

“Martin Luther King and You”

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister
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The reading was King on creative maladjustment, a version of which is available [here](#).

Every day right now, even multiple times a day, we Americans are being presented with what Dorothy Parker might call a “fresh hell.” Our minds reel. [“America is off the tracks,”](#) says a newspaper headline, and I can’t disagree. One of my Facebook friends describes reading the daily news through clasped fingers, as though watching a horror movie.

Unlike a horror movie, what’s happening is real. The fear does not pass. (Nor should it.) The events of this past week reminded me of the first clear thought I had back when I saw the election results in the wee hours of November 9th. My thought was that a lot of people are going to die. I see this not an emotional reaction, but rather as a logical conclusion. A lot of people will die because of unchecked climate change. Because of increased geopolitical recklessness. Because of greater availability of guns. Because of increased hate crimes. Because millions of people, including people each of us knows and cares about, will lose life-saving health care.

And so, as someone who does not believe in hell – fresh or frozen – I am feeling obligated to speak out. I feel obligated to speak out about these death sentences that are in the process of being handed down. I feel obligated to speak out about the ethical and theological crisis that American society is going through, the crisis that makes all the other crises permissible. And on this Martin Luther King weekend, I feel it’s necessary to talk about how people of conscience are going to get through all this, and help get others through it.

One theological virus that has infected America since its beginnings as a colonized nation is this: the idea that some people are worthy of God’s love, and some people are not. Now, this is not a congregation where you will hear very much about God’s love. But those of us who gather within these walls are not immune to the brutal, global consequences of belief systems that divide the world into us and them, master and slave, the saved and the damned. There is a strong, religion-approved moralistic component of these continual horrors. The European colonizers viewed Native Americans as morally inferior savages; they counted African slaves as three-fifths human; they viewed women as property and blamed them for the fall of humankind from the Garden of Eden. This ethic of dominion and domination and white male

Christian supremacy is based on particular scriptural interpretations. It doesn't matter whether or not we in this room believe a word of those scriptures; the ethic of conquest is deeply embedded in America's DNA. And it is exceedingly adaptive, finding different groups to deem unworthy, so that they might be dominated and excluded, to the benefit of the powerful.

Much of what is wrong with our country can be summed up by the fact that the word "exclusive" has positive connotations here. It's considered an achievement, a sign of success, to leave people out and bar the door. And it's perfectly OK, in many theological traditions, to leave people out, in a variety of ways. Normally I wouldn't comment much on other people's theologies. But "live and let live" doesn't work when people are going to die.

Look at what's happening to health care. For the past six years, the United States has been on a path of greater inclusivity. Sick and healthy, poor and rich – more and more people had access to health insurance, and were covered. They weren't covered perfectly, and certainly not cheaply, but at least there was some protection against catastrophic expenses for more people than ever before. Who wouldn't want more of our fellow citizens to have access to life-saving care?

Well, a lot of people, it turns out. People with power, and people with warped ideas of freedom. People who think freedom from government rules and freedom from paying taxes they don't happen to like are more important than the freedom to be alive and healthy.

There is a pervasive and perverse Calvinistic streak in America, the idea that people deserve what happens to them in their lives – that the rich are worthy of the wealth they've accumulated, that the poor deserve to be poor. Rarely are the arguments logically consistent – "God wanted him to have all that money" is said in the same breath as "he earned it all himself." Which is it? Ultimately, it doesn't seem to matter – all are supposedly getting what they deserve; it was meant to happen that way. Never mind the entirely human-created systems that steer resources up rather than down.

Of course, this is hardly the view of all Christians – if you had a terrible disease and showed up under any of these three steeples along Hennepin Avenue, none of the priests and pastors we know over there would blame your health on your sins. But there are plenty of Americans buying into the mythology of meritocracy, whether it's an economic meritocracy or a health meritocracy. And tragically, this country, alone among industrialized democracies, is again about to give itself a pass on making sure the sick among us are cared for.

The theological damage goes further. You don't have to look for very long on the internet to find religious folks who glorify suffering, [who see sickness as a prime opportunity](#) to inspire good works and charity. Some even go so far as to say that a government that cares for its people is robbing individual citizens of opportunities to do good.

Now, in my job, I regularly see how suffering can lead to beautiful acts of service and compassion, both within this congregation and in the broader community. But here's the thing – we actually don't need to create more suffering to create more compassion. I can already offer you full-time opportunities just around here. We do not need to kick 30 million people off health insurance to create 30 million more opportunities for charity; we don't need 30 million more fund-raisers at the bowling alley or on GoFundMe because another cancer patient's family is about to lose their home. Generosity is a great thing, but in the words of Martin Luther King, "Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary." "Love your neighbor" is getting crumpled and tossed as we head back to a more corrupt system, one that funnels money from the bottom to the top by profiting off human sickness, enforcing misery, and shortening lives.

Theological questions about humanity inform our national life in many ways. Richard Leonard, a news director at a radio station in rural Iowa, [recently wrote in the New York Times](#) about the way in which fundamentally different outlooks on human nature are affecting our politics. He quoted [J.C. Watts](#), the former Republican congressman from Oklahoma, who is a Baptist minister. Watts had this to say on a visit to Iowa: "The difference between Republicans and Democrats is that Republicans believe people are fundamentally bad, while Democrats see people as fundamentally good.... We are born bad," Watts said, adding that children do not need to be taught to behave badly — they are born knowing how to do so. "We teach them how to be good," he said. "We become good by being reborn — born again."

Watts' sweeping statements certainly do not speak for all members of either party, but his point helps illuminate some of the big gaps we have in outlook in today's America. Viewing people as fundamentally bad helps explain why a very friendly family in Texas once advised me to bring a gun in my car while driving across the state, just a case; no one here in the more liberal Midwest has ever suggested such a thing. Perceived differences in human nature help explain why there are only a handful of gated communities in Minnesota, while there are thousands across the conservative south. Perceptions of people as inherently and hopelessly evil help explain why our country

has an astronomical incarceration rate. When people see others, and themselves, as fundamentally bad, and not to be trusted, fear becomes a centerpiece of daily life. And those who crave power love to take control when the populace lives in fear.

Fundamental disagreements about humanity are both a scientific problem and a theological one. The social sciences tell us that each of us is born with the capacity to love and the capacity to fight – we start off as a mostly blank slate that could go either way depending on what we're taught and how we're treated. On the theological side, humanists and Unitarian Universalists tend to reject any doctrine of original sin. Sin is not the main lens through which we filter our experiences, nor are sin and salvation seen as the central problems of human existence.

Yet another theological challenge facing our country is differing interpretations of how the world works and how things happen in it. More than a third of Americans think the earth was created 10,000 years ago. Three out of four believe in miracles, miracles of the kind you find in ancient stories, miracles that might perhaps cure you if you don't have health insurance.

The very fact that evolution and global warming are commonly referred to as "beliefs" speaks volumes. A couple of years ago, a Louisiana native was interviewed for [a New York Times video documentary](#). The coastal island he lives on is rapidly slipping under the Gulf of Mexico – [it's already 98 percent gone](#) – and scientists and state officials are trying to get everyone to move to higher ground. This man's response was to tell the scientists that they didn't know what they were talking about. "Only God's going to know when that island going to disappear," he said.

In one sense, he's right – no human being knows the exact day or hour that his island will vanish. So, in a small way, it is a mystery. But the ultimate outcome is no more mysterious than the age of the earth, or the warming of the planet, or the ways most illnesses are cured. The man is facing the heartbreaking loss of the only place he's ever called home. But it is very hard for a nation to create a shared reality when there is not basic agreement on how reality works.

I share all this not to depress you (though it may). And I don't share it to foster a sense of superiority (though it may do that as well). Nor do I share it in the hope that you will be motivated to take up arms against theological stances with which you disagree. If there's anything that history has shown us, or that daily news reports from the Middle East show us, it's that fighting over religious beliefs rarely goes well for anyone involved. Even skirmishes that take place on Internet comment threads end terribly. [As Jonathan Swift wrote way back in 1721](#), "Reasoning will never make a Man correct an ill

Opinion, which by Reasoning he never acquired.” If you didn’t think your way into it, you’re unlikely to think your way out of it. This is not at all to say that we shouldn’t express ourselves theologically or philosophically; on the contrary, there is great benefit in doing so, to clarify things for ourselves, and to serve as models for and to connect with those who might be similarly inclined, as we work together to keep the world from regressing. But changing people’s minds with facts or reason can be very hard to do.

I have several reasons for laying out some of our country’s theological conundrums before you today.

One reason is that, in turbulent times, whether that turbulence is personal or national, it’s helpful to name what’s going on. To hear someone say, *OK, yes, this is really happening, and yes, it’s really bad and yes, it’s really hard.*

The second reason I’m describing all this is because there’s work to be done, and any insights into the hurdles ahead or into the motivations of others is helpful.

And the third reason is that being aware of the beliefs of people outside our usual circles can help us clarify and firm up our own theological and philosophical foundations. Knowing our core commitments, knowing how we truly think about things like human nature and the importance of human flourishing and the way the world works – these can all help with decision-making, and can be a resource for our own resilience. There’s more than enough uncertainty at a time like this. It’s good to be grounded, both in your own mind and in the communities that give you strength.

And so these past couple of months, I’ve found my ministry taking me toward the question of “How are we to live our lives in the face of this new reality?” How we are to *be*? The actions we are going to take to resist are going to change as strategies develop. How will we keep our grounding, our center, our sense of self? How will we do so in the face of chaos, and risk, and events designed to distract us and get us questioning our sanity? How do we keep from falling into our own us/them dichotomies?

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s words have timeless value, and they seem especially relevant this January. He has much to teach us about the value of personal practice and personal conviction in the face of authoritarianism.

I think if Dr. King were able to join us here today (and I do wish I believed in miracles, because that would be so cool) – if he were here with us and fully aware of what’s happening on a national level, he would definitely encourage us toward

maladjustment. In fact, it's easy to hear King's views on creative maladjustment being echoed in our current national dialogue – you can hear it in the calls to avoid the normalization of all the abnormal things that are going on right now in our faltering democracy. So, let's honor King by continuing to be maladjusted, in all the right ways.

I think if Dr. King were able to join us here today, he would marvel at the achievements of the Affordable Care Act, and be alarmed by the threats to gut it. [Speaking in 1966 at a conference of physicians](#), King said this: "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and the most inhuman because it often results in physical death. I see no alternative to direct action and creative nonviolence to raise the conscience of the nation." Many of us have already begun to act on this, and many more actions are likely to be necessary.

I think if Dr. King were able to join us here today, he would encourage each of us to personally "armor up" for the struggle, to know and do what keeps us resilient and grounded. "All too many people," he said, "attempt to face the tensions of life with inadequate spiritual resources." And it's true; if you yourself are in need of care, you won't be as able to help others. Helping others was of paramount importance to Dr. King. For him, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" He saw serving others as the way to live creatively and meaningfully.

And finally, if Dr. King were here with us today, he would encourage us to lead with love. He saw love as "understanding, redemptive, creative good will for all." "Along with the insistence on nonviolence," he said, "goes the emphasis on love as the regulating ideal." Regardless of what's happening around us, Dr. King's words encourage to go high, for the sake of all: "Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer," King said, referring to Jesus, "the command to love one's enemy is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization." King was making a theological call, but also a practical one. Love often succeeds where reasoning fails.

Dr. King's comment came in [a sermon in 1957](#), amid increasing global tensions about nuclear war, but the survival of humanity is at even greater peril today. The fates of all people are as bound up as they have ever been. The nuclear weapons have only multiplied, the devastation of climate change is underway, and we can add terrorism and even superbugs to the worry list. With all that going on, it's very challenging for love to be the regulating ideal in our relations with our fellow humans and in our quest for justice.

But these times we find ourselves in require us to try. And so whenever we think of all the people who voted to end their own health care, let us first respond with love. When

we think of all the people who walk around viewing their fellow humans as fundamentally evil, let us first respond with love (and prove them wrong). When we think of the guy on the island in Louisiana who probably never got to take a science class in his entire life because of his circumstances, let us first respond with love. Because there's so much work to be done. Understanding, redemption, resistance, and justice must be done, with as much love as we can muster. Dr. King would want it no other way.