

“Considering MLK’s Life of Intention”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Tomorrow is a national holiday, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. The bill to create this holiday was signed on November 2nd, 1983 by President Ronald Reagan. Prior to the bill reaching his desk, President Reagan had opposed the creation of this holiday citing cost concerns. It was only after both the U.S. House and Senate passed the bill with veto-proof margins that he decided to sign it. The first Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday was observed on January 20, 1986. Nearly 36 years after that first MLK holiday, his legacy lives on. And not only does his legacy live on, so do some of the problematic issues that he worked so hard to overcome. Today, in honor of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and in support of the causes he gave his life for, I want to speak about his life intention. I want to speak about his life intention and how he lived in a manner that made his intention clear.

As I begin, I want to say that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a very gifted writer and an eloquent speaker. His abilities as a writer and speaker are such that I think the best way to convey at least a portion of his life’s intention is to use his own words. So this morning I will be sharing multiple quotes with you from various sermons and speeches he gave. I hope that as I share his words, I am able to do so in a way that lifts up not only his message but also his purpose. I believe it is important to lift up his purpose because at least one particular aspect of that purpose is under serious attack today. I will speak to that later.

As we begin to consider some of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s intentions in living, it would be beneficial to explore what he thought made a person’s life meaningful. Two quotes by him give us some clues. Here is the first. “There is nothing more tragic than to find an individual bogged down in the length of life, devoid of depth.” The second is more pointed. “The quality, not the longevity, of one’s life is what is important.” Rev. Dr. King was intent on living a life of depth and quality. And what, in his opinion, makes for a life of depth and quality? Here is what he would say to that question. “An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.” Rev. Dr. King didn’t focus his energies on individualistic concerns. Instead he embraced and prophetically spoke about and acted for the “broader concerns of all humanity.”

The following quote provides an indication of how strongly his focus on the “broader concerns of all humanity” were. “If physical death is the price that I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from the permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive.” Many people tend to think that Rev. Dr. King’s focus and efforts were primarily, if not exclusively, intended to benefit of “the negro.” Negro was the word he used to refer to people whose skin color was dark and whose ancestors came here from the African continent. In actuality, his focus and his actions were intended to benefit all humanity, irrespective of skin color, gender, age, religious persuasion, where a person’s ancestors came from or where a person lived. His intention was to save us all from enslavement to beliefs that prevent us from being able to love as fully and completely as we have the capacity to do. He was concerned, and I believe rightly so, that all of us were in grave danger unless racist beliefs were replaced by the ability to love one another more fully. His concern led him to the view that non-violence was the only course for accomplishing the change that was, and still is, required. He made this very clear in the following statement. “It’s no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it’s nonviolence or nonexistence. That is where we are today.” The non-violence he advocated was grounded in two principles or values that were foundational to his life. Those were love and justice. Here is a quote that offers a glimpse into his views on non-violence. “At the center of non-violence stands the principle of love.”

And how did he come to hold such principles and values—principles and values that gave him both meaning and purpose in life? He came to hold these principles and values through the religious faith he was raised in—a religious faith he dedicated his life to professing to others. His “broader concerns of all humanity”

were inspired by what he found in the Bible. There he found scripture verses that spoke to the importance of love and justice.

Here are two scripture verses that he was very familiar with, so familiar that he could recite them by heart. The first of these two verses comes from the Book of Amos in the Hebrew Bible. Chapter 5, verse 24 states, “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Here is a quote that indicates how well Rev. Dr. King knew this verse. “No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” The second verse comes from the Gospel of John in what is often referred to as the New Testament. In John 13:34 it is written that Jesus told his disciples. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another.” These verses and others like them were foundational to the principles and values of love and justice which Rev. Dr. King professed. Love and justice were key elements of his writings, his sermons, his actions and every aspect of his life. Love and justice were essential aspects of his life of intention.

Through the course of Rev. Dr. King’s life, and even to this day, the example he set furthered the causes of love and justice that he held dear. It is because of the life of intention he lived that tomorrow we will celebrate a holiday that bears his name. I am very glad we have such a holiday. I am glad not because I get a day off from work but because it reminds me that the principles and values Rev. Dr. King lived by and promoted are not yet fulfilled. There remains a tremendous amount of work needed to further both love and justice. And that work needs to be done by me, by you, and by everyone who believes that love and justice matter and that more love and justice are needed in the world today.

Now I want to return to the particular purpose of Rev. Dr. King’s life that is under attack today. There are a myriad of issues and causes where the principles of love and justice are needed and can be brought to bear. Rev. Dr. King focused considerable time and attention during his lifetime on making it possible for people of color to vote—to cast a ballot and have that ballot counted and respected just the same as anyone else’s ballot. Rev. Dr. King once stated that; “The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by human beings for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison people because they are different from others.” And here is another example of his thoughts on the issue of voting.

“Give us the ballot, and we will no longer have to worry the federal government about our basic rights....

Give us the ballot (*Give us the ballot*), and we will transform the salient misdeeds of bloodthirsty mobs (*Yeah*) into the calculated good deeds of orderly citizens....

Give us the ballot (*Yeah*), and we will place judges on the benches of the South who will do justly and love mercy (*Yeah*), and we will place at the head of the southern states governors who will, who have felt not only the tang of the human, but the glow of the Divine.

Give us the ballot (*Yes*), and we will quietly and nonviolently, without rancor or bitterness, implement the Supreme Court’s decision of May seventeenth, 1954.” (*That’s right*)

Today there are growing threats to our democratic process of voting—threats both to the ability to cast a ballot, and to the assurance that one’s ballot will matter when the decision of who won an election is made. A recent article by the Brennan Center for Justice cites that in 2021 nineteen states enacted 33 laws that will make it harder for Americans to vote. The majority, if not all of these laws, will have more impact on people of color than on people who identify as white. The recently passed laws that make it harder to vote aren’t just limited to “the South.” The article points out that two states, Arkansas and Montana, passed four laws that will restrict the ability to vote.

I believe we would all agree that the ability to cast a vote is important. But there is something else that is just as important, and probably even more important, than being able to cast a ballot. What, you might ask, could that be. It is ensuring that when a ballot is cast, that, first, it will be counted and, second, that the outcome of the ballot count will determine who will be installed in the office the ballots were cast for. If a person’s ballot isn’t counted, or if the vote count doesn’t determine who will take office, then casting a ballot

becomes irrelevant. Some of the 33 laws that have been passed could be used to subvert the election process and negate the will of the electorate. On January 6, 2021, this country witnessed a violent attack on our nation's Capital Building. Some of these 33 laws are an attack not on a building but on the very foundation of our democratic form of government. As Unitarian Universalists we value the democratic process so highly that it is contained in the Fifth of our Seven Principles. That Principle states: "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large."

On the eve of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday then, I would encourage all of us to consider the life of intention that the Rev. Dr. King lived. Considering his life of intention is a good and appropriate initial step. It is by no means, however, the only step we should or need to take. If we respect the principles of love and justice that Rev. Dr. King lived by, if we believe in the Fifth Principle of our Unitarian Universalist Association, then we need to take subsequent steps. We need to take steps to ensure that everyone who has the right to vote, gets to vote—that all who have the right to vote and do vote, have their vote counted—that the vote count is fair and accurate—and that the count determines the outcome of the election. I believe that if Rev. Dr. King were alive today, he would be speaking passionately and eloquently on this issue. And he would be inviting us to join him in his efforts to protect both the right to vote and the process for determining who wins an election.

Tomorrow, we will honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as we celebrate the holiday that bears his name. In the days ahead, we can honor his life of intention by heeding his calls for love, for justice and for the right of every person to have an equal say in who gets elected. There is one last quote of Rev. Dr. King that I want to share with you before I end this sermon. I have not altered the pronouns of this quote to match the sensibilities of today. I would invite you, as I share his words, to replace "man" with "person" and "he" with "they." "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in the moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." As we face the challenges and controversies that are before us, may our words and actions be guided by the principles and values of love and justice, not for the few or the chosen, not for our own individualistic concerns, but for all humanity.

So may it be.