

Imitate Christ

The late spiritual writer Ed Hayes frequently reminded us that Jesus' original followers *imitated him* long before they worshiped him. ... they *imitated him* long before they worshiped him. I would dare say that one of the critical weaknesses of Christianity in the last 1700 years is that we may well worship Jesus (there is often a church on every other corner in our cities), but we haven't done a very good job in *imitating* Jesus. Another way of putting it: the reason Christianity hasn't seemed to be too effective in the past 1700 years is because, by and large, it hasn't been tried.

As we belatedly commemorate the Birthday Anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I'd like to reflect on two basic principles of our Faith that are addressed in our Scripture reading today and were central to Dr. King's life and ministry.

#1: In our Gospel today, Luke reveals Jesus as a prophet: God had a message for human society and Jesus was its herald. The message is that the Reign of God, the Realm of God is in plain sight – surrounding and penetrating every person... but we miss it. Jesus' mission – through bold speech and bold action – was to wake us to see that the world as God intended is bursting forth. Quoting Isaiah, Jesus stood in the midst of the Synagogue and proclaimed his inaugural address:

*The Spirit of God is upon me, ...has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, ...proclaim liberty to the captives, ...recovery of sight to the blind, ...let the oppressed go free and proclaim a year acceptable to God.*

Dr. Martin Luther King was a prophet of God, who through – bold speech and bold action – proclaimed the dream, Christ's dream of the world as a beloved community where we are all – black and white, sister and brother – children of the one God. Martin, as a baptized disciple of Jesus, was the living Christ in the world... which brings us to the second basic teaching, which is revealed in our Second Reading from Paul to the Corinthians.

#2: In Catholic practice, priests alone have often been referred to as "other Christs." I certainly presume that priests can be other Christs ... but they become such not on the day of their Ordination, but on the day of their Baptism. One of the greatest damages of our hierarchical church to this day is that many of us have no idea or sense that *through baptism we are all molded into the body of the risen Christ!* Through our Baptism, our Confirmation and our day-to-day commitment to the risen Jesus, we all become other Christs, called to carry on the ministry of Jesus: bringing glad tidings to the poor, liberating captives, giving sight to the blind, freeing the oppressed!

If we all are not willing to roll up our sleeves and jump in and help... God's word, God's dream will never be fulfilled. It's up to us!

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In our Second Reading, Paul of Tarsus in his address to the Corinthians – and us – clearly understood this and reminded the community that since *no one person* can carry on Christ's ministry by herself or himself, we must *constantly join together* with the other "gifted" people Paul spoke about last week. Each of us plays a part; no one's contribution is insignificant. Christ's Body isn't whole if any gift – no matter how small – is left out. Dr. King didn't birth the Civil Rights Movement alone, but it was "we shall overcome:" sisters and brothers, black and white joining together and becoming the risen Body of Christ.

This message of Jesus, this message of Paul of Tarsus, this witness of Dr. King is so critical and so needed at this moment in our Nation's history.

Sisters and brothers, as we, as a Nation, celebrate the Birthday Anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – who would have been 90 on Tuesday, January 15 – if there is any remaining myth that Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement and the enactment of powerful Civil Rights Legislation in the 1960s solved the racism issue in this Country, the recent events in our nation have blown that myth completely out of the water.

At this moment, we are a deeply divided, wounded and traumatized Nation. Among a long list of shocking words and actions we have seen our Government rip families apart in the belief that brown- skinned refugees, fleeing persecution and death, are "infestations," in the words of our President.

I mention the color of these families because it is no accident that white families have not been separated, nor have immigrants from countries "like Norway," to quote Pres. Trump, been labeled as originating from countries of excrement.

Brothers and sisters, events at our border and the vile, cruel and racist rhetoric that led to them reveal a nation still entrenched in racism, a deep sickness at the core of America; callousness, a soul disease...for as Father Bryan Massengale puts it so well: "Racism is a soul sickness, a profound warping of the human spirit that enables human beings to be indifferent to their darker sisters and brothers."

Race in America has become a spiritual cataract that limits our vision and determines who is beyond the reach of our concern or interest. Racism today is revealed not only in verbal taunts and slurs, and not only in the scourge of killings of unarmed black men. Racism today is revealed in a lack of empathy and profound indifference, lack of concern and social callousness of the majority of society to the horrors and scandals that are unfolding in our midst.

Dr. King declared that his mission and the goal of the Civil Rights Movement was to "redeem the soul of America." He was engaged in something far deeper than simply promoting change in segregation laws and social practices – as important as these strategies were. The ultimate goal of Dr. King was the moral and spiritual transformation of the nation. King believed that without *deep soul work*, without a revolution in values, the racism of the past would simply mutate and take different forms and experiences... and how right he was! Thus: where we are today!

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The current crisis in America urgently challenges us, as people of faith, to ask the questions:

Who are we as a Nation?

What do we really stand for?

Will we have the courage to expose the demon of racism with in and demand that we live according to the dream of Jesus?

Our future is a nation depends upon our willingness to face and answer such questions. Martin deeply believed in the power of grace to change hearts of stone, into hearts of flesh.

And so, sisters and brothers, this critical time in America is not a time to give up in despair but to join with sisters and brothers of goodwill as people of hope who proclaim ultimately that we will follow a God who changes things:

water into wine...,

bread into his body...,

old ways into new life...,

January cold into hope for Spring!

Ultimately: we shall overcome! So let's keep walking our talk, and behold: light will overcome darkness; love will overcome hate!

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In a work published after his death, Dr. King gave a final testimony to the struggles and promises of creating in genuinely integrated society:

There is no easy way to create a world where people can live together, where each has one's own home, job and house and where all children receive as much education as their minds can absorb. But if such a world is created in our lifetime, it will be done in the United States by black and white people of good will.... It will be done by rejecting the racism, materialism and violence that has characterized Western civilization and especially by working toward a world of brotherhood and sisterhood, cooperation and peace.

Sisters and brothers, Jesus' original followers imitated Jesus long before they worshiped

Him; let us do the same!

Amen!