

Remembering Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Rev. Dr. Gloria J. Tate

Any reflection on the work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. calls into view particular gifts of his ministry: the application of the gospel to political and social reform; the coupling of cries for justice with public action; and the merger of passion and intellect.

Dr. King, like preachers before him, focused on agape. However, he was radical enough to merge the themes of grace and justice. He brought to the pulpit a social gospel that defined racism as a theological issue and promoted active agape love as a power that could bring political transformation to a nation steeped in discriminatory practice and ideology.

In the early 60's, many of us saw King as representing a new breed of preachers. My exposure to the church had provided a limited view of the black preacher as someone who only interpreted the gospel as a promise of salvation in the "bye and bye." Dr. King wasn't the first, but he was the most prominent symbol of a person who brought together themes of the black church tradition (emphasis on justice and hope) with the universalism of the gospel (God has created all people equal) in a style that affirmed both the passion of black preaching and the astuteness of theological training.

Certainly people who preceded him and many of his contemporaries fit that mold, however they were not as visible to the masses. Dr. King launched, through the help of television, the times and his being deemed the leader of the civil rights movement, an appreciation in the populous for a different image of the "black preacher."

His incorporation of a social gospel, a passionate call for political involvement, with a well-grounded theological perspective is still an influential model of ministry within the African American Christian community and beyond.

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