

# Where Do We Go From Here?

January 17, 2021

“Where Do We Go From Here” is the title of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s last book as well as the title of the speech he delivered at the 10th anniversary convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Coalition in 1967. Rev. Dr. King asked, “Where do we go from here,” three years after the Civil Rights Act was signed, two years after the upheaval in Watts, amidst what some called the Summer of Love, but others experienced as a summer of violence and upheaval. He asked his peers and fellow prophets this question just nine months before he would be assassinated, eleven months before Bobby Kennedy would be assassinated.

While the particulars are different, I suspect many of you join me in saying that the times we’re in right now feel similarly chaotic and troublesome. In the seven months since George Floyd’s murder, we have continued to see all-too-regular killings of unarmed black people by police, the widening of the economic gap between those who are rich and poor, and the blatant insurrection and sedition at the Capitol last week.

And so, as our nation celebrates Rev. Dr. King’s birthday this week, it is only fitting that we once again lift up his question, “Where do we go from here?” Rev. William H. Lamar IV is the pastor of Metropolitan American Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington D.C. His church was vandalized by white supremacists in December. Since then, he has received thousands of messages of support: emails, cards, crayon drawings, checks and money orders from all over the world, intended to help, encourage, and strengthen his congregation. He says that all of these gestures of support show, “the light of God burns brightly in the hearts of so many.” AND, as he opens the mail, he says that the real work is to open himself.

The racist attack on his church and the subsequent outpouring of support of so many has led him to reflect, “I must stop resisting and yield to the powerful energy of the spiritual stirrings inside me. These stirrings occur when the dust, from which we were made, is persistently beckoned by the divine. When we attune to them, when we shun distraction, when those silent stirrings are so loud that they can no longer be ignored, we can travel to the place where humanity and divinity meet in us.” Then, he pivots slightly, acknowledging that, “Sometimes our humanity and divinity dance. Often our humanity and divinity wrestle.”

As deeply appreciative as he and his church are for the outpouring of love and support, he fears that the cards and checks assuage the spiritual stirrings on behalf of people of good will to do something, and to some extent become sentimental dead-ends, rather than truly affecting change. “Doing something sweet for people who have suffered, especially in response to spiritual stirrings, can teeter on the edge of escapism. It can shield us from doing the hard work of figuring out why people suffer and how we can alleviate that suffering. We turn the page feeling better about the situation and ourselves, but the systems that make suffering possible remain unchanged.”

Friends, both the depth and breadth of the racism in this country are calling all Christians, all followers of Jesus, all of us who pledge to make the Christ Spirit dominant in our lives and in all human relations, to more than mere sentimentality. We’re being called to be agents of grace, transforming systems and power structures to reflect more of what Rev. Dr. King named the Beloved Community.

“We are being called to disrupt this world and to co-labor with God as God inaugurates the new heaven and the new earth...to disrupt the visible oppression outside our sanctuary.” (Lamar)

Lamar cites the Gospel passage that Traci read for us today, where we learn that Jesus’ mission is to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. And points out the urgency with which Jesus makes this proclamation. Jesus doesn’t say “someday” this will come about. He tells all who will listen, “TODAY, this is fulfilled in your hearing.”

According to Luke, Jesus intends to disrupt systems that cause poverty, imprisonment, sickness and oppression. Jesus intends to disrupt how economies and relationships are ordered.”

Tomorrow night at 7 p.m., you’re all invited to participate in a Zoom “Table Read” of excerpts from King’s “Where Do We Go From Here?” We’re offering this in lieu of the annual Gathered In Faith Together MLK Day service which isn’t happening this year because of the pandemic. There’s no need to read the text ahead of time, though if you’d like to, a link to the portion we’ll be reading is in your This Week at Union, as is the Zoom link.

In “Where Do We Go From Here?” King looks to the Gospel passage that I read today, the story of Nicodemus. In 1967, amidst the advances and struggles and chaos of our nation that year, Rev. Dr. King admonished the Southern Christian Leadership Coalition with Jesus’ response to Nicodemus’ question, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” Jesus told Nicodemus he must be born again, and Rev. Dr. King told his fellow Christians that Jesus said:

In other words, ‘Your whole structure must be changed.’ A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will ‘thingify’ them and make them things. And therefore, they will exploit them, and poor people in general, economically. And a nation that will exploit economically will . . . have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together.

What I am saying today is that we must go from this convention and say, ‘America, you must be born again!’

There are no better words to wrap up our reflection today than those of Rev. Dr. King himself:

Let us be dissatisfied until America will no longer have a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds.

Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort and the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice.

Let us be dissatisfied until those that live on the outskirts of hope are brought into the metropolis of daily security.

Let us be dissatisfied until slums are cast into the junk heaps of history, and every family is living in a decent sanitary home.

Let us be dissatisfied until the dark yesterdays of segregated schools will be transformed into bright tomorrows of quality, integrated education.

Let us be dissatisfied until integration is not seen as a problem but as an opportunity to participate in the beauty of diversity.

Let us be dissatisfied until men and women, however black they may be, will be judged on the basis of the content of their character and not on the basis of the color of their skin.

Let us be dissatisfied.

Let us be dissatisfied until every state capitol houses a governor who will do justly, who will love mercy and who will walk humbly with their God.

Let us be dissatisfied until from every city hall, justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Let us be dissatisfied until that day when the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, and every person will sit under their own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid.

Let us be dissatisfied until all people recognize that out of one blood God made all people to dwell upon the face of the earth.

Let us be dissatisfied until that day when nobody will shout “White Power!” when nobody will shout “Black Power!” but everybody will talk about God’s power and human power.

Let this affirmation be our ringing cry. It will give us the courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom.

When our days become dreary with low hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.

Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. Let us realize that William Cullen Bryant is right: “Truth crushed to earth will rise again.”

...This is our hope for the future, and with this faith we will be able to sing in some not too distant tomorrow with a cosmic past tense, “We have overcome, we have overcome, deep in my heart, I did believe we would overcome.”

May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
**Luke 4:16-21, John 3:1-8**  
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