

Remembering Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Rev. J. Mark Davidson

For years, I honored Dr. King, "the drum major for justice," the passionate advocate of civil rights and apostle of non-violence. I continue to honor his essential witness and his inspiring example of moral and spiritual courage. But I am concerned about the iconization of MLK, because I believe it eviscerates our own capacities for faith and action. As I have evolved, of far more interest to me is the spiritual depths of his witness, which are not unique to him and accessible to us all.

Those of us who would follow in the wake of his dream or track the tangents of his prophecies would do well to find our way to this wellspring. The clear truth that rang forth in his sermons and speeches didn't come from his brilliant mind, his talent with language, or his powerful voice. The truth came from listening to the voice of God. Like young Samuel in the Temple, apprenticing under Eli the priest (I Samuel 3:1-10), King saw that recognizing the voice of God in the midst of all the other voices crowding in and clamoring for our attention is the most important and continuous act of discipleship. And the most neglected. We have the Word. What we need is the Voice that opens the meaning of the Word and imparts the courage to speak the truth in love.

We too are called to this listening. We face great difficulties in dismantling racism, working toward a culture of peace, and providing real alternatives to lives wasted in the pursuit of affluence. We do well to remember Dr. King's immense contribution to our understanding of ourselves, our history, and our hope. But we do even better to return to the sources that inspired him -- reverence for life, belief in basic human dignity, nonviolence, and a deep spirituality steeped in listening to the Voice of God. If we too will listen, tell the truth we have heard, and follow where the Voice leads, we will, with God's help, step out of the shadow of his greatness and create new sources of inspiration and hope ourselves.

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