

Editor's note: The following article is a homily prepared for the observance of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. This year the holiday occurs on Monday, January 17. Due to the ecumenical witness of Dr. King and the holiday's proximity to the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute has annually provided a sermon on Dr. King as a resource to integrate the Week of Prayer with this important American holiday, for the benefit of the churches in the USA. These sermons have previously been published in a Week of Prayer resource booklet that is no longer printed. The resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, including the homily below, can now be found on the Graymoor Institute website, www.geii.org.

Martin Luther King: An American Icon

BY REV. MONICA A. COLEMAN, PH.D.

Every Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, we have a choice. We can describe King's words, work and actions with a longing to return again to a golden period in recent history. We see King as an emblem of a time when we knew what was right and what was wrong. He represents a time when good people locked arms together, marching down the street fighting the police, institutions and governments who committed injustices against Americans. We see King as a leader of a movement that made gains by changing both laws and the texture of people's everyday lives.

Or, we can describe King's words, work and actions with the wish that he had never died. We crave the leader that we once had – one who will speak truth to power and guide us through equally difficult times. Not since has the black community, has America, had a leader like King. He was able to bring people together and inspire us. We need another King.

I have heard numerous versions of these two approaches for all of my life. I speak as an African American woman who shudders when watching the "Eyes on the Prize" videos, but never lived in a segregated, Jim Crow age. King was dead for several years before my parents even thought to conceive me. Yet I, like many others of my generation, have lived in the shadow of *the* Martin Luther King, Jr. – a shadow cast by African American churches, civil rights organizations and those of us "who marched with King."

Thus King Day has become an occasion to deify Martin Luther King. In our remembrance, we make him larger than life. Our nostalgia, grief and admiration

combine to make King into something like MTV's icon. We have a picture, streaming video and various adaptations of VH1's "behind the music" dipped in civil rights politics. We herald King as someone we can look up to; someone we can idolize. For most of today's young people, King is a day off of school and an "I have a dream" sound bite. And, like MTV's icon, there is a media blitz, and then there is nothing.

And yet I often think that the aforementioned options are the only choices we have with King Day. We can desire a return of the civil rights era, or we can pine for another King. These seem to be the only ways we know how to honor a good one who has died too young. I choose the second option for one reason alone – because the focus on the personhood and leadership of King propels me to rephrase a popular question: "What would Martin Luther King, Jr. say?" If we had a King, if King were here, what would he have to say about America in 2005?

I think that King would understand the various forces that are oppressing people around the world. Near the end of his career, King began to speak out against both poverty and war. He understood that the fight for civil rights and justice-for-all extended beyond the experiences of African Americans in the Deep South. He identified racism, militarism and extreme materialism as "triplets of evil" that overlapped and interlocked to create a self-perpetuating system of daily misery for many of the world's people. He understood that this system was a far cry from the ideals that America's founders desired for this country.

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there are many more –isms that have come to tear the world apart. I think King would understand the various forces that are oppressing people around the world. I think he would understand that they work together; that no American is innocent of committing or benefiting from them. I think that he would name them.

He would resist the various wars and ethnic fighting occurring around the world. He would strive for ways to find peace and common ground. He would care about the criminalization of African American men, and who benefits from the building of prisons and the unjust application of law. He would loathe the disenfranchisement of any Americans – the early voters and Floridians alike. He would be concerned about the things that divide us: the division between East and West, Christianity and Islam, between the Christian right, progressive Christians and all those in the middle. He would want us to find what is common and work towards that.

I like to think that he might recognize his own entrenched sexism and begin to renounce it. He might then fight for women's rights like equal pay and parental leave. He might speak out against sexual and domestic violence. He would recognize that the oppression of women and children is another abuse of power. I like to think that he would support the American Disabilities Act. He would want persons living with physical and mental disabilities to have equal access to both places and opportunities. He would see the ways in which society discriminates against its own. For this reason, I also think he would fight for

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universal health care. I like to think that he would extend his love for humanity to a concern for the earth, fighting for the health of the planet. He would care about pollution and the ways in which it disproportionately affects the poor. He would care that we are killing our animals, resources and greenery at rates that could eradicate the planet's ability to sustain life.

I also think that Martin Luther King would be an ecumenist; even supporting religious pluralism. When King met with Mahatma Gandhi, he admired him and learned from him without forsaking his own faith. He would see that Christians indeed have more in common than not.

I don't think that King would support everything that I do. He might not use gender-inclusive language for God. It would be a stretch to assume that King would support gay marriage. I cannot speculate about his stance on a woman's right to choose. But I do think that he would want civil rights and equality for the world's inhabitants.


I truly believe he would rally people together around these issues. I believe he would want to resist them all nonviolently. And he would do all these things, not just because they are the right thing to do, but because he felt that God called him and all of creation to do no less. He would embrace, and possibly quote, Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3:9: "For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building."

I'll admit that this kind of speculation is dangerous. But perhaps Martin Luther King Day can allow us to see King as an icon – an icon in the true sense of the word. Like King, I've been raised in the black Baptist tradition where the word "icon" is rarely used, if at all. I've been raised in an Afri-

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can American Protestant culture that has refused any images of God more than the semblance of Michelangelo's brother on a church fan. I have learned about icons from my spiritual partner with the Catholic upbringing. She holds a wooden cross about the size of a child's block. She looks intently at the candle's flame. I have learned about icons when I stumbled into a coffee shop in Nashville that offered vegetarian sandwiches in front of an Eastern Orthodox church and bookstore in the back. There are small pictures of a brown-skinned Moses hanging on small hooks. I've learned that icons are not idols. They are not places where we stop and long for the past, and worship. Icons, rather, are like stained glass – various colored opportunities through which we might see the sun/ Son shine. A true icon is a window through which we can see the divine. I'd like to think of Martin Luther King as this kind of American icon.

Maybe all this icon-talk also deifies King. After all, he was human, as we are. He made mistakes, overlooked issues, and hurt other people as we all do at one

point or another. I've turned my "What would King do?" question into the ideal fights for justice around the world. But this glossy discussion that highlights the best of King, might also call us to be the best that we can be. It might allow us to use him as an American icon; using his words, work and actions as a window through which we might see and hear God. So that this day and this year, we can best honor King by saying what King would say, doing what King might do, and being the kind of beloved community to which we are called. 

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