

The Culture of Violence and the Beloved Community

a sermon by Tom F. Driver
for the community-wide celebration of the birthday of
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,
at the Mt. Olivet Baptist Church,
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Tonight we honor The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., who led the way to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Tomorrow Barack Obama, America's first African-American President will be sworn in for the second time. There is a story about when Barack Obama met with Congressman John Lewis just before Obama's first swearing-in. Congressman Lewis, you know, is an heroic veteran of the Civil Rights Movement who was beaten nearly to death at the march across the bridge at Selma, Alabama, earlier in 1965. Led by King and others, the marchers were headed for the state capital in Montgomery to gain voting rights for black citizens. Forty-four years later John Lewis was huddled with Barack Obama in the corner of a room just before the inauguration. The president-elect wrote something on Lewis's inaugural program and then walked away. Lewis read the words: "Because of you," Barack Obama."

To honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is, at the same time, to honor John Lewis and countless others who have put themselves on the line in defense of racial equality in America. Our meeting here tonight is also an opportunity to move closer to what Dr. King called, time and again, "**the beloved community.**" That blessed reality toward which he strove, and for which he gave his life, begins with a combination of diversity and respect. We have in this room more diversity than we usually have in our places of worship. How much respect do we have?

If you are able, please stand.... I'd like us to increase our awareness of the other people who are here. In a moment I am going to ask you to turn slowly all the way around in a complete circle. If the initial of your first name is in the first half of the alphabet, turn clockwise, toward your right. If it is in the last part of the alphabet, turn counter-clockwise, toward your left. As you slowly turn all the way around, please take note of people you do not know. As you do this, please ask yourself, "How much respect do I have in my heart for people who are different from me?".... Please turn...

Thank you. Please be seated.

I.

As grateful as I am for the invitation to speak here this evening, the occasion is also humbling. Martin Luther King, Jr. was, in his lifetime, and remains in his legacy, a better man than America deserves. We cannot live up to him. And yet we must try.

Shakespeare famously wrote that some are born to greatness, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. Of Dr. King we can say that he fits all three descriptions. He was born into a high-achieving family, his father a preacher of such power and renown, his mother of such character and determination, that the benefit of his parental genes is clear. The junior MLK was himself full of ambition to achieve. Excelling in studies at Morehouse College, at Crozer Theological Seminary, and at Boston University, he prepared himself for the greatness that lay ahead of him even though he could not see it coming. But in the end, it was history and the soul of the Black Church that thrust greatness upon him. We can say that when the moment of great responsibility and great challenge came, he was ready. He was ready but America was not. America was not ready then and it is not ready now.

My sense of humility before tonight's task has been increased by my re-reading of the speech that Dr. King gave at The Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, in 1967. It happens that I was present that night. Before giving the speech he met at Union Theological Seminary with leaders of an organization called Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam, which sponsored the event. I was then teaching and living at Union Seminary. It happened that my wife Anne Barstow and I walked across the street to the church right behind Dr. King and those who were escorting him. Everyone knew it was to be a major speech. Everyone knew it would be controversial both within the ranks of the Civil Rights Movement and beyond.

On that momentous night at the Riverside Church, King was introduced by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, another great prophetic voice. Heschel was a founder of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam. Like King, he had come to the Riverside Church to denounce the Vietnam War.

The collaboration between Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel was an important moment in American history. Two years before the Riverside Church event, Heschel had gone to Alabama to join with King and the others in that voting rights march across the bridge at Selma that I mentioned at the beginning. That's when John Lewis was given a fractured skull. Rabbi Heschel said that when he marched across that bridge he felt that his "legs were praying." In a service of worship held before the march began, Rabbi Heschel had read

Psalm 27, which was read [here](#) earlier this evening:

*Teach me how to live, O Lord.
Lead me along the right path,
for my enemies are waiting for me.*

....

*... they accuse me of things I've never done;
with every breath they threaten me with violence.
Yet I am confident I will see the Lord's goodness
while I am here in the land of the living.*

(Psalm 17:11-13, NLT)

Two years after that Bloody Sunday, King and Heschel stood together again, this time in opposition to the Vietnam War. America's militarism was causing, then as now, unnecessary suffering for everyone, especially America's people of color.

That night King said that "The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit..." With sorrow in his voice, he said that his own government was "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." He pointed to "the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism." "I am convinced," he said, "that ... we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values."

But America did not. Exactly one year to the day after giving that speech in a city beside the Hudson River, Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot dead by a gunman in a city beside the Mississippi. On that horrible day I was in Paris, France, and saw the news in the headline of a newspaper while walking along the street. I bought the paper, nearly collapsed in grief, and leaned against a tree to keep from falling. If King had lived, he would now be 84, just three years younger than myself. But, he was struck down at the age of 39, far younger than my children are now.

America's greatest man of peace, its most dedicated and most effective leader of nonviolent action, was himself the victim of guns, violence and hatred. It is now 45 years later. We meet together to honor his birthday, which has become a national holiday. There is much for us to celebrate; but it must be done with a clear-eyed combination of hope and realism. The danger in celebrating the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is that, if we are not careful, hero worship can lull us -- as indeed it has lulled so many in America -- into false optimism, the avoidance of the moral dilemmas of our own time.

In the stage play by Bertolt Brecht about Gallileo, the pioneering scientist, someone

says, wanting to honor him, "Unhappy the land that has no hero;" and Gallileo himself replies, "No. Happy the land that needs no hero."

One widespread delusion in America is that the Civil Rights Movement has succeeded, thanks to Dr. King and Barack Obama, and has become a post-racial society. It is true that we have twice elected an African-American to be President of the United States. But that does not mean that we have finished dealing with race in America. It just means we have a new opportunity to try.

The delusion that we are post-racial, and the delusion that our strength as a nation lies in the military, have much in common. The first provides a cover to hide the realities of white privilege that still pervade American society. The second hides the reality of America's imperial behavior throughout the world and our neglect of social justice at home.

II.

This year, the slaughter of the innocents came before Christmas. It came in Newtown, Connecticut, on the 14th of December. It has led to a national discussion about allowing ordinary people to buy weapons of war. On the day I write this sermon, the lead headline in The New York Times says, "GUN SALES SURGE AS NATION WEIGHS TOUGHER LIMITS." Why are we doing this? Why is this behavior not insane?

This year, the number of airstrikes by drones that target and kill people from the air by remote control is growing at a rate many times faster than before. Why are Americans not discussing this? When the President of the United States sits in the oval office and personally decides whom to kill, including at least one American citizen, why is this not an insane situation?

When we become terrorists in order to abolish terrorism, why is this not seen as madness?

Let me tell you. We do not see the absurdity of it because we are like drunks and junkies who truly believe that to get our of their difficulties they need more of what got them into trouble in the first place. So we have a man who has enormous influence upon Congress telling the nation that ""the only way to stop a bad man with a gun is a good man with a gun"

If the head of the National Rifle Association, who said that, had studied the Hebrew Torah or the Christian scriptures he would know that even good people do bad things. The laws of Torah and the morality of Jesus all aim to protect us, first of all, from ourselves. The

greatest dangers we ever face are those that arise from inside.

Which brings me to my text. It is famous words of Jesus that are often quoted but seldom heeded. Matthew 26:52. A crowd of men armed with clubs and swords came to arrest Jesus. Hot-headed Peter drew his own sword and cut off one man's ear. But Jesus said:

“Put away your sword. Those who use the sword will die by the sword.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. had learned the truth of that from the black experience in America. And he knew, as Jesus and the Hebrew prophets did, that the sword is always a weapon of injustice. That is why he spoke of militarism as one of the “giant triplets,” going hand in hand with racism and materialism. These add up to what we are beginning to recognize as a culture of violence. It is so much in the news right now, as part of the national debate about gun control, that I will not take time to list all its features. What I want us to see is that our culture of violence is the expression of a certain spirit.

Saint Paul wrote that our real opponents are not flesh and blood but principalities and powers. That is to say, our true enemies are not people but spirits, beliefs, practices, ideologies, or whatever you wish to call them that want to capture our minds and destroy our moral core. My seminary teacher, the theologian Paul Tillich, used to call that spirit of destruction “demonic.” I, along with some others today, call it the spirit of domination.

Our culture – our violent culture – is driven by the will to dominate. We know this spirit because we can often feel it within ourselves. At the individual level, it's the smug satisfaction we feel when we get things done our way. This same spirit of domination is writ large in militarism. Imbued with the spirit of domination, the primary purpose of the Pentagon is not to defend our shores but to have dominance over the world. That is why we have more than 700 military bases outside of our borders. Likewise the purpose of our very large corporations and banks is to dominate the world's market places. American racism is born of the will to dominate – that is, to maintain white supremacy.. Sexism insures male dominance. Extreme wealth is not just good fortune and is certainly not due to divine providence. It is to allow the economically strong to wield power over the poor, who are economically weak. The problems we face are not technical. They are diseases of the spirit.

And that is where Martin Luther King can help us. For over against that spirit of domination, one of whose faces is Jim Crow, Dr. King lifted up the **beloved community**.

III.

Like Moses, Martin Luther King looked forward to a Promised Land. He called it the **Beloved Community**. The end we seek, he wrote, “is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform....”

King was no sentimentalist. For him, love was not just a feeling. It was decision and action. That is why he chose the path of nonviolence, which is a greater challenge than war and requires more discipline. “The aftermath of nonviolence,” he said, “is the creation of the **beloved community**, so that when the battle’s over, a new relationship comes into being between the oppressed and the oppressor. ... the way of non-violence leads to redemption and the creation of the beloved community.”

If we are to understand what is meant by “beloved community,” we must see that it has to do with the kind of unity that can be found in the presence of diversity. The Beloved Community is not made up of people who look alike, think alike, sound alike, or worship alike. It is made up of people who have decided to love one another not in spite of but because of their differences. And the first step in the direction of such love is respect.

Here again, the messages of Martin Luther King and Abraham Heschel converge. “My first task in every encounter,” said Heschel, “is to comprehend the personhood of the human being I face, to sense the kinship of being human, the solidarity of being.”

Today we have a choice between the culture of violence and the Beloved Community. The culture of violence wants to put a gun in every hand and see the world as a place of deadly competition in the spirit of domination. The Beloved Community wants to enlist us all in the Divine project of forging justice and making peace. As we cannot have peace without justice, so we cannot make justice with war.

The Beloved Community is not a place. It is people marching without guns.

Let the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., serve to enlist us in that nonviolent army to which God has been calling us since the beginning of the world.

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