

A service in honor of the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr
St. Bartholomew's United Church, Hanover, PA
Presented by John M. Pawelek, January 22, 2006.

Children's Story: The Selma to Montgomery March, 1965

Selma, Alabama is about the same size of Hanover. Forty years ago black people in Selma lived on one side of town and white people on the other. The two were separated by a bridge. The black people were poor. Most of the white people had much more money. Unlike the white people, the black people had no running water or flush toilets. Their roads were made of dirt. Their children went to run-down schools. There was little they could do to change things. A big reason was that they couldn't vote. They lived in the greatest democracy in the world, but they couldn't vote for leaders that would help them improve their living conditions. To vote they would have to pay a poll tax that they couldn't afford, and pass a written test that they couldn't pass. Martin Luther King, Jr was a Baptist minister who came to Selma to help. Since they couldn't vote, he suggested another way--join together and march to the state capitol in Montgomery to ask the governor for help. To march to Montgomery was truly frightening. Not only was Montgomery 54 miles away, but the highway went through Ku Klux Klan country—white people that hated blacks. White people with guns and whips and ropes that they were not afraid to use on black people. To make matters worse, the Governor, George Wallace, had been elected by people like this.

But they decided to march anyway. On a Sunday in March, 1965, about 600 residents of Selma joined arms to march across the bridge. They never made it that day. They were beaten back by the sheriff's men—with water hoses, electric cattle probes, and attack dogs. The pictures were in newspapers and on TV all over the world. I remember them well as I'm sure many here today do as well. I found them to be devastating.

Martin Luther King would not let them give up. He and his helpers began to make phone calls. The word went out across the country. Thousands of people heard the word. I was

one of them. I was a graduate student at Brown University in Rhode Island. I saw a notice on the bulletin board about the march from Selma to Montgomery. I decided to go, as did two of my friends: Jim, a Lutheran minister, and Barry, a Jewish art teacher. On Saturday night we drove up to the Boston airport. Along with about 100 other volunteers, we got on to an old propeller plane and flew through the night to Alabama. We arrived about 3 or 4 in the morning to an amazing sight. The airport was jammed with people and flight after flight of more planes were coming in. Women, men, young and old of all colors and faiths had responded to Dr. King's call. There were many ministers and priests. And when we went outside the airport we were even more surprised. Lined up as far as the eye could see were old pick-up trucks and cars. Black farmers and others were driving us to the march. We were taken to a big field a few miles outside Montgomery to wait for Dr. King and the marchers from Selma. This time they had gotten past the bridge and were walking along the highway. Their numbers kept increasing. It was no longer 600 people, but thousands. They had been marching for three days already, and we were to join them for the last day going into Montgomery. While we were waiting, we ate the fried chicken that Linda had sent along. Then just at dawn there was an amazing sight. The marchers from Selma appeared. They were coming over a hill just as the sun was rising behind them. We saw them first as silhouettes. They were walking six-abreast with their arms linked. As they got closer we could see that Martin's group was leading. They walked right by us as we waited to join the end of the line. By now there were thousands and thousands of people. Maybe 25,000. They were singing. I'll never forget the singing. "We Shall Overcome" was the most popular song. Last week it was sung in churches throughout the world.

[Here have children link arms, sing one verse of We Shall Overcome]

We waited a long time, maybe two hours, for the end of the line where we could join in. Because I was tall and 22 years old, I was placed on the outside. I found my arm joined with that of a young black woman-- something unheard of in the South at that time. We marched and sang all morning. Slowly we made our way into downtown Montgomery. There were armed soldiers to protect us, but they wore a Confederate flag on their sleeve.

People were screaming and swearing at us from the sidewalks. I got particular attention because I was linked with a black woman. People threw things and even spit on us.

When we arrived at the state capitol, the area was filled with throngs of marchers. Martin Luther King was on the steps. He gave a fiery speech like only a Baptist preacher can give. He challenged the governor to help black people get the right to vote. But of course the governor wasn't there.

And then it was over. The pick-up trucks appeared and we were driven back to the airport. The march was the first of many yet to come, but it reached the nation's conscience. Later that year President Lyndon Johnson signed the equal voting rights act. This was the beginning of the end of laws to stop black people from voting.

And that is my story of the Selma to Montgomery march led by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sermon: Precious Lord Take My Hand

This morning our service is about Martin Luther King, Jr. and the continuing Civil Rights Movement in America. It is also about Jesus as a defender of social justice. This was central to his life and teachings. He taught and practiced that all are equal in God's eyes. It is the same social justice that is in the preamble to the American constitution. "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal".

Certainly no one doubts that Jesus was a social activist. Ultimately he died at the cross for it. Jesus was radical and outrageous. He accepted everyone as equal in God's eyes. Children, women, lepers, tax collectors and out-right criminals. One of his best friends, Mary Magdeline, was probably at one time a woman of the streets. He told us to love our enemies. He told us that the meek, the down-trodden and the peace-makers are blessed in God's eyes. He told us to be like the good Samaritan. Even today, these are radical teachings. But they are the reason that the vast majority of African Americans are Christians today. In God's eyes, all people are equal. These are particularly meaningful

words if you are a slave or otherwise oppressed. Jesus was also the reason why Martin Luther King, Jr. used non-violence as the guiding principle of his leadership in the civil rights movement of the 60's. "Love your enemy as yourself."

Martin Luther King, Jr knew well of Jesus and the good Samaritan. His father Martin Luther King, Sr was the beloved pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Martin, Jr became co-pastor with his father in 1960. Before that he had grown up in Atlanta. He was an outstanding student. He skipped the 9th grade, and in his junior year in high school his score on the college entrance examinations was so high that he advanced to college without formal graduation. He entered college at the age of fifteen. In 1948, he graduated from with a degree in Sociology. He went on to earn a divinity degree and than a PhD in theology. In 1953 he married Coretta Scott.

We all can point to events that changed our lives. One such event happened to Dr. King when he was in high school. His school had sent him to the state oratory competition where he won the second place prize. In those days, this was an amazing feat for an African American. It foretold his charismatic speaking abilities later on. On returning home, he took the bus. As usual he was forced to sit in the rear reserved for negroes. But this time it really struck home to him. How could he have done so well in the oratory contest with white students but not sit with white students on the bus? Years later, when Rosa Parks refused to sit in the negro section of the bus, Martin was deeply touched. His passion during the civil rights movement was fueled in part by her bravery.

Jesus could have delivered The Beatitudes with Africans Americans in mind. African Americans were brought to this country as slaves. White slavers entered their African villages and their homes and stole their young women, men, and children. Those thought healthy enough to make the long voyage to America were prized. The slaves were kept naked, chained in a half-lying position, and flogged for not eating. Many died at sea and were tossed overboard. Those who survived the voyage were transported to pens for auctioning. There was little concern for families during the sale. Mothers, fathers, children were separated at the buyer's will.

How could our Christian ancestors have been a part of such a practice? This is how. They convinced themselves that Africans were not fully human and thus could be treated as animals. The laws were written that way. For more than two hundred years the practice of slavery continued in America. By this time the slaves had turned firmly to Christianity for solace. They sang hymns yearning for salvation and rest after a life of sadness and unspeakable pain. "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen", "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child" , "There is a balm in Gilead". To end it required a civil war, shedding the blood of thousands of Americans, black and white. But even though slavery was abolished, the horrible psychic damage that it created remains today. When I grew up in Baltimore in the 1940's and 50's there were separate facilities for blacks. Separate schools, restaurants, swimming pools, and parks. Most blacks lived in the poorest areas of the city. Then, in the 1950's, the Supreme Court ruled for integration in all schools and public places. Brown vs the Board of Education. Maryland complied, but there was resistance even in Baltimore and it was particularly strong throughout the South, where white defiance reigned. These conditions, along with the extreme poverty and lack of voting rights, spawned the Civil Rights marches of the 60's. Martin Luther King, Jr. was elected leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from where he would lead the nation in achieving equal rights for all. And he brought his own favorite hymn to the movement, "Precious Lord Take My Hand".

Dr. King's rise to national prominence began August 1963 in the famous march on Washington. More than 250,000 people had gathered near the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC to rally for "jobs and freedom." This was two years before the Selma march. Dr. King was not yet very well known and only one of many speakers that day. But in the end the day belonged to him. As he had planned, he presented a short, formal summary of the sufferings of African Americans. He was about to sit down when gospel singer Mahalia Jackson called out, "Tell them about your dream, Martin! Tell them about the dream!" Encouraged by shouts from the audience, King spoke words that became the hallmark of civil rights in America -- a dream of all people, of all races and colors and backgrounds, sharing in an America marked by freedom and democracy.

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. “I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. I have a dream that my children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

Though his life was cut short by an assassin’s bullet, Dr. King’s dream lives on. Things have improved. The election of black political leaders—mayors, congressmen--is now routine. There has even been at least one black mayor of Selma. The black middle class has increased. More blacks attend colleges and professional schools.

But I must also tell you that the dream has not yet been realized. Our urban centers are filled with federal housing projects. Poverty still reigns in these largely African American communities. These are almost exclusively inhabited by single-mother families. The two-parent family was destroyed by slavery and never fully recovered. Children are raised in the midst of drugs, violent crimes, pregnancies in young girls and teenage boys being shot or in jail. There are few role models. I know many boys, good, friendly, talented boys, who have gone to jail. Some deserved it, many didn’t. Some have been murdered by rival gangs, and one alas, took his own life. Depression rates are very high in the inner city black community and especially high among teenagers. Today, one in three black boys will go to jail. There is little incentive to do well in school, in fact the opposite is often true. School grades are below average. It is self-perpetuating.

But I can testify that these children are as bright, sensitive, loving, and funny as any child you know. They are artistic and poetic. Friendly and caring. They love talking about

science, or acting in skits. But so many are doomed. Black boys are watched everywhere, especially when they walk into stores. They know. At its center remain the degradation of slavery and the hatred of racism. Jesus knew about this potential for this evil in humans. It was the major subject of his teachings.

Sadly, injustice and oppression continue to fester among us—not only for blacks in America but throughout the entire human race. What can we do to help? If you follow the teachings of Jesus the answer is easy: We should do everything possible. Love your neighbor as yourself. We can learn. We can teach our children by our actions and words that everyone is a child of God.

Martin Luther King finished his 1963 speech that day in Washington with faith and optimism:

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.”

Amen

Benediction: “Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand. I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light, take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.”

Go in peace, believe in peace, create peace. In the name of God the most Holy who guides us all. Amen.

SUPPLEMENTAL

-After the Selma march, we had a couple of hours before the plane was to take off, so Jim and I decided to walk out along the highway. We were approaching an intersection on the other side of a hill when we heard shots. We were frightened and turned back. Later we learned that a car full of KKK men had shot and killed a white woman, a Unitarian from Detroit named Viola Luizzo who was a volunteer driver.

-Africans weren't Christians when they first came to America. Of course, they had their own religions. Virginia law in the 1660's stated that it was acceptable for Christians to enslave non-Christians. And when slaves began converting to Christianity, the laws were soon changed to be based on skin color rather than religion. It became legal to enslave someone who had dark skin, Christian or not.

Eric's Story

As an example of current life for African Americans, I would like to tell you the story of Eric. A young man who grew up in a federal housing project in New Haven, CT where I have been working with our church as a volunteer.

Eric was 13 or 14 when I first met him in the mid-1990's. He was in a group of inner city youth from a federal housing project in New Haven that came to our church on Wednesday evenings. We soon learned that Eric's mother was a drug addict and he lived with his aunt, sisters and cousins. Eric was one of the most popular members of the group and was a natural leader. Like most African Americans, he was a Christian and went to church frequently. He was always cooperative, good-natured, attentive to the younger children, and all-in-all an excellent role model. He had never presented any discipline problems. Against all odds, he did well in school, and often worked on his homework during the church youth gatherings.

Just a few summers ago, there was a treat in store for the kids in the 'projects'. Through a summer grant for inner city youth, a trip to Riverside Amusement Park in Massachusetts had been arranged. On a sunny day in June, two busses with 60 happy children, ages 6-16, and adult chaperones from the projects took off for the park. Everyone was given a pass for the day that included all the rides. Riverside had great rides. Recently it had advertised that it was an 'all new Family Park'. But as we will see, this had ominous meanings.

Things started well. The kids naturally split up according to age group, and the teenage boys, about 15 of them, were going everywhere together. Suddenly two park guards accused one of the boys of not paying for his milkshake. The other boys knew this couldn't be possible because of the way the payment system was set up. But they were all told to stand in a certain area. Very quickly, the rest of the children were brought there. It was easy to find them. They were African Americans and their passes identified them as

being from New Haven, CT. They were told they had to leave. Eric, feeling responsibility as a leader, spoke up and told the guard that his friend was innocent. The arresting officer approached Eric in a threatening way. Eric had done nothing to deserve this approach. He was frightened, he started to back away--admittedly a mistake--but at this the officer grabbed him and began swearing at him and calling him racial names. He threw Eric to the ground and hand-cuffed him. The officer offered to remove his gun and fight Eric with fists. When some of the adults requested his badge number, he and his fellow officers hid their badges, and pretended not to speak English. By this time the local police had arrived. Eric was thrown into an unmarked car by two plain clothed men and driven to jail. There he was charged as a "disorderly person" and for "resisting arrest". The children were taken to the busses and driven home frightened and traumatized. Some of the adults got into their car and made their way to the jail. At 2:30 AM Eric was released with a court date in August. An officer drew them a map to get home to New Haven, but it sent them the opposite direction, into Vermont. They arrived back at the projects at dawn.

But it wasn't over. We had to make sure Eric made his court appearance in August. It was for 8AM in Juvenile Court in Springfield, MA, 90 miles away. I arrived with my van in the courtyard of the projects at 5:30 AM. It was dark. One by one back doors opened and Eric and the five witnesses (3 boys and 2 girls) came out to the car. They did this on their own, no adult was yet awake as far as I could tell. Eric's aunt had bought him a white shirt, as I had urged, and I tied the tie I had brought for him around his neck. We got there in enough time to have a great breakfast in the restaurant down the street from the courthouse—the first of several as it turned out. Then we went to court. We waited, and waited for hours. Finally we were told that the prosecutor had postponed the case until next month. We had been warned that this how the prosecutors win cases, by delaying until the witnesses and the accused no longer show up. Well, over the next few months we repeated this same trip 3 more times, with postponement after postponement. The final time, unexplainably the judge looked at us in the back of the courtroom and dismissed the case. We were in disbelief. We had won! The kids were jubilant. Today, Eric is a graduate of a two-year trade school. He has a nice job in computer repairs and his own car and apartment.

This story has a good ending, but I am sorry to say that there are so many more that do not. Of the five kids who were Eric's witnesses, one is in jail for selling drugs, and the other took his own life rather than shoot a member of a rival gang. Seeing them behind the scenes, these were loving, smart, and talented kids. Yet, today, 1 in 3 black males go to prison. One in three!