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 Arlington Street Church
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Doing Justice to Dr. King

Dr. King heard an inner voice. Jesus was speaking to him.

I believe it.

Even as a fourth generation Unitarian, now Unitarian Universalist, having very little truck with the paranormal, and who in almost any other circumstances would say, stress, exhaustion, *psychosis* . . . I believe it. Jesus spoke to Dr. King.

Everything he believed, the guiding light of his words and actions as a civil rights giant, was rooted in his faith in Jesus. There was nothing abstract about their relationship. On January 27th, 1956, “soon after agreeing to become the spokesman for the Montgomery bus boycott, he began receiving nightly phone calls from people threatening to kill his family. Unable to sleep and tormented by visions of his little girl suffering, Dr. King broke down one night.” As David J. Garrow writes in *Bearing the Cross*, it was at that moment, that, standing in his kitchen, Dr. King heard a voice inside himself, telling him to carry on. As he told it, “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you.... I heard the voice of Jesus, saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.”¹

Three nights later, Dr. King was out at a meeting at the church. Coretta, two-month-old Yoki, and parishioner Mary Lucy Williams were at home when “an explosion rocked the house, filling the front room with smoke and shattered glass.” Those watching Dr. King as he learned the news “were surprised by his calm and steady demeanor. Looking back on it, [Dr.] King agreed that he had 'accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My religious experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it.’”²

1 David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 58

2 David J. Garrow, *op cit*, pp. 59-60

Dr. King's faith was the foundation of his capacity for his extraordinary life's work. Every moment of the suffering he and his family and followers endured was transmuted in the fire of that faith. *Through faith*, their suffering became vision, tenacity, love.

While a relationship to Jesus may and may not be at the heart of your faith or mine, I invite you to join me in a deep consideration and articulation of the faith that sustains us, a faith strong enough to get us through sleepless nights and waking nightmares. How do you complete the sentence that begins, "I believe," and, most importantly, how does each of us live that faith?

There is a dynamic tension in Dr. King's faith, as there was in that of Jesus. History professor and author William H. Chafe³ names that tension as an embrace:

on one hand, of the Christian gospel of unconditional love;
and, on the other hand, of the Jewish scriptures' prophetic insistence on righteous justice.

We don't do Dr. King justice when we speak only of his work for mediation and reconciliation. He said this succinctly: "As much as I deplore violence, there is one evil that is worse than violence, and that's cowardice."⁴ To his followers, Dr. King said, "It is not enough for us to talk about love. There is another side called justice. . . . Standing beside love is always justice. Not only are we using the tools of persuasion; we [have] to use the tools of coercion."

The tension between unconditional love and righteous justice is the subject of an extraordinary exchange of correspondence in May of 1959. A Mr. Lewis Happ of Brooklyn wrote to Dr. King about his hurt and frustration at reading stories of racist incidents in Montgomery: "I begin to read ... that some injustice [has] been done to my [people,]" he wrote, "and there is absolutely nothing done about it but singing and praying and reading scripture lessons. It just makes my heart ache to see us drift back into slavery again."⁵ Here, in part, is Dr. King's response:

Dear Mr. Happ:

3 William H. Chafe is a history professor at Duke University and author of *Private Lives/Public Consequences: Personality and Politics in Modern America*. I am deeply indebted to him for this sermon.

4 Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, p. 274

5 For the original language of Mr. Happ's and Dr. King's letters, please see mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/.../Vol5/25May1959_ToLewisHapp.pdf

I can well understand how you feel concerning the situation here in the South. But let me assure you that we are not merely singing and praying about our problems. We are engaged in positive action every day to solve [them]. I don't think any leader of the South has ever suggested singing and praying as a substitute for positive action, and this is certainly why we are suffering and being brutalized as leaders. If we were passively and silently accepting evil, we would not be facing the condemnation that we are facing today from [diehards] in the white community.

“As you probably know, I believe firmly in nonviolence as a way to solve our problem. And I further believe that love must be our guiding ideal. But this does not imply that we are to do nothing. It simply means that we must stand up and resist the system of segregation and all of the injustices [that] come our way, and at the same time refuse to hate our opponents and use violence against them. For I still believe with Jesus that 'He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.'⁶ And he who hates does as much harm to himself as to the person that he hates.”

In his 1963 *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, written to moderate white clergymen who were pleading with him for patience and a calming of the waters, Dr. King wrote, “You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community [that] has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creating of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word 'tension.' I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.”

And then he rises to the moment of reckoning. “I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers,” he writes. “First, I must confess that over the past few years, I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace, which is the absence of tension, to a positive peace, which is the presence of justice.... Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much

6 Cf. Matthew 26:52 (Dr. King's footnote)

more bewildering than outright rejection.”⁷

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I preached last Sunday morning about integrity – integrity as living undivided, and without regret. Dr. King's integrity – his profound answer to the call of his faith – compelled him to forge inextricable links among racial justice, economic justice, and peace. He said, “We are engaged in a social revolution. The evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism are all tied together, and you can't really get rid of one without getting rid of the others.” Calling for “basic structural changes in the architecture of American society,” he insisted that a just society required “a radical redistribution of economic and political power.” Taking a position against the Vietnam War was costly in every way, but his faith demanded it.

Compelled by his religious convictions to the life of a prophet, Dr. King was hounded, mercilessly, by J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, which sent him tapes they had made, illegally documenting his sexual infidelities, along with a letter suggesting he commit suicide. Mitigating the depression that threatened to overtake him, though, was the inner voice he had heard in the kitchen, “a voice . . . that sent him to Memphis to advance the cause of [the] striking sanitation workers, ... part of the Poor People's Campaign to which he was ... devoted . . . a voice that gave him the courage to continue standing up for [love *and* justice]” all the way home.⁸

“Well, I don't know what will happen now.” This is Dr. King on April 3rd, 1968, speaking on the evening before his assassination. “We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop.

“And I don't mind.

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do G*d's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!”

Beloved spiritual companions, let us honor Dr. King.

7 For the complete text of Dr. King *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, 4/16/63, please see http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

8 William H Chafe, *op cit*

May ours, too, be a faith articulated with our lives.

May ours, too, be a faith that embraces both unconditional love and righteous justice,
with justice always standing beside love.

May ours, too, be a faith that transmutes suffering into vision, tenacity, and love.