As you know, this weekend we are observing our national holiday honoring the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

What you may not know is that Dr. King is officially one of the “holy men” on our Episcopal Church calendar of “saints.”

And if you were to go to Westminster Abbey in London, one of the major pilgrimage stops on our Anglican Communion, you would see his statue among the ten martyrs depicted above the door.

The biblical lessons we hear this morning are those chosen by our church for the feast day of Dr. King.

We hear echoes of Dr. King’s life in the reading from Genesis, wherein Joseph’s brothers plot to kill him because he is a “dreamer.”

Joseph, a son of Jacob, isn’t murdered but is sold into slavery.

We also hear echoes of Dr. King’s courage in the Letter to the Ephesians: “Be strong in the Lord…put on the whole armor of God so that you may be able…to stand firm.”

And we hear of Dr. King’s courageous commitment to confronting hate with love in the words of the Gospel of Luke:

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

Yet, I must admit to being intimidated by the idea of preaching about Martin Luther King.

This topic is big. How do we say enough? He changed the very fabric of America, and our ideas of race, caste and privilege.

And how do I – as a white male who has reaped the benefits of privilege my entire life – say anything at all about him?

First, by acknowledging this fact.

And, second, by asking that you consider my words with your own story, for all of us need to understand how our stories are intertwined with each other, and that is a central message of Dr. King.

Dr. King wrote this in a letter from his jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963; I was 10 years old. Here is what he said: “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.”¹

We must also ask, why do we speak of Dr. King in church?

This is a secular holiday and there are plenty of tributes to be heard elsewhere.

But I believe this is exactly the place to honor and speak of Dr. King.

In our effort to transform Doctor King into a national icon, we must also remember that he was first Reverend King, a Baptist pastor who was called out of his safe comfortable pulpit to be a leader of a movement that was bigger than himself.

Dr. King was first-and-foremost a man of deep faith – the same biblical faith of his enslaved black ancestors; the same biblical faith of abolitionists – white and black – who fought to end slavery; the same biblical faith of Christians and Jews who sang “We Shall Overcome” on the Selma Alabama Bridge.

Despite being beaten and bludgeoned, they got up and kept walking.

After that bloody day in Selma, Dr. King said this:

“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. That will be a day not of the white man, not of the black man. That will be the day of man as man.”²

That will be the day for all humanity.

We still yearn for this day he describes.

As I’ve thought about Dr. King this week, what occurs to me is that he reached people’s hearts not in the abstract, but in their daily life.

He touched people not just in the sweeping arc of history, but reached people in the small, everyday cuts and bruises that racial injustice wrought.

He brought into sharp relief the fundamental injustice of people being forced to sit in the back of a bus, or refused a cup of coffee at lunch counter, because of the color their skin.

He never lost sight of the wide economic gap between blacks and whites in America that we still live with, or as he termed it, “Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society.”³

But he also made the big picture real on the ground so it could be seen by ordinary people everywhere.


There were grace-filled moments when the better angels of our nature overcame our worst demons.

These battles were hard won and came at a cost, and still come at a cost.

I came of age in California during the time of civil rights and Martin Luther King. And while I knew of this – my parents made certain that my sister and I would know – I did not witness any of this firsthand.
As some of you know, not long ago, I served a church in the South, in the Charlottesville, Virginia, for seven years.

I had the privilege of hearing the stories of people in my parish who lived through this time in South. They were young then and now in their older years, they are still committed to this cause. I want to share two of their stories with you today.

Elizabeth Gleason – she goes by “Betz,” it’s a Southern thing. Betz grew up in Charlottesville and went to all-white schools.

She came of age in the era when drinking fountains had signs that said “white” and “colored.”

Her Episcopal church, an old established parish in the heart of Charlottesville, did not have a “whites only” sign, but it may as well have.

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court handed up its momentous decision in Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, ordering the desegregation of public schools. At the time, Betz was a young mom with little kids.

The response throughout the South was to close the public schools rather than allow black children to sit next to white children in the classroom. Charlottesville closed its the public schools rather than letting black children in.

And then the churches – the white churches – allowed the school system to teach only white children in their church buildings.

So, Betz, a young mother, and her husband, and her friends, quit their church. They wanted no part of this injustice wrought by their church.

But one church – St. Paul’s Memorial Episcopal Church, the church where I would serve decades later – said no to this unjust scheme.

The rector, the Rev. Ted Evans, declared publicly that racial segregation was evil, and his church would not cooperate with this sinful effort to educate only white children. His bishop would eventually force him out but he stood his ground.

Betz and other young parents from other churches joined his church, and their they have stayed ever since.

Betz went on to be elected to the City Council and mayor. She and her friends dedicated their lives to ending segregation in their town.

The other story I want tell you is about Mildred Robinson, another long-time member of St. Paul’s Memorial.

Mildred is now an accomplished law professor at the University of Virginia School of Law. She teaches tax law. She is African American.

Her father was the superintendent of the black schools in the Southern town where she grew up. When the schools were ordered integrated, he lost his job. If the schools were going to have black children, then the whites made sure they ran things.

Mildred’s family paid a stiff price for a few inches of racial progress.
What does all this mean to us now?
I believe it means everything.
The stories of Betz and Mildred, and the example of Dr. King, remind me that the fight for justice and equality is more than about politics in Washington or down the street at the state Capitol.

Change comes in the everyday moments, on the bus, at the lunch counter, in schools, and in the pews. Change comes in our homes, in our attitudes, and in our hearts. Change comes when ordinary people do extraordinary things.

The work of Dr. King, and so many others whose names are lost to the mists of time, is still with us.

It has been noted by many that the most racially segregated day of the week in America is Sunday in churches.

But let me point out something about Trinity Cathedral: this is the most racially diverse congregation in the Episcopal Diocese of Northern California, bar none, and I can safely say that having worshipped inside 40 of our 68 churches in this diocese.

We should honor and celebrate our diversity at this cathedral, and strive for more. But that diversity is not enough.

We must ask, do we notice each other? Do we cross the boundaries of our pews to truly see each other?

Do we have the ears to hear each other’s stories, even if those stories make are painful and make us uncomfortable?

Do we have the courage to truly connect with each other across whatever human-made walls get in our way? Can we walk alongside each other in the burdens we carry?

And then, can each of us bring change into this hurting, wounded and fearful world, each in our own extraordinary way? This is soul work – our soul work.

I end here, with Dr. King, and offer you his words of his deep and abiding faith:

“The God whom we worship is not a weak and incompetent God. He is able to beat back gigantic waves of opposition and to bring low prodigious mountains of evil. The ringing testimony of the Christian faith is that God is able.”

It is up to us to keep the dream alive.

AMEN

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1 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963, fourth paragraph.
3 *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, twelfth paragraph.
4 https://www.keepinspiring.me/martin-luther-king-jr-quotes/