

Walking Together with Compassion

It is an honor to address you today on this jubilee memorial service for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I never anticipated such an invitation. So my dear friends on the planning committee and at Interfaith Tampa Bay, I thank you. We are indeed blessed by the active interreligious spirit in our community.

What can we say about the last 50 years since King's assassination? I put the matter this way: Violence cannot kill the Dream, but inaction can defer it. Our nation, King noted in his Dream speech, has yet to make good on the insufficient funds for cashing the check of equality. We say all persons are created equal, but we have yet to equalize privilege in our society. Too many are deprived of opportunity because of our inaction, and the inequity that results often follows the color of our skins.

Thus, let us be proud of the recent proclamation in St. Petersburg. Last Thursday, a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim stood before the majority woman City Council and its Black woman chair, and declared the Tuesday following the King holiday as National Day of Racial Healing. This is the second annual such day. The proclamation particularly focuses on local government using a racial equity lens in its ordinances, policies, practices, and governance. So, we're beginning a new movement of action, in which the City of St. Petersburg intends to lead where it can. All of us are called to personal and collective action for racial equity.

As our nation returned from World War II to engage a new era of peace, a transition to civil rights was unavoidable. Empires around the world had fallen. President Roosevelt had ended convict leasing at the beginning of the war to silence Nazi propaganda. President Truman ended Jim Crow in the military to conclude the war and secure victory. A Jew, a Christian and a Muslim entered the American stage to end racism publicly. Abraham Joshua Heschel, Malcom X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., individually and jointly rose from the particularity of their own religious neighborhoods to press forward on a new global vision. Before astronauts saw the oneness of Earth from outer space, these three each experienced the people of the world as one from traveling around it. They all arrived at understanding that a united world of peace is founded on compassion for all.

Compassion is a matter of course within the circle of our closest relationships, and it's easily forgettable when we walk out our front doors. For compassion to be realized in our city, we must walk together. As Dr. King said in his Dream speech, "many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny, and they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back."

Because we are indivisibly united in one common thread of life, the healing of those who suffer involves the healing of those who have the power to end the causes of the suffering. It is the case of the patient healing the doctor as the doctor cures the patient.

Abraham, Malcom and Martin understood that all humanity is one, and we deny our unity at our own peril. They worried about the Cold War leading to nuclear annihilation and, sad to say,

that worry has increased in our day because of the continued denial of our common humanity even after the Cold War is over.

For Martin Luther King Jr, this denial was unmistakably clear in Jim Crow segregation. Dr. King saw that racism does not exist on its own merits. Racism is not natural to the human being. At the 11th annual convention of SCLC, he questioned society itself:

“Now, when I say questioning the whole society, it means ultimately coming to see that the problem of racism, the problem of economic exploitation, and the problem of war are all tied together. These are the triple evils that are interrelated. ...

In other words, "Your whole structure must be changed." A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will "thingify" them and make them things. And therefore, they will exploit them and poor people generally economically. And a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments and everything else, and it will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together. What I'm saying today is that we must go from this convention and say, "America, you must be born again!"ⁱ

King had introduced the triple evil of racism, materialism and militarism earlier that year in a speech opposing the Vietnam War as a continuation of the imperial French project. That was exactly a year to the date before being shot down at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. He was assassinated for speaking to the American soul and laying bare the wound at the heart of our being a nation. That wound will continue to fester until we hear the cries and normalize the stories of those who suffer.

Florida's foundational history involves racism, exploitative profiteering, and state sanctioned violence. As a Spanish colony, Florida's mixed communities achieved sustainability but did not generate great wealth to export elsewhere. There was no gold here. But when the British acquired the two Florida colonies, they introduced chattel slavery and in twenty years were returning great profits to land barons. At the time of the Civil War, 3 ½% of the population owned nearly 44%ⁱⁱ of the population. Violence was the only way so few controlled so many. Although chattel slavery is gone, that ratio of inequity persists across most of our institutions.

Even today the presence of police is most felt in impoverished neighborhoods. Our criminal justice system punishes people based on the number of times police have had contact with them. There is clear line from who is policed to who is imprisoned. Yet prison is no solution to poverty. In fact, high incarceration rates lead to generational poverty, since half the children of the incarcerated end up being incarcerated themselves.

Exploitation continues in many ways. Poverty touches nearly 1 out of 2 Floridians. Almost a third of workers are paid minimum wage. It takes three minimum wage salaries to afford a home for the average family. Providing food and rent assistance is insufficient for establishing sustainable families. Children need a quality education delivered by teachers they trust to have their well-being in mind, but most children do not know how to trust teachers who do not look like them. And parents need jobs whose wages allow them to be at home at night helping their children with their studies. Living wages generate greater activity and revenue in the marketplace, but as a society we lack the stomach for making certain everyone is paid justly.

In recent months, Florida’s leaders have concluded that we can no longer afford to police our way out of poverty, and but they look to the market to find a solution rather than confront the issues of class and race which are the problem. They refuse to acknowledge that the market as it exists is part of the problem.

For Dr. King, the way forward is towards the Beloved Community where compassion and opportunity kiss each other, where peace and action journey together, where commerce and culture reveal the best of humanity. The Beloved Community is a city of compassion that hides no one in the shadows. It is a city that invites all to participate in making peace a felt-reality, not just an inward spiritual value.

A city of compassion is a city that intentionally engages the work of love of addressing the suffering within its communities. Compassion begins in listening. The word means to suffer together, and to do it together, means we listen to the voice of those who suffer and learn their story well, hearing it over and over again until we can tell it with our words such that they say, “By God, that is my story that you are telling!” Too much of what passes for compassion is a guilt offering for not listening. We “see” a problem, and being privileged with resources, we throw our solutions at it. We make a dent, perhaps, in the conditions of the suffering, but suffering itself must be heard to be healed. We must listen to the human cries of suffering as if they are our own cries to relieve suffering. We must bear suffering together and learn the insights that our neighbors have acquired through their experience.

Those who suffer hunger, homelessness, illness, and miseducation have stories we need to hear and learn if we really intend to share their suffering in its fullness and then address it with new unforeseen collective efforts. In a city of compassion, we walk together sharing our stories of hope and pain. That sharing will inspire the efforts which lead to opportunity for all and peace in all our streets. I dare say it will also lead to good commerce and a marketplace of well-being.

Only compassionate listening to those who are suffering can break the spell that luxury and willingness to use force have upon us. Racism is no mere set of personal prejudices. Racism is organized violence for materialistic ends. It rejects the indivisibility and interconnectedness of all life and matter. It is a lie. [So too, extreme materialism is a lie, and organized violence is a lie.] Racism can only be met by compassion honoring each other and organizing for our general welfare. We must stand together in pursuing inclusive equity for all.

Dr. King acknowledged the truth of our commonality, confronted its denial in society, and organized to give America a second birth. Let us pick up King’s mantle and continue moving toward the destiny God intends for us all.

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http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_11th_annual_sclc_convention.1.html

ii <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/slavery-in-the-united-states/>