

MLK Day Celebration

January 17, 2022

Rev. Cindy Maddox

I want to thank the Northfield Human Rights Commission for the invitation to speak with you tonight. I am honored to be with you.

I want to begin by acknowledging what is obvious—
that I am not a person of color,
and I am speaking on a day when we usually try to center black voices,
when we need to hear the lived experiences of people of color.
Many of the recent speakers at this event have been people of color,
and I honor and thank them for their leadership and their truth-telling.

I accepted the invitation because of two quotes I try to remember from Martin Luther King, Jr.:

“In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies,
but the silence of our friends.”

and "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent
about things that matter."

It is in this spirit that I speak today.

I love Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

I love the writing, the grounded yet soaring prose.

I love the delivery—his cadence,

the way he repeated the "I have a dream" line

sometimes at the end of the paragraph to draw the audience
ever onward, ever forward,

as if carried in the current of his words,

we cannot leave the boat until we reach that promised shore.

I love that speech, but I fear for it the way I fear for the Bible—

that we claim it as sacred but then don't let the words live off the page;

that we handle it so much we smooth out its rough edges

and domesticate it.

Besides, it's way too easy to talk about dreams

and never do anything to bring them to reality.

And he was so much more than this speech.

Some of MLK's other writings are much harder, much more challenging,
and we do him no honor when we forget his harder truths.

His Letter from Birmingham Jail contains harsh but accurate criticisms
of the church in America,
of once-supportive ministers who grew tired of his demands,
of liberals who told King and others that they were moving too fast,
demanding too much.

King did more than dream of his children not being judged
by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Oh, he never gave up on that dream,
but he also called for a living wage,
stood with sanitation workers on strike,
and spoke out against materialism, militarism, and nationalism.

Desegregation and the right to vote were essential,
but King believed that African Americans and other minorities
would never enter full citizenship until they had economic security.

He said, "We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society
to a person-oriented society.

When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights,
are considered more important than people,
the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism
are incapable of being conquered."

We still see these triplets ruling our country, and as usual,
those who were already most vulnerable pay the highest price.

As the pandemic pushed millions of people around the world into poverty,
billionaires have added \$5 trillion to their fortunes—so far.

In some ways we have come a long way
since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

And in some ways we still have so far to go.

The last 6 years or so have shown even us clueless white people
how much racism still exists,
how extreme prejudice did not disappear—
it just went underground until given permission
to come out of the cave, out of the grave,

no longer hooded but honored,
 fewer of them burning crosses but still carrying fire.

In his dream speech, King said, (and I use his words and the language of his time)

“There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights,

‘When will you be satisfied?’

We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim
 of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.”

But according to research published by the National Academy of Sciences,

“Over the life course, about 1 in every 1,000 black men
 can expect to be killed by police.”

It is not just the individual racists but systemic racism

that continues to threaten life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

Voting rights have again been endangered because of the gutting
 of the Voting Rights Act,

with gerrymandering again the norm,

polling places eliminated in minority districts,

and whole classes of people denied their constitutional rights.

We have countless children and parents still separated

by cruel and inhumane immigration policies,

and the damage that has been done will never be undone.

And the injustices against the indigenous nations of our land

continue to affect the lives, economic conditions, and mental health
 of native and indigenous peoples.

We cannot honor the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,

without acknowledging the injustices that still remain

and the work that remains to be done.

For me it begins with asking why.

I grew up not asking why.

It never occurred to me to ask why my elementary school in Ohio
 in the early 70s included no people of color.

When we moved to Miami and I was bussed out of my predominantly
 white neighborhood to a school 6.5 miles and a world away,

it never occurred to me to ask why the kids were rougher, tougher,
 than those in my sheltered elementary school.

Through middle school and my first years at Miami Killian High School,
I came to enjoy the diversity of my community.
I found my place in the choir and advanced music ensembles,
and through those groups I made friends with a wider range of people
than I had ever known.

It didn't matter if you were
black, brown, white, Cuban, Italian, Jewish, gay, straight—
when we sang "One singular sensation" we were one.

And it was wonderful.

And it was a façade . . .

because the year was 1980, and on May 17 of that year, there in Miami
an all-white jury acquitted the police officers who beat a black man to death
with their flashlights.

Four days of riots began that night, and all the schools shut down
for fear of the riots moving into the schools.

I don't know what the black kids did with their week off school,
but the white kids went to the mall.

I was sixteen, and it never occurred to me to ask my black friends about it.

If we are to make any progress, we have to ask the questions,
and keep asking the questions, even if we think we know the answer.

Why did the sales clerk ignore the woman who was clearly there before me,
and try to wait on me first?

Why did my beautiful brown-skinned boy, when he was only five years old, say,
"Anthony's skin is regular, but mine's not."

Why is teaching the truth about American history in our schools controversial?

Why do black and Latino men experience such high rates of unemployment?

Why do people of color pay higher mortgage rates?

Why are black boys as young as ten years old seen by police
as older, less innocent, and more of a threat than their white peers?

Why are black girls and women given less pain medication in hospitals?

Why do Hispanic women earn 54 cents to every dollar
earned by white non-hispanic men?

Why, when we make the statement that Black Lives Matter,
do some people feel the need to say "All Lives Matter,"

when obviously all lives should matter,
but clearly they don't, and all lives are not in danger.

The answers to these questions could be summed up in one word: racism.
But accepting one-word answers rarely gets us to the core of the issue,
and even *more* rarely helps us address the problem.

We need to do more than name it.

We need to understand the many-armed monster that is racism
and systemic racism in order to confront it and change it.

Our theme for today's service is social action,
and I am not proposing talk instead of action.

Over the years we've had lots and lots and lots of talk about racism
without enough action to end it

But we do need more honest communication,

where those of us who are white listen with open hearts and minds
to the experiences, viewpoints, and criticisms
of native, indigenous, immigrant, African American, Hispanic people,
and all people affected by racism.

And, my fellow white people, I will remind us:

it is not up to people of color to educate us,
to bare their scars so that we can decide
how badly they are wounded.

Those of us who are white need to do our own work,
learning from black experience

but not dependent on every person of color to be our teacher.

We need to keep asking all the why questions so that we can understand,
because we cannot change what we cannot comprehend.

MLK would not be satisfied with us gathering once a year
to honor him and his legacy without it challenging us to continue the work
of which he was a part.

We need to act—

to call our legislators when decisions threaten justice,
to vote and make sure everyone else does, too,

to support nonprofits that work to end racism,
to rally for a fair wage and economic equality,
to say their names and tell the truth
and listen even when don't like what we hear.

It is easy to say this one day a year.

It is also easy to get bogged down in despair
at the enormity of the problem.

MLK addressed this very issue.

He said, "Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.
Even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream."

His call to not wallow in the valley of despair
was the lead-up line to the annunciation of his dreams.

That is where we find hope: in the renewing of the dream.

No, the dream is not enough on its own.

But it is the point of hope.

It is the touchstone to which we return when we grow weary.

Let us recapture the 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 people are created equal."

Then—and only then—will we be able to let freedom ring.