

## Matthew 5:1-16

### MLK Sunday

<sup>1</sup> When Jesus saw the crowds [gathered to hear him], he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup> Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:  
<sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
<sup>4</sup> "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup> "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup> "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup> "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. <sup>8</sup> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. <sup>10</sup> "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.  
<sup>13</sup> "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. <sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup> No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.



Sixty-five miles an hour – a chartered bus – an Interstate in the middle of Alabama – my friend's eyes welled up with tears.

It was July, 1999. Forty of us were on the bus in the middle of a 10 day journey through the American South visiting places that had been sites of major events in "The Movement" — the racial civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

My friend Dick had not been back to Alabama since 1965 when he had been arrested during a civil rights demonstration. There was a warrant issued for his arrest back then, and ever since he had been afraid that setting foot in the state might lead to his

*Can You Swim?*

**A sermon preached by**  
James F. McIntire

**Text**  
Matthew 5:1-16

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**Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday**



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imprisonment. I'm not talking about some fascist dictatorship in a distant part of the world — this is here in the United States where a respected citizen feared for his freedom if he set foot in one of our states. Dick had decided to stand up for what he believed was right and he had been arrested for it, intimidated by the legally-elected authorities of one of our own states, beaten by the police until his ribs were broken. He had been intimidated to the point where 30 years later he was worried about stepping onto that soil again.

It was an amazing revelation to me ... and this day on the bus, Dick's eyes welled up as he recalled the emotions of those memories.

He was telling us about the Birmingham of 1963. We had been to many of the Birmingham churches — including Bethel Baptist Church, the church of the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, a man whom I have met several times now, a contemporary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a man who had been fighting segregation for his entire life, a man whose house was bombed on several occasions, including Christmas 1957, a blast which should very well have taken his life. And now on a Sunday in the summer of 1999 we were visiting and worshiping at 16th Street Baptist Church near downtown Birmingham.

It was at 16th Street Baptist on September 15th, 1963, that a dynamite blast tore a hole in the side of the church building and ripped open the hearts of the world when 4 little girls died — Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley. My friend Dick wasn't there that horrible Sunday morning — he had been there not long before though, and he went back for the funeral. It was that story that he was telling us on the bus 36 years later after we had worshiped in the church and met with Chris McNair, father to Denise. It was that event that tore at Dick's heart then — tears at it even to this day. The thought of these innocent little children losing their lives to sticks of dynamite carefully placed by white segregationists who thought they could teach a lesson through violence was more than he could tolerate. He knew it would be an emotional day — but he didn't realize how

emotional.

Dick was there when Dr. King preached the funeral sermon for the four little girls: "In spite of the darkness of this hour we must not despair. We must not become bitter; nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence. We must not lose faith in our white brothers. Somehow we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and worth of all human personality."

"How is it possible?," I found myself thinking, "How is it possible that anyone could be so misdirected to believe that we can be separated by the color of our skin — or by any other characteristic that God has given to us?" It seems so long ago and so far away — but it's not. It's far less than a lifetime ago when these events were headlines in our world. It's amazing that anyone came through those times alive; amazing that violence didn't take over and set us all at each other's throats. Thank God we all paid attention to Dr. King — "we must not become bitter; nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence."

"Blessed are the poor in spirit ... blessed are those who mourn ... blessed are the meek ... blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." So says Jesus in what we call the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed" are those whom the world has nothing to do with, those who try to live outside the rules that the world says will give you victory. Blessed are those whom the world reviles and persecutes because they act out Jesus' teachings. It's that message that echoed throughout Martin Luther King's speeches and sermons and writings.

We sometimes forget that about him — before the title "Dr." comes the adjective "Reverend". King was a follower of Jesus, first and foremost. It was he who was reviled and persecuted on Jesus' account, it was he who lost his life because he was preaching unpopular "Jesus" views in a world that pretends to follow the teachings of the same Jesus.

I stood in many places that summer. I sat at the lunch counter at the Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, the site of the first sit-in protests in the racial rights movement. I stood where Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth's parsonage once stood before white racists' dynamite brought it down around he and his family. I stood at the blast site where those 4 little girls died. I stood in Kelley Ingram Park where fire hoses and police dogs ripped at the skin of protesters fighting for their rights. I stood in many of the pulpits King used to spread his non-violence — Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, his parish from 1955-1960; Brown's Chapel AME Church in Selma; Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, first his father's pulpit and then his. I stood in Lewis Scott's tiny store in the Projects in Selma — a store providing basic groceries to the community then and now, a store behind which many, many rallies were organized and marches were begun. I stood in the new building and in the midst of the congregation of Rising Star Baptist Church which was fire-bombed as recently as 1996. I stood in the King home in Atlanta — where Martin was born — and I stood at his tomb where the words ring out, "Free at Last".

And each time I stood somewhere that an important civil rights event had occurred I thought of Moses standing in the presence of God on Mt. Horeb when a bush nearby was burning but was not being consumed by the flames. It was there that God told Moses: "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." Those places — that holy ground — is around us daily. It is at those places where the events of our lives take place. And it was on holy ground that I stood each stop we made during those 10 days in the summer of 1999.

One of the places I stood that week was in Selma, Alabama, where the push for equal voting rights would not be stifled by anything or anyone. On Sunday, March 7, 1965, a group of black and white folk left Brown's Chapel AME church determined to take their protest to the state capital, Montgomery. They were going to let the world know that they were being denied their right to vote by a local government determined to keep the African-

American population disenfranchised. It was a peaceful march led by members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) — 600 people lined up two-by-two walking the six blocks from Brown's Chapel to the Edmund Pettus Bridge across the Alabama River.

To everyone's surprise, no police tried to stop them. King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), would lead the march. Hosea Williams, Andrew Young, and James Bevel met to decide by a flip of the coin who would lead in Dr. King's absence — Hosea Williams won the toss so he and SNCC Chairman John Lewis, now a US Congressman, led the demonstrators onto the Edmund Pettus Bridge. "When we arrived at the apex of the Edmund Pettus Bridge," recalls Congressman Lewis, "we saw a sea of blue(-clad) Alabama state troopers." Gas masks hung from their belts and they were slapping billy clubs against their hands. Hosea Williams turned to Lewis, "Can you swim?" he asked. Lewis looked down over the edge of the bridge at the cold river below and answered, "No." There was no way out — straight ahead or over the side. Straight ahead was where they were going.

Bloody Sunday is the name that day took on soon after. Horses trampled, tear gas drifted through the daylight, billy clubs and fists pounded on the protesters, blood and sweat poured from children and elderly, black and white, men and women, screams and shotgun blasts filled the air. One of the history-makers who had been there as a young child in 1965 led us on our march across the bridge in 1999. Joanne Bland remembers being knocked down and blacking out as the crowd ran from their tormentors. As she woke, she saw in front of her her teenage sister's face — blood streaming down her forehead, a sign of a cut imposed by some segregationist's club.

It was a setback for the Selma movement — but not the final word. On March 21<sup>st</sup>, after several other attempts were stopped, Martin Luther King, Jr., joined with 4,000 people from around the nation at Brown's Chapel and headed over the bridge once more

— and on Thursday, March 25<sup>th</sup>, they finally reached the State House in Montgomery.

I stood on the Edmund Pettus Bridge that summer of 1999 and listened to my friend Dick tell about the events that he had participated in. He told me about Hosea Williams' remark to John Lewis, "Can you swim?" There is no way to confront the evil of this world except by going straight through the middle of it, is there? Can you swim? Nope. Then I guess we're headed right into it.

During his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stood on holy ground and in the midst of holy people. He told the crowd — and he tells us today — that we are the "light of the world" "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven." You cannot hide your light — that light which God has given you — that light which shines for all the world to see the glory of God's presence in your life. You cannot hide that light — there is no reason to hide it, there is no excuse for hiding it, there is ever reason to let it shine.

Is it any wonder that "This Little Light of Mine" was one of the rallying songs of the racial civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s? Is it any wonder that that song was constantly ringing through my head during that bus trip to sacred places of "The Movement"?

We have a job — not just a job, *a mission*. God calls us to let our light shine. It is what Martin Luther King did. It is what his memory is about. It is what this weekend's holiday is about. We have a mission to carry out — that to which God has called us. We must let our light shine today and tomorrow and forever.

Martin let his light shine so that we could all be a little closer to equality and freedom and toleration and inclusion. He let his light shine so that we could all see a little better that one day our

children "will live in a world where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." He had a dream that we can bring to reality, a dream that freedom will ring throughout the world. He had a dream that the light would lead others to the mountaintop.

Are we there yet? Do we let our light shine so that never again will any of us try to hold others down by shackles or words?



Friday afternoon I was herded into Cell 13 of the Philadelphia Police Department's 9<sup>th</sup> District headquarters. The cell door clanged shut behind me and my 3 fellow cellmates – Pastor David Tatgenhorst of St. Luke UMC in Bryn Mawr; Sam, a former General Secretary of the Philadelphia Religious Society of Friends; and Noah, a 29 year old Quaker activist from Vermont who has been active around the country and in Iraq. We had been arrested, handcuffed, loaded into the back of a police van, booked, fingerprinted, photographed, and stripped of our personal belongings and belts and shoelaces. We had been given our dinner – two pieces of Wonder Bread with a slice of pasteurized, processed, cheese food between them and a small water bottle. A total of seven of us on Friday, 5 on Wednesday – 12 of us in all (interesting number, huh?) arrested this week during acts of civil disobedience outside Colosimo's Gun Center at 9<sup>th</sup> and Spring Garden Sts, a notorious retailer of guns which end up distributed up and down the east coast.

The goal of this action and the "Heeding God's Call" peace conference this week was to have Mr. Colosimo voluntarily agree to a Code of Conduct which will help end the straw purchase of handguns from local stores. Our children are dying – our Commonwealth lawmakers won't take a stand – our faith communities must. This Code of Conduct, drafted by the "Mayors Against Illegal Guns" coalition, has been voluntarily adopted by WalMart – so we've asked Mr. Colosimo to do what he knows is right – and we'll continue to ask he and the many other gun

retailers to take this on as a mission for the safety and security of our communities. How can anyone disagree? It's voluntary, it's an appeal to one's faith commitment, it's a moral appeal. James Colosimo has refused – so we protested inside his store on Wednesday and outside his gun center Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

I sat and refused to leave because God has called on me to let my light shine. I refused to give in to the powers of the world because God has called on me to let my light shine. I refused to budge because too many children and youth have died and God has told me it must stop. In the bitter cold of a January day in Philadelphia I stood and sat and sang and prayed because as I'm threatened by the powers of this world and forced to jump over the side of the bridge to freedom into the threats of intolerance I know for a fact that I can swim if I have to and I know that God will always carry me safely through the troubled waters below.

Yesterday, after I was released at 8:30 am and came home for a short nap and shower, I went back down and gathered with hundreds of like-minded people for worship and a planned, peaceful march back to Mr. Colosimo's shop. Seven women from Hope joined me and spoke with their feet and their words about this important moment in time. I am so appreciative of their decision to march and to speak out. Afterward, we talked about the need for follow-up so in the next few weeks you will see some action steps that you can take and that our congregation can take – letters, petitions, statements – not just about Philadelphia but about our own communities out here in the “safe” suburbs – where our children are dying as well. A movement haws started with this week's action – never before have faith communities taken on gun retailers directly. The hope is that we will continue this moving forward, that we will hear God through the prophet Amos speaking clearly to us – “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

We will make a difference ...



Can you swim?

Whenever a gun retailer sells to someone who he or she knows is about to turn around and sell those weapons of destruction on our streets so he or she can make money while we kill each other – we know we're not at the top of Martin's mountaintop dream yet. Whenever there is the sound of a decision being made based on race or gender or ability or social status — whether it be denial of equal educational opportunities because of attacks on affirmative action or a blatant segregationist statement coming from the mouth of any of our political leaders — then we know we're not there yet. Whenever there is any appearance of a vote being denied – whether it be elderly Jewish folk in Florida in a presidential election or an African-American voter stopped at the poll because he has no photo ID – then we know we're not there. When we read of a gay man being beaten to death in a Midwestern town simply because of his sexual orientation, or a young girl with mental retardation being gang raped simply because of her disability, or an African-American man being dragged behind the bumper of a pickup truck — then we know we're not there yet.

Can you swim? Would you rather jump over the side of the bridge and take your chances in the cold waters of intolerance? Or do you want to go on ahead and let your light shine, taking it as far as you have to so that it sits on the lampstand and not under a bushel basket?

We have the choice. Make it this weekend. Tomorrow, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, is a day that has turned from a vacation day into a service day. Find something creative to do tomorrow — serve your community — go to a soup kitchen, sweep a floor, paint a graffitied wall. Check out the newspaper or the Internet or the radio or TV and find somewhere tomorrow where you can let your light shine.

Decide what Dr. King's legacy means for you, to your faith, for your life. There are ways to hear his words, let it light your life's light, and let it shine from this day on.

Is your light about peace? Hearing the words of Jesus, Dr. King said, "I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as an American to the leaders of my own nation. The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop it must be ours."

"We must find an alternative to war and bloodshed," Dr. King said in his final Sunday sermon, "Anyone who feels, and there are still a lot of people who feel that way, that war can solve the social problems facing [hu]mankind is sleeping through a revolution." Let your light shine – speak out for peace.

Is your light about ending racism? Dr. King's words echo: "We are challenged to eradicate the last vestiges of racial injustice from our nation. ... It is an unhappy truth that...spoken and unspoken, acknowledged and denied, subtle and sometimes not so subtle - the disease of racism permeates and poisons a whole body politic. And I can see nothing more urgent than for Americans to work passionately and unrelentingly to get rid of the disease of racism." Do something about the racist tendencies in your own life, make racism disappear from the face of the earth.

Is your light about poverty? "We are challenged to rid our nation and the world of poverty. Like a monstrous octopus, poverty spreads its nagging, prehensile tentacles into hamlets and villages all over our world. They are ill-housed, they are ill-nourished, they are shabbily clad. ... There is nothing new about poverty. What is new is that we now have the techniques and the resources to get rid of poverty. The real question is whether we have the will." Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless.

In a speech entitled "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence" delivered April 4, 1967 at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside Church in New York City, Dr. King reminded us that we must never be complacent, that we must not be silent, that we must always be actively seeking, speaking, and doing justice.

Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak...Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movement well and pray that our own inner being may be sensitive to its guidance, for we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.

"Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us." This Tuesday we begin a need day in American history with the inauguration for the first time of a person of color as our President. It's a reminder that we're closer to Dr. King's dream ... not there yet but it reminds us that our eye is still on the prize. And it sure feels like a new spirit is rising among us – a new hope, a new sense of newness, a light of possibility shining on us. And it should not be lost on us that this is a man who has claimed his faith as a follower of Jesus as an adult struggling with people in the neighborhoods of one of America's troubled urban communities. I have no doubt that our new President senses God's light welling up inside him as he climbs to the platform on Tuesday morning. "Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine ..."

Let God's new spirit rise among us. Listen to Dr. King's words, follow his legacy, recognize that it is grounded in the message of Jesus, and let your light shine. Let the jail door slam behind you satisfied that you have done the right thing, the God thing. Sweep leaves from the playground of a school; paint over graffiti at the playground; sing "Happy Birthday, Dr. King" at the library; pick up trash along your block or at the park.

Whatever you choose to do tomorrow – honor Dr. King, honor your call as a follower of Jesus, and by all means ... Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine ... sing it with me ...

Amen.