

Micah 6:6-8

“With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Today in our church and around the nation, we celebrate the life of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, and his contribution to America’s progress on racial justice. His well-known ‘I Have a Dream’ speech gets a lot of airplay this weekend, and my social media is inundated with choice quotes and memes about togetherness and overcoming.

But the writing I treasure most from MLK is not a speech with soaring hopeful quotes. It is an open letter with firm invitation to accountability to white Christianity for their resistance to the civil rights movement. It’s a letter is challenging for me to read.

In April 1963, while King was in a solitary jail cell for his participation in Birmingham demonstrations, eight regional clergy leaders and bishops from liberal, mainstream denominations published, in the local paper, a critique titled, “A Call for Unity”, following their January letter called “An Appeal for Law and Order.” The April letter challenged his ‘outsider’ presence, questioned his tactics, urged patience to the local black community, and thanked the local police who was led by Bull Conner, known for his extreme responses to protestors.

This letter is King’s response, scribbled on the margins of that same newspaper smuggled into his cell. I often imagine him sitting for days in isolation, separated from his newborn son, absorbing these critiques from his Christian brethren. He chooses to respond with such grace and love and accountability.

In this Letter from a Birmingham Jail, as its come to be known, he says to them, “I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate...Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.” He calls specifically on the white church, saying, “I felt that the white ministers, priests, and rabbis of the South would be some of our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders. All too many have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained-glass window.” Difficult words to hear.

I wish this letter would read as exceedingly dated. After all, it was written 58 years ago. But to my profound grief, the issues he raises are almost all still relevant. Police violence toward people of color. De facto racial segregation, and the inequity that results, found in schools, government, health care. The soul-crushing impact of racial bias on children. And most pertinent, the lack of urgency and participation of white people, Christianity in particular, on dismantling these oppressive systems. Just this summer, when a national reckoning with racial justice was transpiring, calls for patience, for Unity, and for Law and Order emerged from white Christian churches – echoing the same critiques from the clergy group almost sixty years prior.

I am so proud of this church and our response to this latest national awakening. It's clear that we want to respond to MLK's call to join in the work of extricating the sin of racism from our faith and from our society. Because we've started doing this work, to listening to and learning from perspectives and voices of color, many of us identified the events on Jan 6th as having observable links to racism and white supremacy. If we don't see those ties, it's clear that many black and brown Americans do.

As a committed anti-racist Christian, I want nothing more than to dissociate myself from those extremists, to distance myself whenever whiteness is asserted through intimidation and force.

But when I read MLK's letter, I realize I don't get to do that. He says, "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people." Distancing myself is not what MLK is calling for; It is not my work as a white Christian 60 years later.

My work is to own white supremacy. I use white supremacy not to describe violent white power extremists, but rather, the simple devastating truth– that not by any fault of my own, but by virtue of being part of this society – imbedded in me is an unconscious belief that whiteness is better. White. Supremacy. Just as the words describe.

My work is, instead of proclaiming loudly how different I am than those who lofted the cross in one hand and the confederate flag in another, to acknowledge that Christianity has partnered with and benefitted from racism from the very beginnings of this nation's history – including our denomination's earliest forebearers, the Congregationalists.

My work, as uncomfortable as it is, is to trace the line from the extremes we saw last week to my day-to-day thoughts and choices and actions, to understand that the throughline of systemic racism doesn't stop with me just because I mean well.

And I hate it, honestly.

It's grueling, painful, work that forces me, on the daily, to uproot what I thought I knew and who I believed myself to be. It forces me to work through my internal shame enough to allow the truth of my biases to surface. But it's necessary work if I'm to become a trusted partner in the work for the freedom and racial justice King calls us to. As he says, "Like a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up...injustice must likewise be exposed, with all of the tensions its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion, before it can be cured." Denying its presence in me only makes me a dangerous ally, one who believes myself to be free of the sin of racism.

I fear I shall never be free of this sin.

And this is where I am utterly grateful to God's grace, for our Christian faith. Because we share a faith that tells us that we can have sin and still be beautiful, beloved, treasured children of God. I can live into the knowledge that, as a white American, I will likely forever carry in me the sin of racism...AND that God sees me and my efforts, God loves every single part of me, God knows my heart and intentions and calls me worth. Names me as their Beloved.

It's also where I'm grateful to our holy scriptures, which comfort and guide me. Our words of wisdom today come to us from a time where things were falling apart for the people of Israel. God was angry about the way they were treating those less vulnerable: "They covet fields and seize them; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance." God was threatening justice, so he sent Micah with these words of warning: "Therefore I will give you over to ruin, and your people to derision. You will bear the scorn of the nations." Their response feels resonant to how I feel when I take in the vast evil that is systemic racism. As King says, "The judgement of God is upon the church as never before."

How can we ever make this right? What will it take? How do we begin to change? The Israelites offer a litany of sacrifices, of penance, of public contrition. Burnt offerings? A thousand rams? Ten thousand rivers of oil? Their panic and overwhelm is palpable, and all too relatable to the overwhelm I feel facing my role in addressing racial injustice in this country.

What God, through Micah, offers them – offers us – is so simple, and yet contains, in its simplicity, a lifetime of work.

Do Justice.
Love kindness.
Walk
Humbly
with your God.

Do Justice: The Hebrew understanding of justice is on action. Not on wishing for it, calling for it, learning about it, but DOING justice. Justice calls upon the faithful to work for fairness and equality for all, particularly those marginalized or exploited. In Doing Justice we are often pushed beyond what feels comfortable, or secure, in pursuit of the realm of God where all receive justice. King calls for this when he says, "We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of the tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be dealt with." This is doing justice.

This church is working on doing justice. We are using the privilege granted to our station to proclaim Black Lives Matter from the church building. We are seeking out black-led, underserved organizations to support financially. We are tracking what the Seattle police have committed to and seeking accountability from the Seattle City Council. We are pushing ourselves to learn, in monthly dismantling racism groups and book studies and sermons that make us uncomfortable. What are other ways that this church might push itself beyond comfort to do justice?

Love kindness. The Hebrew word ‘hesed’, often translated as kindness, is broader than simply being good or nice. It encompasses loyalty, faithfulness, love . . . relationship. It is the magic spark that exists in between people, and between God and people. . . the essence that bonds us to each other. King models this when he says, “I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured my tears have been tears of love.”

Magnolia UCC loves kindness in so many ways. I see it in the way that those participating in the dismantling racism group grieve for the damage done by racism and yearn for the wholeness of our brothers and sisters of color. I see it in the way that we continually challenge ourselves and each other to expand our understanding of who our neighbor is. I see it in the way that you dialogue with each other, through zoom screens and emails, with care and gentleness, through disagreements and personal trials. How might we deepen a practice of loving kindness, of nurturing relationships, in seeing God’s spark in every one in a way that builds the beloved community? What steps might you be able to take in your own life?

Walk Humbly with your God. I find this final part of God’s instruction deeply reassuring, and robust enough to want to sink into each phrase.

Walk. This work will never be done. It is a journey, a travel. . . a walk. It reminds me that we may never get to proclaim we are over racism, have been cured of white supremacy, but the important thing is to steadily show up for the work. To continue walking.

Humbly. It’s a reminder to be endlessly gentle with ourselves and others in this work. There is a lifetime of unlearning, and we are all in different places – but none of us have ‘arrived’. Humbly reminds us to forever place ourselves in a learners’ stance, the beginners mind.

With our God. Finally – and thank God for it – we are reminded that we are not alone in this work, but partner with God every step of the way. When UCC ministers are ordained, we answer our vows not with ‘yes’, but ‘Yes, with the help of God’. This work is not work that God sets us to alone, that we undertake by ourselves. As King says, “We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of (people) willing to be co-workers with God.” We are guided, supported, nudged and encouraged with God, and when we fail to do or be enough, we are embraced by God’s endless grace.

Do Justice. Love Kindness. Walk Humbly with our God.

While the work is mighty, and our part in it can seem at times so much, we can fall back on these words: of comfort, of challenge, of encouragement.

As the next few weeks transpire, and the fallout of the next few weeks unfolds, I will be returning again and again to these endlessly challenging, endlessly comforting directive. As we seek to do this work in community, may we return to these words as ballast and succor. Thanks be to God.

Amara Oden (*she/her*)
Ministerial Intern, Magnolia UCC
MDiv Student, Seattle University