

## “To Overcome Racial Injustice”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Tomorrow, as I hope we are all aware, is a national holiday, Martin Luther King Jr. Day. This holiday is a time to remember an incredible man. But if we only remember Martin Luther King Jr. on this holiday, and neglect to attend to the cause he gave his life for, I believe we would dishonor both the holiday and the man whose name it bears. So today I want to lift up the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—a man I believe demonstrated levels of dedication, commitment and integrity that were, and are, exceptional. And I also intend to honor him by speaking directly to the cause that he is probably best known for—overcoming racial injustice. King’s accomplishments related to overcoming racial injustice were, and are, important and significant. Yet in spite of all that was accomplished as a result of his efforts, racial injustice continues to be a cancer that inflicts our culture and our country. To honor King then, I believe today we need to ask ourselves a question. What is it that we are called to do to overcome racial injustice?

While preparing for this sermon this question was continually on my mind. At some point in the process I realized that the first thing I needed to do was acknowledge my position in this culture and in life. As a white male I began my life with more advantages and opportunities than the vast majority of people of color in this country. As an older white male, who was given advantages and opportunities that I didn’t earn, I have a level of privilege and power that is greater than I deserve. And because I am white and male, my personal experiences with racial injustice are extremely limited and almost entirely about witnessing racial injustice towards others. From this awareness I asked myself how, with any level of integrity, I could possibly speak to this topic and be taken seriously. The answer that came to me was crystal clear. I realized that I need to step back. Figuratively speaking, I need to move to the back of the bus. I need to let the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and those, who today, are continuing the work of overcoming racial injustice, speak to this topic. So this morning I will be sharing with you the thoughts and perspectives of two people who know much more than I ever will on this topic. Those two people are the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Ruby Sales, who is a civil rights activist, a theologian, and the founder of The Spirit House Project. I have chosen the words of these two people of color because they have both been identified as “legendary civil rights activists.” And both share a common theological foundation for their work.

What is that theological foundation? We heard it earlier in our responsive reading. Let’s hear again King’s words.

What is needed is the realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.

There are three key words in this statement, power, love and justice. It seems to me that for much of this country’s history, the dominant value has been power. Often that power has been reckless and abusive towards people of color and other marginalized

groups. As a Baptist minister King looked to the Bible for moral and spiritual guidance. In Biblical verses he found again and again connections between these three words. Connections that are reflected in this reading.

Because of King's civil rights work many people might think that of these three words justice was paramount. I would propose however that for King love was number one. To support my claim let us consider these two quotes by King. First, "Love is the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality." And second, "When I speak of love, I am speaking of that force which all the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life." While justice was what King worked to achieve, love was consistently his guiding light. It was his guiding light even when he and those he was speaking for were being belittled, berated and even beaten and killed.

King's commitment and dedication to the moral principle that all people are worthy of and deserve love signifies to me the level of King's integrity. The significance that love had for King is apparent even in the approach he practiced and advocated for when seeking to overcome racial injustice, specifically nonviolence. His commitment to nonviolence was at odds with some other leaders of the time who advocated any means possible, including violence, to address racial injustice. Again I quote King. "Nonviolence is absolute commitment to the way of love. Love is not emotional bash; it is not empty sentimentalism. It is the active outpouring of one's whole being into the being of another."

I want us to take a moment here to contemplate what King is not only asserting here, but what he is inviting us to do—to love in a manner and to a degree that allows for the outpouring of our whole being into the being of another. He isn't suggesting here that we do this only with the people we are closest to or with those who share our views and values. He is telling us we need to love—in this way and to this level—even those we consider to be our enemies. His own words can say it much better than I possibly could. He said: "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend." And further: "He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us, and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies." The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. based his life's meaning, purpose and work, first and foremost on love. And it was from this unwavering moral value that he sought to overcome racial injustice.

Today, Ruby Sales is one of many who continue the work to overcome racial injustice. For those of you who may be unaware of her and her work, I offer this brief history. Like The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ruby grew up in the south attending an exclusively black church. In March of 1965, Sales, who was just 17 years old, participated in the Selma to Montgomery marches. In August of that same year she also participated in a demonstration in Lowndes County, Alabama. For doing so she was jailed for 6 days along with numerous other demonstrators. Shortly after being released another member of the group took a shotgun blast that was meant to kill Sales. The person who took the blast was Jonathan Daniels, a white Episcopal seminarian. The incident traumatized Sales to the point that she found it nearly impossible to speak for the next several months. Eventually the trauma subsided and she re-engaged in the work of overcoming racial injustice. In 1994, decades after the traumatic incident in Lowndes County, she entered Episcopal Divinity School, the successor school to the

one Jonathan Daniels had been a seminarian in when he gave his life to save hers. She graduated in 1988 with a Master of Divinity degree.

So now, let's hear, in Ruby's words, some about the tenets of the religious tradition she was raised in.

When you look at black spirituals, you hear a theology and a philosophy of nonviolence, and so this was an essential part of black folk religion. It was not a retaliatory religion. It was a religion predicated on right relations and love and nonviolence.

Notice the echos here of what we heard previously from the writings and speeches of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

And like King, Sales believes that love and justice are intricately connected and cannot be separated. In a recent interview with Krista Tippett for the radio program *On Being*, Sales made the following statement.

I became involved in the Southern freedom movement not merely because I was angry about injustice, but because I love the idea of justice. So it's where you begin your conversation. ...most people begin their conversation with "I hate this" — but they never talk about what it is they love. And so I think that we have to begin to have a conversation that incorporates a vision of love with a vision of outrage. And I don't see those things as being over and against each other... — you can't talk about injustice without talking about suffering. But the reason why I want to have justice is because I love everybody in my heart. And if I didn't have that feeling, that sense, then there would be no struggle.

I know that I feel outrage at the level of racial prejudice, racial discrimination, and racially motivated violence that is so evident in our country today. And sometimes my outrage takes me into the clutches of hate—not just hate of the racial injustice I see, but also feelings of hate toward those who perpetrate such racial injustice. But my experience with racial injustice is minuscule compared to what Sales and King experienced personally every day. And in spite of their experiences, both found it within themselves to love everybody. Here is how King talked about his commitment to love. "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear."

Honestly, I have not yet developed the ability to love everyone in the way and to the degree that Sales and King describe. I still carry the burden of hate. It would seem that, from what these two people say, the burden of hate I carry hinders my efforts at overcoming racial injustice, or for that matter, any injustice based on prejudice. So while I love justice, my periodic struggles with hate prevent me from making the positive difference I am capable of. From the perspective that both King and Sales hold, it is evident to me that I have considerable work to do on myself in order to further the cause of justice. It is the work of transferring feelings of hate into feelings of love.

Initially I thought of this as an impossible task, one I could never accomplish. As I listened further to the interview between Sales and Tippett though, I found a ray of hope when Sales said; "Always, there is a tension between liberation and oppression, between justice and injustice, between love and hate." I know that I have not yet

reached the point where I am capable of feeling love instead of hate in all cases with all people. And it is possible that I may never achieve that lofty goal. It is clear to me though that I must not give up on the goal because justice is so important.

The work of overcoming racial injustice clearly is not yet complete. Tomorrow is a day that is set aside specifically for continuing the work that needs to be done. Some of the work is in the community, the state and the nation. Some of that work is within ourselves. So with love in our hearts and justice on our minds, may we go forth and use our power to further the dream that King spoke of so eloquently in his "I Have a Dream" speech. He told us: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'"

Blessed be and amen.