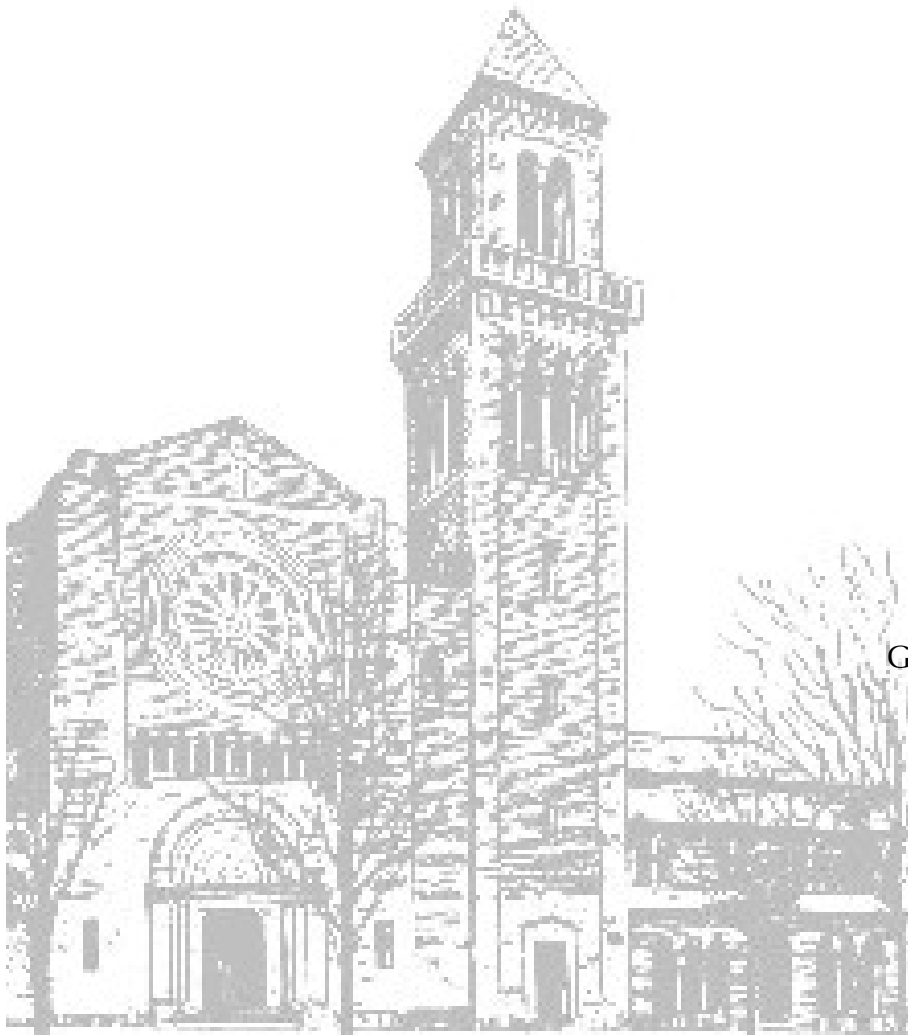


# “King for a Day”

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**To the reader:** This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

# “King for a Day”

## STORY

Nine years old, when is it better to be a boy than when you are nine? And in a new home, in a new town, with a new church. Actually, it was a very old church. Unlike the Unitarian church where I was very small, a place built while I was there, my new church was built in 1817, the first actual church built to be Unitarian, in downtown Baltimore.

What is more exciting than exploring the back rooms and basements and attics of an old building? Wonderful, strange and creepy things were everywhere, and in those days parents abandoned young boys to such places without a thought for safety, so my friends and I ran freely amid the dusty remains of a century and a half. Books, boxes, and odd objects in dark warrens beneath and attics above. It was wonderful.

And we had a guide, an adult who served as our Fagin, showing us the hidden corners and forgotten parts of the vast edifice. One afternoon, while the grownups drank coffee and basked in their boring conversation about sermons, he took us up to the organ loft, and then showed us a doorway that went even higher. It led to the attic, but on the way up there was another door that opened into another large room, which was behind the organ itself, with three very long benches that could accommodate at least thirty people. Barely below the ceiling and completely enclosed, there was no window connecting it and the main auditorium, only a large louvered panel like a Venetian blind.

The man told us this was the slave gallery. This was Baltimore after all, and some of these religious liberals owned slaves who drove their carriages for them. During the service they sat up here, able to hear the service and its liberal message. Then they would go and get the Phaetons and surreys and buggies and obsequiously drive their enlightened owners home where they would doubtless eat fine meals served by these same folks as they discussed the sermon over dinner.

\* \* \* \* \*

READING: from “Restoring Lost Values” - Martin Luther King, Detroit, 1954

“There is something wrong with our world, something fundamentally and basically wrong. I don't think we have to look too far to see that. I'm sure that most of you would agree with me in making that assertion. ... The trouble isn't so much that we don't know enough, but it's as if we aren't good enough. The trouble isn't so much that our scientific genius lags behind, but our moral genius lags behind. The great problem facing modern man is that the means by which we live have outdistanced the spiritual ends for which we live. ... The real problem is that through our scientific genius we've made of the world a neighborhood, but through our moral and spiritual genius we've failed to make of it a brotherhood. ... Within the heart and the souls of men. That is the real basis of our problem.”

\* \* \* \* \*

SCRIPTURE: *Isaiah 42: 1-4*

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching."

\* \* \* \* \*

SERMON

Race and religion are deeply entangled in my mind and heart, as my story reveals. They are also deeply entangled in American history. Southern Baptists got that way because they seceded from their northern cousins over the issue. So did Presbyterians and Methodists. Quakers all but vanished in the south because of their abolitionist views.

I am not here to talk about religion and race, though. I am here to ask a much more personal question. As we approach the King holiday, a man for whom racial justice and religious integrity were inseparable, I want to know who Dr. King is to you? Most probably, he is a hero, an icon, a saintly figure. As noble as this is, it verges on the idolatrous. That's why I decided to speak on this now, because all the official observances will be very solemn and dignified, and some of you will be away next weekend because of the holiday. So rather than prove our broadmindedness and liberalism by saying all sorts of noble thing about him, I want to do something different; dare I say something more like he would do.

I want you to be Dr. King for a Day. I remember a sentimental show years ago called "Queen for a Day," where women saddled with afflictions would literally compete for who was most needy and become queen for a day by garnering the most applause on a primitive meter the host used. That's the play on words, but that's as far as it goes. When I say become King for a Day, I mean try to see the world today through his eyes. If you were he, what would you see?

Progress, yes. There are more African-Americans in the middle class, and more in prominent public positions, including a presidential candidate. But that famous promissory note presented in 1963 is still unpaid in large measure. The percentage of those in our prisons who are African-American is almost inverse of their percentage in the country. Dr. King would notice that. HIV affects twice as many black Americans as white, even though there are four times as many whites as blacks. Dr. King would see that. The white flight that began in 1968 continues, so that today's schools are as segregated as those before 1954, only now we do it by district and not by school. Dr. King would see that too.

He would see that every problem we had in 1968 is still with us in 2008, including a long and costly war that, like Viet Nam, drains our coffers. He would remember that

the problem of race is deeper than laws and policies and programs and the persistence of prejudice. That is the surface, the symptoms, the tip of the iceberg. The disease of racism is far deeper and will require a cure that is more than a few pills.

That's where my story comes in. The slave gallery in that old Baltimore church may have been unused for years, but it was still there. It was part of the structure of the church, in its design. Racism is that way in our culture. America was designed with racism in it. The constitution was biased toward the south, giving those states higher populations by counting slaves but not letting them vote. It permitted the slave trade for almost 20 years. More important, though, it deferred the problem of slavery to the future, so that race became the issue that affected all other issues. You cannot find a national issue that was not shaped by or affected by racial issues. It was like a low grade fever that could be ignored now and then but would roar to life and erupt into The Civil War. Racism is like malaria; it can be treated but not cured, and the only way to treat it is constantly.

Now comes the really hard news. Racism affects black folk, but it is white folk's disease. A story I heard tells of a white man asking Malcolm X to tell him what to do about racism. Malcolm is supposed to have said, "Don't ask me. Racism is your problem, not mine." He's right, the problem of racism is our responsibility as white people; just as dealing with sexism is the responsibility of men and homophobia of straight people.

If you haven't already figured it out, this will not be easy or quick or simple. Racism is so embedded in our society that most of its effects are invisible to us, white people. Like that slave gallery, it up there but out of sight. Racism is so much a part of our history that even when we are not having bigoted thoughts we do racist things.

Like choosing where we live. This is perhaps the most racist act we all commit. We all want places that have good property values. Makes sense, until you ask why some areas have better values. Well, they have little polluting industry, little poverty, larger houses, lower density because those larger houses are on larger lots, and better parks and schools. That this excludes almost all majority black neighborhoods in the country cannot be coincidental. That's what I mean by racism being embedded in our society.

For any individual to make such a choice is perfectly sensible, rational, understandable. No sensible person who has a choice will impoverish him or herself on purpose. It must be consciously resisted. But that is costly.

When I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade I met Tony, a classmate who was bussed in. We got on pretty well. I was on the safety patrol. Remember the white belts and badges? There were no black kids on the patrol. I decided to recommend Tony. He got on. I felt great. Then, within a week or two, my teacher noticed that my desk was quite messy and had me suspended from the safety patrol. Coincidence? Maybe.

That's the nature of systemic racism. It is so pervasive you can't see it all the time, but it is part of the status quo that we all support in some way. To resist it has a cost, one that black people endure daily, but that we white people can avoid. Racism in America will end only when white people oppose the status quo that serves them and bear the cost of doing so. That sounds unfair, but there is no escaping the debt white

people have piled up. It is only a matter of which white people will pay – us or our children.

Sounds awfully grim. But the good news is that we can pay this bill and it won't destroy us. In fact, we shall all benefit, even if some of us must pay more than others. It's a little like taxes, in that those who have more give more because they can and, having benefited more, should: "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required." Our Bible-believing leaders might remember that before passing the next tax cut.

Part of the answer, for example, is truly equal funding for all school districts. And that means richer towns pay more and get less and poorer towns pay less and get more. "School competition" and "local control" are the new forms of "state's rights" from a century ago. *No child left behind* should mean making every school worthy of every child.

Part of the answer is reparations, yes, reparations for slavery and Jim Crow and Rosewood and Tulsa. People say this can't be done, and perhaps in a remedial sense it cannot. But we can save the future if not the past with universal college tuition for black children in the country (and also Native Americans). That means they get something whites do not, but fully educated people are the quinine of national racial health.

Part of the answer is quotas, yes, quotas, which I believe are the business equivalent of pro bono legal work, done for the public good. Two hundred years of bondage and one hundred years of apartheid do not end with a few laws and programs. That is like giving white people a head start on a marathon, apologizing for the mistake, but not correcting it. Tax credits for businesses that reach out to African-Americans through hiring, promotion, and contracting - or tax surcharges for those who don't - are the social equivalent of carbon credits and taxes.

Now, people protest that we are not responsible for what our ancestors did, but the burden of racism today is as unearned for those who descended from bondage and the American form of apartheid. The cost of racism is like the taxes and bills left behind by the deceased. That they are dead does not erase the debt, and it is our responsibility as their heirs.

There's a program here in town called Expect Equality. Good people are behind it, people I respect. I have taken part myself, but I have not promoted it. Why? Because I know that putting up a sign and a joining a committee is a band-aid and an aspirin. It feels better, but the disease is still there. When we, as a church, feel genuine unease with the disease of racism; when we, a 98% white congregation that says it believes in equality admit there is a problem because we are 98% white; when we, an historically open-minded church admit that maybe we have something to learn spiritually and morally from people of color and their experience; when racial equality is as central to our identity as spiritual equality; then we can put up this sign.

What will it take to get there? It will take "moral genius," the courage to live by our values not just have them, because it will be hard and costly. It will take making choices that defy the status quo, that do not 'make sense,' that will offend our fellow white people, even some of our own members.

I do know when we will be on the way. Some years ago, my son was in a school

where he was a minority. When we went to a music festival for the district (which was also mostly children of color) they all sang the national anthem of course, but they also sang "Lift Every Voice." They did not hand out the words any more than they hand out the words for the Star Spangled Banner. But my son (and his parents) knew the words. As far as he was concerned, they were his as much as anyone's. And they are. When we know the words because we believe they are ours, we will be on the way.