

***Don't Mourn, Organize***  
Lake Street Church of Evanston  
Rev. Michael Woolf  
January 19, 2020

Today as we gather to honor Martin Luther King Jr. in churches all across this nation, it bears mentioning that he died with a 75% disapproval rating, hated staunchly not just for his fight for racial equality but also for opposing the Vietnam War in which black men were sent “eight thousand miles to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia or East Harlem.” He was tugged at from all sides, for there were certainly those who wanted more fundamental and revolutionary change in American society, and there were those white moderates that thought he was moving too quickly. And now of course he has a big statue in Washington, he’s a hero of the republic, and people of all political persuasions rush to misquote him and use them for political gain. I’m certain there will be a few tweets today and tomorrow that you can find that are, let’s say disingenuous at best. We build tombs for the prophets that our ancestors destroyed. Rarely has there every been someone so thoroughly vindicated, so profoundly celebrated, and so ignored when it comes to advancing the sorts of theological and political ideas that his prophet vision demanded.

I want to talk about Martin Luther King’s dream today because I believe that King did not dream alone – he dreamed the dream that God has for us in our lives together. Because what happens when you are in sync with the divine is that your dreams are the dreams of the divine, your hopes are her hopes, your passions are her passions. You become more fully in step with what the holy is doing in this world. That’s what a prophet is – not someone that can tell the future, but someone who shares God’s dream.

I would like to suggest to you a couple of things that the spiritual person ought to care about in 2020 and in our world. Over the past 3 years, the average American life expectancy has gone down, sustaining a trend. One of the reasons for this is what folks call deaths of despair – overdose, suicide, and diseases like cirrhosis of the liver. These deaths of despair are increasingly claiming Americans in the prime of their life. The reason for these increases are complex, of course, but they are not as mysterious and unable to be tackled as many would have you believe. But a recent study came out this week that linked a \$1 increase in the minimum wage with a 6% decrease in suicide. Hear that again – a \$1 increase in the minimum wage reduces suicide by 6%. What that tells me is that, if you didn’t already think so, it’s clear that economic empowerment and raising the minimum wage, along with affordable and accessible healthcare is a spiritual issue. It is not a fundamental shift in our nation’s economic system, but it demonstrates that the pressures of poverty and being stuck have real mental health consequences. We can save lives by fighting for better healthcare and increases in the minimum wage – making our society more flourishing and ridding it of deaths of despair is the dream of God. It is a spiritual issues, and I call on you to be a part of that dream.

And I would like to talk briefly as well about our community's recent reparations initiative. Now, I want to say flat out that I have no experience on how much money should be placed in the city of Evanston's reparations initiative, nor do I know if the tax structure is the best way to do it, I just know that I am proud to live in a community that is trying to have some conversations about equity, race, and justice. Flourishing is not just a national level thing, it is a local thing as well, and what this says to me is that we are committed to figuring out how to chart a path forward as a community that attends to all the messiness and pain of racism here in Evanston. I think that is part of God's dream, and it is something that we should honor on this Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday. Now, not all dreams are free of awkwardness or uncomfortability. In fact, I would estimate for white folks it will mean a lot of introspection, a lot of grappling with personal narrative, a lot of talking about race, even though it seems hard to do. I want to encourage you to support finding ways for Evanston to be for everyone in this community and not just for the white and wealthy. Remember, especially, MLK specifically named white moderates who disagreed with his tactics and wanted him to slow down as some of the more effective enemies of the movement.

There is a temptation on MLK Jr. Day to mourn and to go on YouTube and look at a few speeches. I encourage you to do so, and especially don't skip some of the sermons and speeches about Vietnam. But really all of that is just surface level stuff if you don't share the same dream that King had, which was the dream of God for the flourishing of all of God's children. Everyone can share that dream – it is available for everyone. But once you share that dream you will find yourself called to action – you won't mourn, you'll organize for a world in which there is flourishing. You'll fight for justice and equality in a way that seems imprudent and unwise.

Hatred took Martin Luther King Jr. from the world before he could witness some of the great reforms of the Civil Rights Era, before his view on the Vietnam War could be declared a consensus, before his work was done. But King's dream was always bigger than him – it was God's dream. It was a dream that declared that the world and its problems were inexorably bound up in God's redemptive will. It was a dream that cost him his life, but he would ask you whether you're even alive if you aren't willing to risk yours for the sake of something. As Terry Eagleton put it, "the central doctrine of Christianity, then, is not that God is a bastard. It is, in the words of the late Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe, that if you don't love you're dead, and if you do, they'll kill you." There is so much work to be done – but there are also dreams to be dreamed. In my definition of prophet everyone can participate, so long as your dream is God's dream, and I hope that you will dream with God of a new world, but I also hope you'll not give into despair and that you'll organize to make it happen.