

Hollow, Hollow, Hollow

A Sermon Delivered by

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Instead of speaking about the intellectual odyssey of Dr. King today, I would like to talk in practical terms. I will speak in pastoral terms. The occasion of his birth and the holiday in his memory will produce—as they should—words of polish both erudite and refined. There is certainly a temptation to deliver soaring rhetoric today. If ever there was an American hero in my lifetime it was Martin Luther King, Jr. He is also a Christian hero. A Baptist clergyman who reminded people that foundationally he would always be a Baptist preacher, I am tempted to spend some time talking about his theological journey.

We would do well to know something of that journey and how he struggled to come to terms with a religious upbringing that taught him the words of Jesus, to love God and neighbor, but could not give him a strategy for social change. So we would do well to read his own words in an essay included in his book of sermons, *Strength to Love*, where he traced his journey from fundamentalist notions of God, sin and the world to liberal notions only to find classical liberalism deficient and naïve with regard to the social and moral parameters of existence; and how his encounter with the ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr convinced him that a term like ‘sin’ still had relevancy in a world enamored with and by Freud and Marx; we would benefit by an analysis that let us see into King’s philosophy and theology—a philosophy and theology that was world aware, for he benefited by his relationship with the Hebraic scholar, Abraham Joshua Heschel and the study of the prophets; he drew from the well of the Jewish mystic and theologian, Martin Buber, particularly from his book *Ich and Du, I and Thou*. Dr. King was a Christian intellectual in pursuit of truth and that pursuit, that odyssey, led him to consider truth from whatever source he found it in. His eventual solution to the ethic of Jesus, to love one’s neighbor, within the racist and dehumanizing context of American bigotry, was the result of his encounter with the Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi. It was from Gandhi that King took the notion of *satyagraha*, soul force and non-violent resistance to evil.

Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged from a Christian piety forged within the furnace of Baptist religious life and worship. But he was not confined there. He grew. His mind was pliable and effervescent. His intellect sparkled with energy and light. That is something we should certainly take from him today in this age when Christians sometimes confuse education and ideology. His name lent its own strength to him, I am sure, for he is named after the Great Reformer, Martin Luther, who, in his own age and time, confronted the hypocrisy and immorality of institutional evil. Martin Luther King, Jr. called a nation to repentance just as Martin Luther had called the medieval church to repentance. He more than lived up to his name!

I would love to lend poetic voice to the company of poets who will speak out today and tomorrow in homage to this hero. To do so is to risk a certain humiliation, however, for when it comes to poetic speech and the rendering of rhetoric in powerful rhythms and chords of melodic harmony punctuated by the syncopation of truth-telling and prophetic annunciation, well...King has no peers. He was simply a marvel of rhetorical flourish with a voice like God's.

Something I do not feel tempted to do is wrap him in red, white, and blue and place him in a pantheon of American heroes. I do not mean by this that he is not a hero. As I have already stated, he is a great American hero. What I mean by this is that I do not desire that he be domesticated or defanged and this is what becoming a hero can do. It was done to the prophets long ago. First they get ridiculed and eventually killed for their words. Once they are dead and no longer a threat, they are made heroes or part of sacred writ and their ideas nullified. So, for example, with Jesus we can read where he said, [Matthew 19] "23 ... "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." But we will either ignore that teaching or do our best to define ourselves out of the teaching. Jesus pronounced woes and rendered severe appraisals of the institutions around him. This eventually got him killed. Liberals have domesticated and defanged him, making him a guru of love and peppermint self-help aphorisms. Conservatives have taken his woes as a license to judge and condemn the world, while ignoring his passion for justice. As for Dr. King, America can make a federal holiday, rename streets and put up statues but what it must do and ought to do is fulfill its sacred documents and the promises of the constitution to all of its citizens. That is far more difficult than casting a bronze statue or hero worship. Indeed, we might say that much of our culture's approach to life is hollow, hollow, hollow. It is illusory. Our culture will promise freedom, individuality and fame. These are hollow

promises and at the end of the day, we end up with a generation that is addicted, indebted and enslaved. Hollow rhetoric and empty promises will not save us. Or as the preacher King said, “The cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. To be a Christian one must take up [the] cross, with all of its difficulties...and carry it until that very cross leaves its marks upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way which only comes through suffering.” That is a far distance from Christianity-as-entertainment or institutional petrification. Better to sing Holy, Holy, Holy than live in the land of hollow, hollow, hollow.

Now that I have pursued much of what I said I had not intended to pursue, let me get to the point of talking pastorally with you. I will do so by asking you a question. Where in your life is the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. realized? I’ll ask it another way. Where is the ideal of the beloved community that Martin dreamed of, where is that in your life?

What if you could be part of a community whose foundational principle was love, not hate? What if you could participate in a community of faith that consistently held out for the greater good in all people and rigorously resisted the denial of complete human and civil rights to all people? What if you could invest your time, the blessings of your work and finance, the gift of your talent and skill to a community that sought to grapple with life’s urgent issues and square them with the Gospel of Christ? Would that excite you? Wouldn’t you want to be a part of that?

The dream of Dr. King will be and is fulfilled at practical levels of engagement with the world. Soaring rhetoric is fine. It has its place. But Martin was a pastor and a preacher and saw within the context of a church the very things he dedicated his life to. It was a place of dignity, rooted in the love and peace of Christ; a place of respect for one’s elders and nurturing hope for its children and young people. This is such a place. We are white and black here. Young and old. Gay and straight. Male and female. We have in this past year provided a space for children to be educated and up and reading by the time they enter First Grade. We have provided a safe place for youth. We have given money in aid to the world and to promote interfaith dialogue in our region. This can be and often is the beloved community. Today in honor of the Dreamer and in dedication to the Lord he served, may we give ourselves to the ministry of this place and do our best by it. Now is the time. Now. Today, not another day later. Give your life, your talent and your time and let us create in this moment, in this generation a place called the beloved community. In a

hollow and heartless world, such a place will be holy and in turn, shall hallow the world around it. Amen. ✠