

## *Plenty of Spirit to Go Around*

1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

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Tomorrow we celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a nation. To many this is simply another bank holiday. Kids are home from school—it's a good excuse for a long weekend trip, if you aren't still reeling from the holidays. On this day dedicated to the memory of King, you may recall the "I Have a Dream Speech," pegging his lofty words as the antidote to a virulent racism of long ago. You might pause to think of him as the pioneer who paved the way for legislation that brought about unprecedented progress in American race-relations. Your mind's eye replays a series of images that begin with police beating protestors in the streets with clubs to the inauguration of Barack Obama.

Indeed, this holiday is about celebrating progress, but it is also about stepping back and considering how far we have left to go. It's difficult to speak of the intentions of the deceased, but I think it's safe to say this is what King would hope for. After all, he was a man who labored tirelessly to bring about a more just world. Working to bring about changes that many thought were too radical with tactics that were too disruptive, he was beaten and imprisoned by officials in the name of the rule of law. In their eyes, he was the preeminent agitator of his day. This, however, did not deter him from his task. In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, he wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." His task was not one he could do by alone, nor could African-Americans do it alone. It was a task for all people, because everyone had a stake in the fruit of the labor.

King had an active ministry at a time when people flat out rejected his calls for equality or sympathized, but thought that he was asking for too much change, too fast. As groups such as Black Lives Matter confront the mainstream with African-American deaths at the hands of the police and the mushrooming incarceration rates of people of color, we know in our hearts that the justice journey has many miles ahead. America's original sin still lingers: our country continues to exploit and abuse African-American bodies to bolster the emotional and economic well-being of a pre-dominantly European-American middle-class. An offensive to preserve "whiteness" remains written into our laws and cultural norms—and no explicitly racist words must be spoken. You can see it in schools, neighborhoods, and too often churches.

Most African-Americans have known this for decades. Unfortunately, it has taken the recent high profile, legally authorized killings of African-Americans for even lefty European-American liberals to recognize white supremacy's broad reach in the post-civil rights era. There is still a hierarchy that grants countless privileges to those with fair skin and challenges to this with dark skin.

Dealing with unjustified hierarchy is not a new problem confronting Christians. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth that was having its own issues with unjust hierarchy. Rather than having the gift of a particular skin hue, there were some in the community because of their knack for speaking in tongues, which today we might associate with ecstatic speech, demanded expanded church privilege. Naturally, this caused strife in the community, and word got around to Paul. His response to the conflict is egalitarian, but he doesn't gloss over differences. He writes:

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

He calls those within the church to see one another for who they are in God's eyes: each bestowed with different gifts, but all moved by the Holy Spirit toward the common good for the sake of God's glory. In Corinth, some church members were placing undue value on their difference, and they failed to value the diverse gifts others brought to the community.

Not getting caught up in arbitrary definitions of value within the church is challenging, but it is even harder to confront these unfair definitions in the public square. It will take a great deal of work to deconstruct the systems that disproportionately benefit people with fair skin and penalize those with darker skin.

It takes more than limiting our own sins. It requires us to embrace the gifts of the ones the world fails to properly value and to see them as God does: offering a crucial contribution to the common good. We have to continuously ask ourselves whether we fairly appreciate one another's gifts.

Of course, taking such bold actions requires risks. When the world says that dark skin is dangerous and violent, it takes courage to respond differently. When you place another person's pocketbook at risk, you expose yourself to the hostile reactions of those who will do anything to maintain their advantage.

You will have to ask yourself the hard questions: To whom do I hold myself accountable? Is it to fear? Is it to a vague sense of security, clinging to all I can get my hands on in a zero-sum game? Or is it to Christ and a culture of abundance?

Perhaps no scripture reveals the culture of abundance associated with Jesus better than the wedding at Cana. After a brief exchange, with his mother, Mary, Jesus finally embraces his identity as the one who comes to earth so that all might "have life, and have it abundantly." He simply used the elements at his disposal, stone jars and water, to lavishly extend the celebration and joy of the new beginning that comes in the marriage of a couple. In Christ,

everyday God offers us a new start, a chance to transform scarcity into abundance using whatever simple tools we can get our hands on.

Now this church and many of us in it are blessed with many tools at our disposal. An important one of these is access to information. Regardless of whether it is on your smart phone, a newspaper, or a book from one of the several libraries in town, you have the tools to learn so much more than what is in your immediate sphere of experience.

One of the blessings of this holiday Monday is that it gifts many of us with some extra time. If you haven't already, my advice for you is to use some of it to educate yourself on "white supremacy" and the new dimensions of American racism. There are numerous African-American leaders interpreting King's legacy, offering a new way forward for American race relations.

One book that I have found particularly informative is Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*. It is written in the form of a letter to his teenage son. He writes, "I tell you now that the question of how one should live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream, is the question of my life, and the pursuit of this question, I have found ultimately answers itself." The book frames his story and America's story within the context of race. He even offers insights into his own engagement with African-American intellectuals who see the issue of race and potential remedies differently. Rather than speaking in broad sweeping terms that essentialize the African-American community, he tells his own story, humanizing his experience for all who read his book. To borrow from Toni Morrison's review of the book, "This is required reading."

Looking at race relations in America through Paul's lens, we must embrace the spiritual gifts not just of passed civil rights leaders like Dr. King, but also modern ones, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates. If we truly put our trust in Christ, we can trust that God offers us a cultural of abundance with plenty of Spirit to go around. We can trust that God has tied us in a single garment of destiny with all equipped with gifts to share. Amen.

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