

**The Prayers of Martin Luther King, Jr.**  
**January 18, 2015**

**Thought to ponder at the beginning:**

*Don't sleep through the revolution.*

– the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Chalice Lighting:** Words of Oscar Romero,<sup>1</sup> Catholic Bishop of El Salvador, who spoke out against poverty, social injustice, assassination, and torture:

*A Future Not Our Own Oscar Romero*

It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,  
it is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction  
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.  
Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of  
saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.  
No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives include everything.

This is what we are about.  
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water the seeds already planted

knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects  
far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of  
liberation in realizing this.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,  
a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's  
grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the  
difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not  
messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

**Sermon: The Prayers of Martin Luther King, Jr.** (c) Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

*Lord teach me to unselfishly serve humanity.<sup>ii iii</sup>*

That was one of Dr. King's prayers, given at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in  
Montgomery, Alabama, on January 24, 1954 – nearly two years before Rosa Parks was  
arrested and the Montgomery bus boycott was launched.

*Lord teach me to unselfishly serve humanity.*

I guess that prayer was answered.

Prayer was central to Dr. King's ministry, his justice work, his life. Lewis Baldwin, who compiled a book of King's prayers, describes him as “a man who had a deep spiritual hunger; who was a spiritual searcher all his life, who took seriously the sacred imperative to pray, and who followed the prophet Isaiah's words about being a light to others.”<sup>iv</sup>(p. xx)

I imagine he couldn't have conceived of doing his work without prayer to reach into his heart and articulate what was there, to bring comfort in the challenges – some of them ghastly and some of them seemingly insurmountable, to tap into faith and courage in the face of doubt and fear, and to remind his people and himself to keep returning to nobler ideals when the world around them turned vicious.

It is no surprise prayer was central to his life. He was a Baptist pastor and the son of a Baptist pastor. He was raised to have a faithful, strong prayer life and his calling required that prayer life continue.

Today, as we celebrate a man who helped our nation live into our dreams of freedom and justice, we take a look at some of his prayers, to see what they express about his work and to consider what his prayers might be now if he were with us today.

His way may seem foreign to some of us and natural to some of us. Either way, we can learn from hearing his words. Religion, you see was part of the life blood of the Civil Rights Movement, helping to provide a moral compass, unifying people in a story and ideal of peace and love, and providing tools for sustenance – not in a fundamentalist, absolutist way that demonizes others, but in a way that allows for questioning, doubt, self-examination, love, and forgiveness. Religion was a tool for positive change then. It still can be.

### **Dr. King's Prayer:**

*Come unto me, all ye that are laborers, beat down and burdened down because of the problems of modern life.*

*Come unto me and I will give you rest that will carry you through the generations. I will give you a peace that the world can never understand.*

*My peace I leave with you, not as the world giveth, but a peace that passeth all understanding.*

*God grant, if we discover this, we will be able to live amid the tensions of modern life.<sup>v</sup>*

Most of King's people would have recognized the Biblical references in his prayers. You might recognize them, too, in the prayer Steve just read:

Matthew 11:28 Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

John 14:27 Peace I leave with you; My peace I give unto you, not as the world giveth, give I unto you.

Philippians 4:7 And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

(From reading the old fashioned language of King's prayers, I surmise he used the King James translation of the Bible. Hence I have done so here, when quoting the Bible verses that were sources for his prayers.)

King's prayers and theology were Christian, Bible-based. But he was friendly to Unitarianism. (That was back in the day when Unitarians and Universalists were two different denominations.)

My colleague Rosemary Bray McNatt once interviewed Coretta Scott King. At the time McNatt was in seminary, training to be a UU minister. When Mrs. King discovered that, she spoke about her own connection to Unitarianism.

Rosemary Bray McNatt writes:

*"Oh, I went to Unitarian churches for years, even before I met Martin," she told me...  
"And Martin and I went to Unitarian churches when we were in Boston."*

*What surprised and saddened me most was what she said next. ...The gist of it was this:  
"We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized  
we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian." <sup>vi</sup>*

That is heartbreaking, but, sadly, also true. Black people were actively discouraged from pursuing UU ministry until the 1970s. Our denomination was and is populated so heavily by white people that he would have found it hard to create a platform from which to lead. And what about prayer? King visited Unitarian churches in the days when humanistic theology was in ascendancy. Perhaps, ultimately, when human beings regularly threaten and visit cruelty on you and your people, having somewhere higher to turn might be helpful, humanism less so.

Later, in his 1960 essay "Pilgrimage to Non-violence, King wrote:

*There is one phase of liberalism that I hope to cherish always: its devotion to the search for truth, its refusal to abandon the best light of reason. . . .*

*It was . . . the liberal doctrine of man that I began to question. The more I observed the tragedies of history, and man's shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depths and strength of sin. . . . I came to feel that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism. I*

*also came to see that liberalism's superficial optimism concerning human nature caused it to overlook the fact that reason is darkened by sin. . . .*

*Liberalism failed to see that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man's defensive ways of thinking. Reason, devoid of purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations.<sup>vii</sup>*

In prayer, one can never be sure what entity, if any, is engaged in the other half of the conversation. If I pray, is there a God listening? If I hear what seems to be a divine message, is it really God or just my imagination? Who knows?

Nonetheless, prayer in the Civil Rights Movement *at the very least* helped to create space in otherwise suffocating circumstances, helped Martin and his people to keep touching the taproot of peace, justice, and greater good, helped to prevent reactivity and promote resiliency.

How would it be now?

Come unto me, you who work three jobs and still cannot make the rent, you who graduate from college and cannot find work. Come unto me you young men, gunned down by police for little provocation.

Come unto me Eric Garner's children and Michael Brown's mother.

Come unto me Tamir Rice's sister.

Come unto me the scores of loved ones whose lives have been fractured by the brutal slaying of your beautiful, young, black brothers, and sons, and fathers.

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Come unto me and I will give you rest.

You who live in a frightening, chaotic, oppressive world, I will give you peace, and you will be able to carry your load and stand strong and tall until we reach the day when justice shall cover the face of the earth.

### **Dr. King's Prayer:**

*Lord, I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.*<sup>viii</sup>

Martin prayed that prayer on January 28, 1956, after he received a phone call threatening his life, home, and family. The Montgomery bus strike was well underway at that point, and King was threatened regularly. After he prayed on that January day, he reported receiving a “vision in the kitchen” – “I experienced the Divine as ... never ... before,” he said.<sup>ix</sup> It was a personal turning point for him.

I cannot imagine what King's life must have been like – the grinding uphill battle of the bus boycott, the battle to register black voters, the constant retaliation – real and threatened. The fear he must surely have felt for himself but also – and maybe even more so – for his family. Whatever fear I have felt in my own life pales by comparison.

My own tradition is so different from his – born in a Northern middle-class white family, raised in a Unitarian church peopled by skeptics. But over the years I have developed my own way of praying. My prayers sound very different from Martin's. You hear my public prayers on Sundays and at other times. My private prayers are an inner speaking and listening that I lift up to the greater good, the wiser consciousness, the deep mystery that holds this world. That helps to ground me, particularly when I am confused or angry or when I am called to lead in unfamiliar ways. I do not know what God is or *if* God is, but I sense love and good in the world, and I reach out to that. I find it helps.

Yesterday, 50 people gathered to choose a focus for our congregation's work in the next few years. We chose to “end inequality.” Now that is a lofty goal. My guess is that if we are serious and diligent about our work, we will anger people, because to end inequality means to level the field of privilege and to change the balance of power. Those who enjoy privilege usually like keeping it. Those who hold power usually prefer to wield it instead of sharing it. We will probably be challenged, maybe even threatened, and maybe sometimes the way forward will feel treacherous. If we are serious and diligent about our work, we will even have to face the relative privilege and power many of us enjoy because of our social locations. That is hard to do.

When the work feels hard, my hope is that we don't throw up our hands, but that we find ways to express – to lift up to the greater good – our doubts and fears, our emptiness and confusion. I hope we might ultimately feel sustained and comforted in those moments so that our souls become refreshed and we continue our work.

### **Dr. King's Prayer**

*We are still inflicted with economic injustice – Father forgive them. Simply because we want to be free there are those who will threaten our lives, cripple us with economic reprisals, and bomb our homes and churches – but Father forgive them.*

*There are still those hooded perpetrators of violence who will stop us out on some wayside road and beat us, leaving us half dead – but Father forgive them.*

*Right here in Montgomery, in spite of all our efforts, thousands of us are refused the right to become registered voters – but Father forgive them.*

*Our children, merely desiring education, are spat upon, cursed and kicked hither and yonder – but Father forgive them.<sup>x</sup>*

The New Testament source for Dr. King's words is Luke 23:34. These are words Jesus



speaks as he is dying on the cross: *Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."*

Martin Luther King's prayer comes from a prayer pilgrimage organized in Montgomery to protest the electrocution of Jeremiah Reeves, who, widely thought to be innocent, was arrested and put to death for allegedly raping a white woman. I find it a powerful prayer, for it demonstrates phenomenal fortitude to forgive such egregious violations. Economic injustice, violence of every description, disenfranchisement, attacks on children. Forgive all that? They know not what they do, surely. But forgive?

This prayer also asks me, in my position of relative privilege: Do I know what I do? Do I contribute to inequality in ways implicit, explicit, or complicit? Do I need to forgive myself and begin again?

There is power in forgiveness, and it comes in two ways.

First, when you forgive something, you release the hold that wrong has on you. If you hurt me somehow, and I hold onto resentment and anger, it is like allowing you to keep hurting me over and over again. But if I forgive you, I release my anger and resentment, and the hurt loses its power over me.

But here is the other thing about forgiveness, sometimes one needs to forgive with limits. Sometimes you have to say, "I forgive you, but you may never treat me that way again."

Forgive the police officers, for they know not what they do. They are part of a racist system that fears black men. They work a dangerous profession that puts them constantly at risk. So forgive them. But our country cannot continue to view and treat black men as we do. We must change. We will change.

And, forgive me for my part in an unjust system.

**Dr. King's Prayers (two):**

*God grant that we wage the struggle with dignity and discipline. May all who suffer oppression in this world reject the self-defeating method of retaliatory violence and seek the method that seeks to redeem.<sup>xi</sup>*

*O God, our gracious, heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the creative insights in the universe.*

*We thank Thee for the lives of great saints and prophets in the past, who have revealed to us that we can stand up amid the problems and difficulties and trials of life and not give in.*

*We thank Thee for our fore-parents, who've given us something in the midst of the darkness of exploitation and oppression to keep going.*

*And grant that we will go on with the proper faith and the proper determination of will so that we will be able to make a creative contribution to this world and in our lives. In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen.<sup>xii</sup>*

Let us be together in the spirit of prayer.

Spirit of Life and Love, we live in an imperfect world, a hard world, we know. Yet we seek to hitch our wagons to the star of hope and goodness. We seek to bring change, to bring a ministry of promise into a world of sorrow, violence, waste, and despair. We seek to end longstanding systems of inequality, and we know the work will be hard.

We give thanks for those who have gone before us – great teachers and prophets, among them Martin Luther King, Jr., whom we remember today. We stand on the shoulders of giants who made their visions of justice and peace known to us and who had the courage

to face a harsh world, speaking truth to power, even in the most trying of circumstances.

Where we enjoy privilege or power, we seek the courage to name it and share it. Where we feel doubt or confusion, we seek the heart of love that can hold us. Where we feel impatient or frustrated, we seek determination and perseverance but also a sense of the peace at the heart of all things that can guide us and sustain us.

So may it be. Amen.

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i <http://simonbarrow.net/reflect3.html>

ii All prayers of Martin Luther King, Jr., come from *Thou, Dear God: Prayers that Open Hearts and Spirits* by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.; edited by Lewis Baldwin, 2011. Boston: Beacon Press.

iii *Thou, Dear God*, p. 15.

iv *Thou, Dear God*, p. xx.

v *Thou, Dear God*, p. 19.

vi To Pray Without Apology: Why Martin Luther King Jr. Wasn't a Unitarian Universalist, by Rosemary Bray McNatt. UU World, November/December 2002. <http://uuworld.org/2002/06/feature2.html>

vii Ibid. McNatt.. <http://uuworld.org/2002/06/feature2.html>

viii *Thou, Dear God*, p. 77.

ix *Thou, Dear God*, p. 76.

x *Thou, Dear God*, p. 95.

xi *Thou, Dear God*, p. 87.

xii *Thou, Dear God*, p. 99.