murderer but you can't murder murder. Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that.”

Differentiating between just and unjust laws, King sought through pressure, protests and other means to apply creative tension to upset the racist status quo.

During his life, King led this nation to take extraordinary strides for justice. Yet I trust no one here is unaware of the pervasive evil of racism in our time - in our world, our nation, our city, and our own hearts. Poverty snares people of every hue – and black people disproportionately. Prisons hold people of every hue – and black people disproportionately. Much of the vitriol directed toward our president is racism, plain and simple, sometimes thinly veiled.

I do not believe Martin Luther King would be pleased or rest easy knowing that we were remembering him and giving thanks for his prophetic ministry on this 83rd anniversary of his birth. Unless… we heed his prophetic challenge and take from his memory a charge to act for justice in our time and place.

The long arc of God's desire for justice will only be made real in the lives of God's people by human words and deeds, by our words and deeds. As the church, “the conscience of the state,” King charges us to “speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace.”

King was compelled to speak and act: the outrageous disparity between the reality of racist oppression with which he lived – and the promise of God's justice, with which he also lived, gave him no choice. King was compelled because he knew first hand and intimately, had always known, the dehumanizing power of the evil against which he fought. I believe we will not be compelled to act for justice unless or until, we are able to align ourselves in some tangible and substantial way with those suffering injustice and experiencing the evil of oppression. When someone experiences oppression first hand, they do not have to be told to act.

Most of us here today are not experiencing oppression most of the time. (I will speak for myself: I am not experiencing oppression much, if any of the time). So the prerequisite to action is compassion. The prerequisite to compassion is our proximity to and alliance with those who are oppressed by our society. I can feel sorry for a woman in prison, I can feel sorry for a youth in this city whose family circumstances, or lack of education and support prevent him from having hope. I can feel sorry for many people who are far away from me, and I may even be prompted to act with charity. But it is not the same as standing with them demanding justice.

Compassion is not “feeling sorry for;” compassion is “feeling with,” “being with.” The forces in nature and society are great that tell us to look out for ourselves, to protect our own interest. Yet doing so isolates us from the suffering of others; it leaves compassion as a pleasant sentimentality and makes Christ's ethic of justice-with-love a distant dream. I must, we must, resist the attraction of insularity and security, and put ourselves in direct relationship with the oppressed of our communities, or I fear we shall remain forever mute. We shall not be the church of Christ.

This is why I believe it is so important for the people of St. Peter's to participate the interfaith community organization – POWER. Through it, we are aligned with people of every faith, every neighborhood, every socio-economic demographic. It is not a means whereby we can charge in upon our big white well-educated horses. It is a means whereby we can stand in solidarity with our sisters and brothers across this city – have-nots and have, white, black, Latino, Asian. Our action will come not from beneficence, but from understanding and unity.

In the battle between justice and injustice, there is no neutral territory. Either we align ourselves with God's desire for justice and take steps accordingly, or we confess that our silence and inaction have placed us squarely in the

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1 Page numbers refer to Washington, James, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Harper & Row, 1986
camp enabling injustice to grow.

No one is spared the choice, for as King wrote in his book *Stride Toward Freedom* (p.474), “we are caught in a network of inescapable mutuality.” “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Or as he cautioned youths in one of his commencement addresses: “Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be” (“The American Dream,” p.210). A good directive for our School Reform Commission.

Hearing today of the young Samuel who responds to Yahweh: “Here am I. Speak.” Jesus found Philip and said, “Follow me.” Philip found Nathanael and said, “Come and see.” In some way, Christ calls each of us – to answer, to follow, to align ourselves with God’s desire for justice.

Can we do anything less than try?

Preaching at the Ebenezer Baptist Church shortly before his assassination, King said (“The Drum Major Instinct,” p.267),

“If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don’t want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize, that isn’t important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards, that’s not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.

“Id like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I’d like for somebody to say that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day, that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try, in my life, to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say, on that day, that I did try, in my life, to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

“And that’s all I want to say … if I can help somebody as I pass along, if I can cheer somebody with a word or song, if I can show somebody he’s traveling wrong, then my living will not be in vain. If I can do my duty as a Christian ought, if I can bring salvation to a world once wrought, if I can spread the message as the master taught, then my living will not be in vain.” Amen.