

**Middle School Chapel Talk**  
**February 11, 2004**  
**Billy Peebles**

**Exodus 3: 7-12**

Then the Lord said, "I have seen how cruelly my people are being treated in Egypt; I have heard them cry out to be rescued from their slave drivers. I know all about their sufferings, and so I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of Egypt to a spacious land, one which is rich and fertile and in which the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites now live. I have indeed heard the cry of my people, and I see how the Egyptians are oppressing them. Now I am sending you to the king of Egypt so that you can lead my people out of his country."

But Moses said to God, "I am nobody. How can I go to the king and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

God answered, "I will be with you, and when you bring the people out of Egypt, you will worship me on this mountain. That will be the proof that I have sent you."

**Luke 6: 27-36**

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. If anyone hits you on one cheek, let him hit the other one too; if someone takes your coat let him have your shirt as well. Give to everyone who asks you for something, and when someone takes what is yours, do not ask for it back. Do for others just what you want them to do for you.

If you love only the people who love you, why should you receive a blessing? Even sinners love those who love them! And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you receive a blessing? Even sinners do that! And if you lend only to those from whom you hope to get it back, why should you receive a blessing? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount! No! Love your enemies and do good to them; lend and expect nothing back. You will then have a great reward, and you will be children of the Most High God. For he is good to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.

Good Morning! I thank you for the privilege of speaking to you this morning.

Every January and February, I often find myself in a pensive, reflective mood because we celebrate the birthdays of three great Americans—people who fundamentally changed the course of our history as a country: George Washington, born February 22nd, 1732; Abraham Lincoln, born February 12, 1809—tomorrow is the 195<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lincoln's birth; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., born January 15th, 1929. These three heroes of mine are closely connected with one another even though they did not know one another. George Washington was the "indispensable man" and father of our country and was one of the only founding fathers to free his slaves at his death. Abraham Lincoln led efforts to win the Civil War and to save our country from being split apart and he also ended slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation and Thirteenth Amendment. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's which resulted in the end of racial segregation and in the beginning of real equality for Americans of all races and backgrounds. Even though Dr. King died almost 40 years ago, we do not fully enjoy even today his vision of peace and justice for all but as a country, we are much further along the road to equality of opportunity than we would be without his work and service and sacrifice.

Because of our national holiday in celebration of the birth of Dr. King, because Dr. King was a native of Atlanta, and because we celebrate in February Black History Month, I want to focus my remarks this morning on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

This morning's readings from scripture were favorites of Dr. King. The Old Testament reading from Exodus in which God instructs Moses to bring the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt spoke to Dr. King

at a number of levels. He greatly admired Moses' courage and willingness to carry out God's call even when the assignment looked impossible. And, Dr. King probably saw himself as a kind of Moses because he was so desperately trying to do what he thought God intended him to do—lead his brothers and sisters in the South out of the bondage of racism and segregation and discrimination into the freedom of true justice and equal opportunity as called for in our Declaration of Independence and Constitution.

The New Testament reading from Luke was one that Dr. King referred to frequently. Indeed, Christ's instruction to "love your enemies" was at the core of Dr. King's ministry and was the foundation of his leadership of the Civil Rights movement as a non-violent endeavor.

This belief—this notion that we should love our enemies—did not come easily to Dr. King just as it does not come easily to any of us. Indeed, as a boy and young man, Dr. King harbored great anger over the injustices wrought by racism and segregation. He was very upset over how he was treated by whites. For a long time, he did not want to become a minister like his dad and grandfather had been before him. He wanted to pursue a different career—perhaps be a lawyer—and besides, in the face of a racist country, he could not imagine being able to turn the other cheek and to love the people who hated him because of the color of his skin.

And yet he was still drawn to the ministry. As he pursued his college studies—by the way, this young man was very bright; he entered Morehouse College here in Atlanta at age 15—the call to the ministry became stronger and stronger. He was ordained as a pastor in his father's church (I think he was all of eighteen years old at the time of his ordination)—Ebenezer Baptist Church here in Atlanta—and went on to pursue additional studies in Theology and eventually earned his PhD in Philosophy and Religion.

As he finished his PhD work in 1954, Dr. King faced a huge dilemma. He loved the world of ideas. He loved scholarship. He wrote well. He spoke well. He had offers to teach in colleges and universities throughout the North. He had done his doctoral work in Boston and he found parts of that city much more welcoming of African Americans than his native South. And his wife Coretta, an enormously talented singer and musician, could have had many job opportunities in the North as well. No one could have blamed Coretta and Martin if they had decided to stay in the North and pursue their dreams there.

But Martin felt a strong pull—a clear call—to return to his native South. He thought he had an obligation, a duty to come back to his native South and to help his African American brothers and sisters secure a better life for themselves. And Coretta, his very supportive wife, was right there with him in this commitment. And so in 1954—he was only 25 years old—he took a job as the pastor at Dexter Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. This church was literally across the street from the Alabama State capital which served as an early capital of the Confederacy. Talk about irony!

Martin King's story is so rich, so important, and so tragic because of his premature death by assassination in 1968 that I could go on and on about him. There is not time to do that. I would like to share with you, though, why I have such great respect and reverence for him and his life. And by the way, he was not perfect. No man or woman is. By his own admission, he had many faults. I guess I am inspired by his life in large part because in the face of the flaws we all as humans have, he somehow managed to lead his people and our nation to new heights of understanding, reconciliation, and justice.

Why then does Dr. King inspire me and us today—almost 40 years after he was assassinated in April, 1968?

First, he was willing to suffer for his beliefs. He was jailed numerous times. In fact, like his intellectual and spiritual mentors, Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi, he thought it was an honor to go to jail for violating an unjust law. But he also endured death threats directed at him, his wife, and their four children. His house was blown up and at a book signing in the late 1950's, a would-be assassin stabbed him in the chest with a sharp letter opener. He was harassed by his own government, most notably the FBI. He was criticized by fellow African Americans who felt he should embrace violence and who disagreed with his opposition to the Vietnam War. He was willing to suffer because he believed in the rightness of his cause and because he thought suffering had redemptive, liberating results.

He also had great personal courage and he lived his own commitment to non-violence. On one occasion, Dr. King was speaking before a large group and a man jumped on the stage and started pummeling him with his fists. Dr. King simply let the man beat him until his attacker was removed from the stage. He refused to respond to violence with violence.

Dr. King was a great preacher—in my judgment, the best speaker, the most eloquent orator of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His “I have a dream” speech at the March on Washington in August 1963 may be the most memorable speech of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His sermons and his writings are superb and I commend them to you.

Dr. King was a Christian minister of great substance and depth. Christianity always informed his work and service but he was more than just a pastor. He respected and learned from other faiths—Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism. He was also a great patriot and by that I mean he loved and revered the founding ideas of America. He constantly reminded his listeners of the principles and promises of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg Address, and other founding documents. He would not let us forget the ideals of justice and equality and fairness which made this country great but which were not fully extended to African Americans and other groups. It says so much about Dr. King that he loved this country and what it stood for even though it was grossly mistreating his people through the injustices of discrimination and segregation. He had great hope for America and believed that we would ultimately be true to our ideals.

He had hope for America when many people were giving up on America. This hope for America was part of a larger faith. He often said that the “arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” He knew that it would take time to achieve real justice for his people and America as a whole but he believed that we would ultimately get there.

Listen to this note of reassurance and faith from Dr. King and see how similar it is to God's reassuring Moses at the end of this morning's reading from Exodus:

“Our capacity to deal creatively with shattered dreams is ultimately determined by our faith in God . . . However dismal and catastrophic may be the circumstances, we know we are not alone.”

Because of this unshakeable faith, he could embrace the transformational vision of love mentioned in today's reading from Luke--this idea of loving your enemy. As he said so often, through love "the chain of hatred must be cut. When it is broken, brotherhood can begin."

Keep in mind that the brand of love which Dr. King attempted to live and which Jesus and Gandhi lived as well was meant to redeem, to liberate one's enemies. Dr. King was not trying to defeat his enemies in the South. (repeat) He was attempting to set them free from their sin and prejudice through love. In places like Montgomery, Alabama, Atlanta, Georgia, Albany, Georgia, Birmingham, Alabama, Selma, Alabama, he did just that. He liberated his oppressors through love—love expressed via constant non-violent protest. What a great lesson in loving your enemy and what an extraordinary legacy from this great man, great pastor, great American!