



The Beloved Community



A Sermon By
The Rev. Richard D. Meadows, Jr.

January 15, 2017

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at:
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2017-01-15-RDM.mp3>.

The Beloved Community

The Rev. Richard D. Meadows, Jr.
Grace Episcopal Church
The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration
January 15, 2017

Paul writes, I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind-- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you-- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Today at Grace we remember the life of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This the annual celebration of his birthday January 15th, granted as a federal holiday in 1983. Just a sidebar, not every state accepted the birthday as a holiday. In Alabama: "Robert E. Lee/Martin Luther King Birthday." In Arkansas: "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert E. Lee's Birthdays". In Idaho: "Martin Luther King Jr. – Idaho Human Rights Day." In Mississippi: "Martin Luther King's and Robert E. Lee's Birthdays." In Virginia: it was known as Lee–Jackson–King Day. Today we want to look at the Dream and creation of the Beloved Community. But I want to look at it through the lens of the MLK Letter from the Birmingham Jail. I want to pinpoint for some of you just how difficult it has been to struggle and remain in fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Listen to this:

In a speech on the abolition of slavery, given January 16, 1832 by Henry Berry, House of Delegates of Virginia. Speaking on behalf of those fearful of a slave revolt. "...We have as far as possible, closed every avenue by which light might enter their minds...(the mind of the slave)...to extinguish the capacity to see the light and our work will have been completed; they will have been reduced to the level of beasts in the field, and we should be safe." In Virginia alone Berry placed the value of Slaves at \$100,000,000.

MLK - Let us consider, first, the need for a tough mind, characterized by incisive thinking, realistic appraisal, and decisive judgment. The tough mind is sharp and penetrating, breaking through the crust of legends and myths and sifting the true from the false. The tough-minded individual is astute and discerning. He has a strong, austere quality that makes for firmness of purpose and solidness of commitment.

These are just two quotes to compare and contrast with Paul's words...so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen

you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

When we were younger there were many hours spent at the dining room or kitchen table of our homes. These family gatherings sometimes included three and four generations of family members. I had a fondness for the gatherings at my grandparents' house. The gatherings were times of safety and filled with tenderness of the heart. For all intents and purposes, let's call this conversation today an in-gathering of the family. Those family dinner conversations were not always political discussions nor were they check-ins to see how you were doing. Sometimes they would evolve into knock-down drag out fight between loud and boisterous aunts and uncles. They were also times of love and affirmations, times whereby the elders could share golden nuggets of wisdom. The children would listen and only hope they could say anything. There were for some nasty family secrets that never saw the light of day and many still carry the scars and wounds of abuse and hidden secrets. However today we will begin to place somethings on the table of transparency so that as our text says, we lack nothing and may see the light.

Martin Luther King receives a letter from the dated January 1963ⁱ titled "An Appeal to Law and Order and Common Sense." In it they promoted gradualism and the obedience of every law – both just and unjust – much to the chagrin of Dr. Martin Luther King. He said, "This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy."ⁱⁱ The letter concluded with, "We respectfully urge those who strongly oppose desegregation to pursue their convictions in the courts, and in the meantime peacefully to abide by the decisions of those same courts. We recognize that our problems cannot be solved in our strength or on the basis of human wisdom alone. The situation that confronts us calls for earnest prayer, for clear thought, for understanding love, and or courageous action. Thus we call on all people of goodwill to join us in seeking divine guidance as we make our appeal for law and order and common sense." Signed by Methodist, Catholic, Episcopal, Baptist and Jewish clergy. After MLK and others come to Birmingham there appeared this new letter or public statement dated Good Friday, April 1963 and it is from eight of the original prominent clergy. This new letter called for MLK to cease his non-sen-sical activities along with those protesting the racism and mistreatment of the Negro population of Birmingham. They spoke in the format of a published business letter, in a common sense way that natural impatience should give way to calmer civil behavior and discourse. There should be a withdrawal from the peaceful yet potentially violent protests of MLK and the outsiders. These eight clergy encouraged the Negro population to wait on Law, order and common sense to come through the courts. Martin pens a letter known as a Letter from a Birmingham Jail, and he like Paul writes about the struggle of the early church Christian who suffers violence and persecution at the hands of a powerful Roman occupier and government (of whom he is a citizen) must speak of the imbalance in power. Martin

who is a prophet, who speaks to power, not only to Wallace, Conner and Kennedy but to the state government, people of Alabama and to the three branches of the federal government. Martin through his actions and words conveys that the Black citizens of this republic will no longer (if I may borrow from Community Healing Network) believe the lie of the Black man and woman as inferior. They were not worthy of segregation, no matter how separate but equal. So that there was no misunderstanding Martin answers the clergy with the statement “we are too God intoxicated to be astronomically intimidated.” He tells the brothers of the churches in the letter that “You may be too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and our world.”

That’s begs the question then who will be considered the ecclesia, the church, the called out ones and will leave their comfort zones, secure congregations and join as active partners in the struggle for freedom? It is the Dream of MLK that the church in this decisive hour will meet the challenge and answer the question in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “Here am I Lord! Send me!” Martin, explains to the clergy you commend the Birmingham police force for keeping order and preventing violence, and you cannot use your common-sen-sical imaginations to understand how hard it was for the Negro. The clergy had yet to see the dogs with blood on their mouths, the police officers dragging the elderly men and women from their knees, from the posture of prayer, the beating and jailing of children, and the ultimate betrayal of humankind in response to Martin’s Letter from the Birmingham Jail, was to place a bomb in the undercroft of the 16th Street Baptist Church. The bomb kills four little black girls. Addie Mae Collins; 14, Cynthia Wesley; 14, Carole Robertson; 14 and Denise McNair age 11. The collateral damage included another 20 injured and the following days of rioting two more children are killed. President John F. Kennedy responds by saying, "If these cruel and tragic events can only awaken that city and state - if they can only awaken this entire nation to a realization of the folly of racial injustice and hatred and violence, then it is not too late for all concerned to unite in steps toward peaceful progress before more lives are lost." Paul and our gospel today take us to a place where few dare to go. He says that we are the church, and the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind-- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you-- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Get this Paul says this in the midst of his own tribulations

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

³⁶ As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

³⁷ Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

³⁸ For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

³⁹ Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Martin concludes this letter for the call of and the creation of the beloved community. He even apologizes to the clergy in advance and says that if he settles for anything less than a relationship with them, God forgive him. And I like Martin state today that if I've overstated the possibilities of creating here at Grace, the beloved community that Martin, Paul and Jesus speak of then you forgive me. I say let the dark clouds of insincerity, the ugliness of racism, the hurt of a confederate window, the monuments to the dead who'd just as soon, enslave me and on Sunday mornings march in with the cross held high. Those who wear the robes of justice on the bench and switch them for the robe of a Klansman, well, I stand on Holy Ground. I am standing right here on Holy ground and it speaks to me. It holds the blood of the ancestors, it is Stoney Road of James Weldon Johnson, the Mule Bone Controversy of Zora Neale Hurston, the Strange Fruit in the voice of Nina Simone and Billie Holiday, it is the Black and Blue of Louis Armstrong, the Man that was Almost a Man of Richard Wright and the Invisible Man of Ralph Ellison. It is the Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Happiness by Adams, Sherman, Franklin, Jefferson and Livingston. It is the Resurrection and the Life of Jesus. It is the Dream of Martin Paul, Martin and Jesus speak of creation of this Beloved community and it is to be built not on the backs of slaves, purchased by the financial power of the rich, declared in the halls of congress, nor signed into legislation by the pen of the president. It is by the Spirit of God. God told Zechariah, When it was time to build the new Temple at Jerusalem, he said "go tell Zerubbabel, this will not be by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord of the Hosts of heaven." We the people of Grace have the ability to create on earth that which has been created in heaven, a beloved community. Amen.

ⁱ http://exco2010.nonresistance.org/Birmingham_Jail.pdf

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther King Jr.'s [I Have a Dream](#) speech, delivered August 28, 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC