

January 17, 2010

My Dear Friends of Tabernacle United Church, (1)

Although I have not been among you for over forty years I have been watching. I was asked by Dick Fernandez if I could speak to you this morning. I first met Dick in 1959 when, in order to complete a paper he was doing on *The Aftermath of the Montgomery Bus Boycott*, he hitchhiked down to Montgomery, Alabama to interview key people associated with the boycott and then came to Atlanta to interview me. Later, and far more important, Dick as the Executive Director of Clergy and Laity Concerned, a national peace organization, orchestrated the speech I gave at Riverside Church in New York on April 4, 1967 in opposition to the Vietnam War. Dick was so effective that editorials in 162 major newspapers criticized me the morning immediately after my evening speech!

This morning I wanted to share a few thoughts about what has become Martin Luther King Day, the changes that have taken place these past years and the mission that lies ahead. Dick asked me to do this in just a few minutes but I know that you know that I am Baptist minister and I have a microphone...so it might take a tad longer than a few minutes. But who's counting?

I believe that each of you are called today to a genuine revolution of values. You are being called into a world-wide fellowship of values that goes beyond one's race, tribe and class. You are being called to love your neighbor. This is not some kind of Pollyanna wistfulness, but it stems from the unifying principle that unlocks the door to ultimate reality. * This deeply inter-religious belief is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of St. John that was read this morning:

"Let us love one another; for love is God and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God...God is love. If we love one another, God dwells in us, and God's love is perfected in us."

I believe this is the context in which you live.

I also believe that this call to love your neighbor, this love ethic, is what prompted the establishment of this holiday in my name and informs efforts that are taking place this weekend here in Philadelphia and across the country.

I am, of course, pleased and honored that the nation decided to honor me by having a national holiday in my name. I pray that at this time the nation will remember all of those nameless participants who gave life and meaning to the Rights Movement. As with most social change, only a very few people get noticed but without a very large chorus of participants nothing ever changes.

MLK Day in Philadelphia is particularly gratifying to me because of the thousands who volunteer their time and talent to improve the lives of others. People taking responsibility

for their neighborhoods and wider community is the bedrock for community-building. Having said that, there is one aspect of this volunteer day that I would like to comment on.

I would hope no one confuses their volunteering as a substitute for the kind of system change that is required to make Philadelphia a place where it truly honors the idea that it is a “city of sisterly affection and brotherly love for all.” Over the past twenty years or so you have done much to improve Center City and life for a few. It is past time to address the issues of poor neighborhoods, where many reside, with the same commitment and resources. This is not a new idea My dear friend Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote to President Kennedy over fifty years ago urging him to press for a “Marshall Plan” for the most neglected parts of our cities. I leave you with this question: If you were to organize a MLK Volunteer Day to advocate the kind of system changes required to drastically improve the life chances of those in your poorest neighborhoods, what would that day look like?

Just as this weekend marks a wide variety of small, incremental but important changes in Philadelphia neighborhoods, there have been great and important changes in our nation since I left you. Some of the many changes that come to mind include...

The increasing and impressive role women now play in all aspects of society...

The fact that African Americans have continued to make progress along their long journey toward equality...

The fact that acceptance of gays, lesbian and transgender citizens is now a subject of concern when in my time one could barely whisper about these matters....

The great strides that the environmental movement has made and the fact that many now understand this is a critical social justice issue – locally and globally...

And yes, the election to President of an African American.

I am sure each of you can add to this list.

I like to think that these and other changes over the past several years are in some way ripples from the small pebble of change that we introduced in my time. I do know this, God does not prompt social change in one generation without leaving succeeding generations tasks to do and new advocacy leaders to help in their accomplishment.

My Tabernacle friends you know better than I many good things that have transpired since I was with you. However you also know that “All (signs of) progress are precarious, and the solution of one problem brings us face to face with another.”

We know that evil is still at work in our nation. The face of evil is...

Violence...
Greed....
Prisons...
War and seemingly, forever war...
Venom in the political arena...

These are just some of the issues that cry out for attention. Many of you here this morning are engaged beyond the walls of this church in a wide variety of social change issues. I know this. I applaud your engagement. Your witness underscores what all of us know in the deepest part of our hearts: “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

I also know this. There is no greater issue plaguing this country – at home and aboard - than the issue of violence. During my speech at Riverside Church in 1967 in opposition to the War in Vietnam, which I mentioned at the beginning of this letter, I said, that “the United States in the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.” I believed that then. I continue to believe that to this day.

I weep for our nation.
We should all weep for our nation.*

In my darkest moments I use to think that there was, perhaps, a genetic flaw in the American psyche that was the basis for all of our violence – on television, in the streets, in homes and in distant parts of the world. But I knew that this was not the case. Our tendency toward violence lies deeply within the soul of the nation but it is a sickness not a spiritual death notice.

My old friend Bill Coffin had it right when he said that “we are beginning to resemble extinct dinosaurs who suffered from too much armor and too little brain.” Perhaps those with sufficient analytical skill can someday help you understand the why and wherefore of violence in America. **But moving ahead to address the many faces of violence is amoral imperative of today.**

You may ask “What can I do that will be effective?” My advice is to find somewhere that you can begin to make a contribution and not worry quite so much about effectiveness. As a member of this faith community I’d ask that you take your first step up in addressing the issue of violence – whether with an organization or movement – knowing that you will not see the entire “staircase of change” short of taking the first step up. * All social change is accomplished in a thousand small steps. It is a fool’s notion to think that because you can do little you choose to do nothing.

Each of you this morning can choose to be, or renew your pledge to be, a drum major for justice and peace. “And if you make the right choice, you will be able to transform what sometimes feels like a cosmic crisis of values into a creative period of peace. If you will make the right choice, you will be able to transform the jangling discords of the world into a beautiful symphony of sisterhood and brotherhood. If you will but make the right

choice, you will be able to speed up the day, all over America and all over the world, when justice will roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

Your brother,

Martin

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1) In preparing this letter from Dr. King I have expanded his mentioning of “brotherhood” to include “sisterhood.” I have also used direct quotes from King’s speeches when I altered them very so slightly to fit the audience. Finally, on a couple of occasions, I have paraphrased King and identified these phrases with a *.

Reverend Richard Fernandez is a minister in the United Church of Christ and is a member of Tabernacle Church. He presently is a consultant to religious congregations and non-profit organizations. As a student in college and seminary he was involved in the Civil Rights Movement. He also served for eight years as the Executive Director of Clergy and Laity Concerned, a national peace organization that arose in opposition to the War in Vietnam.