

**Sermon Notes of
Assistant Pastor Ed Stonick's Sermon on July 26, 2020:**

"Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – Servant of God, Minister of Jesus Christ"

[In today's sermon, Assistant Pastor Ed Stonick on Zoom shows that Dr. King gave us a wonderful God inspired example of how to deal with today's racial and social unrest.]

Introduction:

- The message today is going to be about an historical figure Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who is back in the news today.
- We're going to talk about his ministry and how much his ministry and the social justice he brought about were totally based on his Christian faith.

- When Ed was in high school, back in the 60s, a popular Western movie came out, with the title "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," referring to the three main characters in the film.
- Now, the term, the good, the bad, and the ugly, has come to be used to describe situations with various and contrasting aspects and possibilities.
- We certainly are facing such situations today, with the social unrest in many cities, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had the most profound effects on everyday life in the US and in many other countries.

- Another era with similar issues and troubles that we're witnessing today was the civil rights movement during the 1960s.
- It had been a very difficult time for black people, particularly in the South.
- The Emancipation Proclamation freed all slaves in 1863, but another whole century passed before blacks began to be treated equally under the law and by their fellow man.

- Many lived in poverty and oppression.
- But in a few short years, the civil rights movement dramatically turned things around.
- This was one of the most profound and one of the best changes in our society.

Role of the Church:

- One of the most important reasons why the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was so successful both morally and practically was that it was led almost entirely by people with a strong Christian sensibility.
- The most notable of these leaders was, of course, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
- Christians, led by Dr. King, were largely responsible for bringing attention to the abuses and injustices imposed on black Americans.
- Christians, who were not involved with the movement initially, soon supported it and demanded justice after witnessing some of the attacks on the marchers.
- The marchers were terribly treated. They were sprayed with powerful hoses, hit over the head with batons and attacked by dogs.

- Now, you may have noticed recently on the news that congressman John Lewis just passed away and he was involved in these marches with Dr. King.
- While most Americans are well aware of the sacrifices Martin Luther King Jr. made and his incredible progress, few realize to what extent he was inspired and guided by his Christian faith.
- Before he became a civil activist, he was a devoted minister.
- His father and grandfather were ministers, as well.
- He followed in their footsteps.
- He never abandoned his faith, but rather, he drew on it as a source of courage in challenging times.

Role of Church, Black Church, His Faith:

- The key to understanding this figure, says historian Carter Woodson, is his faith:

"He was a churchman from beginning to end."

"Martin Luther King's human rights work was deeply motivated by what he drew from his personal history and commitment as a Christian leader. This source can be seen in how he conceived of the struggle to contribute to a more just world, and as a spiritual reservoir which gave strength and resilience to his work."

"Dive even briefly into Martin Luther King Jr.'s work as a civil activist, and it's impossible to deny the importance of his faith in both his personal life and his most famous accomplishments."

"But if King was a churchman, it's important to note that he was a specific type of churchman: We miss King if we don't highlight the theological significance of the black church in America."

"White churches sprang up throughout American history in the pattern of the great European cathedrals and denominations from which they were transplanted. But black churches, while related to those European frameworks, began doing work beyond what those traditional denominations were doing. The church was central to black Americans. The white churches were mainly concerned with righteousness, but the black church also emphasized justice."

- Historian Nicole Tinson said,

"Historically the black church has been a place for creating individual, systemic, and political change within the black community. From its emergence in the late 18th century to its present day relevance, the black church has and will always serve as a safe haven for African Americans, a place to worship God together, and a place where we are motivated to rebuild our communities. You can guarantee that on Sunday there will be a large population of blacks attending church."

- Another historian noted, "In the face of a condition that told blacks they were only worthy of their labor power, black churches came along and affirmed that there was a mode of life far beyond the wounding that came along with black existence in America."

Dr. King's background:

- This is the tradition that produced Dr. King. And it's the same tradition that produced other civil rights leaders, like Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, John Lewis.
- Shortly after graduating from Morehouse College, King enrolled at the Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania.
- He hoped to become a "rational minister" who would use his theological knowledge and wisdom as not only a "force for ideas," but also as the spark behind social protest.
- A few years after he completed seminary, Dr. King was called to Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.
- Now interestingly, he was planning to go Atlanta and pastor there, but he prayed about the situation and God lead him to Montgomery, Alabama.
- He was elected to the Montgomery Improvement Association.
- At this time, he proclaimed, "We must keep God in the forefront. Let us be Christian in all our actions."
- Then, the famed Montgomery Public Bus Boycott soon followed after this.
- You may recall the history.
- Blacks by law had to sit in the back of the bus, but if the bus became full, they were required to give up their seat to a white person.
- Rosa Parks, a devote Christian, one day, when she was especially tired from a long day of work, refused to give up her seat.
- She was arrested, but the outrage soon spread through the black community, and a bus boycott was organized.
- And Dr. King became the leader, whether he wanted to be or not.
- Many Christians believe he was placed in this position by divine inspiration.
- This wasn't easy to do. His home was bombed, he received threatening phone calls in the middle of the night.
- It was very frightening for Dr. King and some of the other leaders.

Role of Prayer:

- In thinking about Martin Luther King's Christianity, we would again miss something significant to his human rights advocacy if we didn't consider how his spiritual practice was engaged in that work.
- The role that prayer played in Martin Luther King's work is captured in a recollection from his wife Coretta.

She said, "Prayer was a wellspring of strength and inspiration during the Civil Rights Movement. Throughout the movement, we prayed for greater human understanding. We prayed for the safety of our compatriots in the freedom struggle. We prayed for victory in our nonviolent protests, for brotherhood and

sisterhood among people of all races, for reconciliation and the fulfillment of the Beloved Community.

“For my husband, Martin Luther King, Jr., prayer was a daily source of courage and strength that gave him the ability to carry on in even the darkest hours of our struggle. I remember one very difficult day when he came home bone-weary from the stress that came with his leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In the middle of that night, he was awakened by a threatening and abusive phone call, one of many we received throughout the movement. On this particular occasion, however, Martin had had enough.

“After the call, he got up from bed and made himself some coffee. He began to worry about his family, and all of the burdens that came with our movement weighed heavily on his soul. With his head in his hands, Martin bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud to God: ‘Lord, I am taking a stand for what I believe is right. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I can’t face it alone.’

“Later he told me, ‘At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear a voice saying: ‘Stand up for righteousness; stand up for truth; and God will be at our side forever.’ When Martin stood up from the table, he was imbued with a new sense of confidence, and he was ready to face anything.”

Courage to Call Out His Fellow Christians:

- At one point during the bus boycott, Dr. King was arrested and was placed in jail for a while.
- From the Birmingham jail, he wrote this dramatic letter.
- While MLK clearly held and practiced a strong faith, he wasn't afraid to call out his fellow Christians when necessary.
- In fact, he was deeply concerned about the Christian community.
- He felt that it was his duty as a faithful man to make every effort to get all Christian Churches on the right path.

- While imprisoned in Birmingham for leading a nonviolent protest, King responded by a now famous letter to certain of his fellow Christian ministers who had criticized him for going too fast, expecting social change to happen overnight.
- Dr. King’s letter from a Birmingham prison to fellow Christian clergymen gives insight to the role his religious commitment played in generating and sustaining his commitment to work for justice.

- Further, the people from whom he came, the African Americans who struggled against centuries of slavery and racism, drew from deep spiritual and human reservoirs in the long and bitter journey from slavery, through oppression and segregation, before the civil rights reforms were won.

- In setting out why he was in Birmingham he explicitly drew on a 'prophetic role'.
- He said, "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eight century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns ... so I am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my home town."
- Here is King's own language: "One may well ask: 'How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?' The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws."

"Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that 'an unjust law is no law at all.'" And in clarifying the difference, he turns to Thomas Aquinas: "Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law." To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: "An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law."

- Sadly, far too many churches initially resisted Dr. King's call. For example, when he was invited to speak at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, many churches not only opposed this visit — they began to rescind financial support for the seminary.
- Thankfully, attitudes have since changed, and many Christians now realize the wisdom in King's words.
- Today, he serves as a huge source of inspiration within the Church, where he is regarded as a chief example of what it means to act on one's faith in the face of challenge.
- Christianity is a wonderful experience of fellowship and joy, but it's also a very practical religion.

I Have a Dream Speech:

- Although he built his reputation during the Montgomery boycott and while jailed in Birmingham, Martin Luther King Jr. is perhaps best known for a remarkable speech that included the iconic words, "I have a dream."
- His speech was delivered to hundreds of thousands of peaceful supporters during the 1963 March on Washington DC, the "I Have a Dream" speech served as the ultimate manifesto for both King and the movement he inspired.
- Although he prepared extensively for this remarkable speech, King diverged considerably from his initial plans, instead prompting renewed crowd enthusiasm with partially improvised descriptions of his overarching dream.
- He was obviously moved by the Holy Spirit.

- As always, Christianity was a major theme in King's speech.
- He described a world in which people of many different backgrounds could work together, attend school together, and yes, pray together.
- The churches in the South, back then were totally segregated.
- He mentioned "God's children" on multiple occasions and shared his fervent desire that people of many backgrounds could band together in pursuing his dream:

Dr. King said, "Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing."

"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; 'and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.'

"And when this happens, and when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Nonviolence:

- Another hallmark of Dr. King's work was his emphasis on non-violence.
- King felt that Jesus could serve as the ultimate inspiration behind a violence-free movement inspired purely by love.
- In referencing Jesus' use of the line "Love your enemies,"

King explained, "If you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption.

"First I should say that I am still convinced that the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom and human dignity is nonviolent resistance. I am convinced that this is a powerful method. It disarms the opponent, it exposes his moral defenses, it weakens his morale and at the same time it works on his conscience, and he just doesn't know how to deal with it.

"What does Jesus reveals in the rhetoric of the Sermon on the Mount? 'Love your enemies'; 'Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you'; 'If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and give him the other.'

Even more striking is his word of forgiveness from the cross is that God's way is the way of peace, nonviolence and compassion."

- Now, as a Christian, King knew in his bones that reacting to oppression with violence would only exacerbate the tensions within society.
- He sums up this principle in one of his best-known sermons: "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."
- Martin Luther King thought deeply about the best methods to use to overcome the injustices facing African Americans.
- Modern notions of love cannot really bear the weight of what King was talking about.
- Much different than impassioned affection or sentimentalism that defines love today, the love Dr. King preached and practiced was lifted straight from the New Testament's teachings on *agape*, the Greek word used for the love of God, which King defines as "an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return."
- *Agape* is understanding, creative redemptive good will for all men.
- It is an overflowing love that seeks nothing in return.
- Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart.
- And when one rises to love on this level, he loves every man, not because he likes him but because God loves him.
- Loving your neighbor means loving a Samaritan; it means loving a Gentile, if you're a Jew.
- Loving your neighbor means loving people that don't love you back, because God commands love as a means by which the world is completely turned upside down.
- And that's exactly what Dr. King did. He turned society upside down back then.

Love:

- As to love Dr. King explains: "It says it is possible to struggle passionately and unrelentingly against an unjust system and yet not stoop to hatred in the process. The love ethic can stand at the center of a nonviolent movement."
- Dr. King's dream was fundamentally Christian.
- His commitment to radical love had everything to do with his commitment to Jesus of Nazareth, and his dream had everything to do with community, with a "we" consciousness that included poor and working people around the world, not just black people.
- Philosopher Cornell West has described Dr. King as an "extremist of love."
- King's notion of love really was revolutionary in that it threatened to undo the social stratifications that undergird our modern world.
- "In that sense," says West, "he turned the world on its head."

- King's philosophy of love wasn't just intellectual; there were practical reasons to practice *agape* love.
- For one thing, he argues, returning hate for hate "only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe."
- Every act of hatred, even when it comes from the oppressed, adds to "the tragic midnight of injustice."
- If the goal was, as King believed, to truly create a new world of reconciled humanity, then the path of hatred would never lead there.

"If we retaliate with hate and bitterness," he said, "the new age will be nothing but a duplication of the old age."

"For the person who hates, the beautiful becomes ugly and the ugly becomes beautiful. For the person who hates, the good becomes bad and the bad becomes good. For the person who hates, the true becomes false and the false becomes true. That's what hate does. You can't see right. The symbol of objectivity is lost. Hate destroys the very structure of the personality of the hater."

- As King often said, hate is too great a burden to bear, which is why he "decided to stick with love." Sadly, today we see so much division and so much hate.
- It simply does blind people. It turns them away from reality.
- "Yes, Jesus," he preached a few short months before his assassination, "I want to be on your side, not for any selfish reason. I want to be on your side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition, but I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world."

Nobel Peace Prize Speech:

- In his speech in 1964 accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, his words speak of the power of faith.

"I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.

"I still believe that mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed ... I still believe that we shall overcome.

"This faith can give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom."

Final Sermon:

- The night before his assassination, King delivered what was to become his final sermon – popularly titled "I've Been to the Mountaintop."
- Dr. King's address at Mason Temple, the Church of God in Christ headquarters, is compelling for all the usual reasons — King's compassion, his fiery call for justice, his eloquent summation of his frustration with the unfeeling powers that be.
- There were fears that evening. Threats had been made.
- He spoke of how happy he was to live in the time of the civil rights movement, having survived an earlier assassination attempt, and having seen the victories that had been won.
- How happy he was to have lived long enough to undertake the work he felt he had to do and had now completed. In his last words he was a Moses to his people.

He said, "Well, I don't know what will happen to me now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter what happens to 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 God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain top. 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. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

- King's eyes were squarely fixed on his goal.
- As James M. Washington put it in the introduction of a collection of King's speeches, "He dared to dream of a better day in the midst of the nightmare that surrounded him."
- To dream of a day when America would finally own up to her past sins was staggeringly audacious.
- We might ask, in the face of death, why did he continue to practice and preach the principles of nonviolence?
- Why did he continue to speak out for love, in the name of love, to a nation overflowing with hatred?
- Why speak about understanding one's enemies, and working for reconciliation, and striving for the common good when he knew that kind of speech came with such a high cost?
- There is still a voice crying out in terms that echo across the generations, saying: Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you, that you may be the children of your Father which is in Heaven.

Practical results:

- Now, what were some of the practical results of Dr. King's life and work?
- Landmark pieces of legislation designed to address the injustices were the fruits of the civil rights movement.
- The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color or national origin in employment and public accommodation.
- The Voting Rights Act of 1965 protected the right of all citizens to vote.
- The Immigration and Nationality Services Act of 1965 opened immigration to the United States to non-Europeans and the Fair Housing Act of 1965 banned discrimination in the sale and rental of private housing.
- Each item of legislation addressed a real and deep held injustice, most that were particularly experienced by African Americans.
- The Christian faith helped bring about justice for minorities, for all Americans. The Christian faith continues to help Americans to continue living out Dr. King's vision.
- Now, the big difference between the times of the civil rights movement and our current distress is the role of Christian religion.
- It made all the difference in the 1960s, because there were many church goers back then, but it is glaringly absent in today's society.
- Let's hope that will be some kind of revival in our country.
- What we need now more than ever is this same spirit among Americans – a spirit of love, a spirit of compassion for fellow man, not hatred and division that we see so powerfully exhibited today.

Conclusion:

- I'd like to conclude by quoting from an article entitle "Are You A Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Kind Of Christian?" It's been written by Paul Raushenbush.
- It poses some important questions for Christians today, and highlights some of Dr. King's most treasured words.
- Our denomination would come up very well according to these standards.

"Does your faith affirm the fundamental dignity and worth of all people and reject any claims of superiority, ether explicit or implicit, based on identities including race, religion, sexuality, gender, class or nationality?"

Dr. King said: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.'"

"Does your faith promote non-violence, and believe that war is only to be used as a last choice or not at all? Does your faith confront and reject teaching that might cause anyone to act with violence or incite rage or hatred towards others?"

Dr. King said these words when accepting the Nobel Peace Prize:
 "Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts. Blacks of the United States, following the people of India, have demonstrated that nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation."

"Does your faith promote social justice and equality as well as individual charity as both integral parts of the Gospel?"

"A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highways."

"True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. Is your faith grounded first and foremost in love, and do you believe that love, not dogma or judgment, is the defining characteristic of God?"

Dr. King said: "Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, 'Love your enemies.'" It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. That's why Jesus says, 'Love your enemies.' Because if you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption."

"Does your faith further interfaith cooperation and empower your ability to feel compassion for the suffering of those who are different from you? Does it acknowledge the wider interconnected responsibility of the human family instead of caring only about and for those in your immediate group?"

Dr. King said: "And when this happens, and when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

- An air force sergeant, Landon R. Scaife, recently summarized Dr. King's life and legacy. He wrote:

"Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had a great vision in which we all can exist in a society where race is not an issue in how people were treated or in how

they were allowed to live their lives. A majority of us here in America have been educated on Dr. King, know of his famous 'I Have a Dream' speech or have observed the federal holiday to honor his legacy.

"Dr. King was very instrumental in the way he led the movement by placing his life on the line for freedom and justice every day in hopes of civil rights reform. King played a part in many well-known civil rights movements in the 1950s and 1960s.

"No battle is ever perfect or complete in the war for civil rights, but the efforts of King and those like him have changed the country and the world for the better in many noticeable ways. His vision has made the world a more equal place, and it has helped to ensure that minorities have a voice."

- In reading this material, Ed has learned many things about Dr. King that he hadn't know before.
- One can dramatically see that Dr. King was lead and inspired by our great God and our Savior Jesus Christ.

(Closing prayer)