

King and "The Other America"

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

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The title of this sermon is "King and the Other America." It is adapted from a lecture I gave three years ago in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. On the PowerPoint, you can see a picture of me delivering the lecture. I posted this picture on Facebook, and people said that I was not lecturing but preaching. Perhaps you have guessed that for me there is not much difference in style of presentation whether I am preaching or lecturing.

Let me tell you why King is important to me. I spent 26 years teaching at Howard University in Washington, DC. Howard is often considered the capstone of HBCUs, that is historically black colleges and universities. I learned at Howard about the connection between the United Church of Christ and Howard University. Howard was founded by the American Missionary Association (AMA), which was an abolitionist group formed in 1846 by Congregationalist ministers in New England.¹ I do not know if First Church was part of the AMA. I reached out to Barbara Lewis and Jennifer deSimas to see if they knew, and they could find no evidence, but we agreed to look in the archives.

After the Civil War, the AMA went south and founded colleges and universities for the education of African Americans, such as Fisk in TN, Hampton in VA, and Tougaloo in MS. And the AMA joined together with the Freedmen's Bureau in DC to form Howard University. The AMA was eventually absorbed into the Justice and Witness Ministries of the UCC in 1999. So it was active for over 150 years.

MLK attended an HBCU for his undergraduate studies: Morehouse College in Atlanta, though it was not founded by the AMA. For his ministerial training—and King was at heart a Baptist minister--King went to Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, PA, and for his PhD he went to BU, that is, Boston University. King: Morehouse, Crozer, BU. So he was the Rev. Martin Luther King, PhD.

But let's talk about Rev. Dr. King and the speech, "The Other America." It is not as well-known as some of his other speeches, such as the "I Have a Dream" or "I Have Been to the Mountaintop". "The Other America" is a speech that King gave several times in the year before he died. Perhaps a timeline would be helpful: Exactly one year prior to his death King gave his "Beyond Vietnam" speech at Riverside Church in New York City. King expanded the civil rights agenda to include opposition to the Vietnam War. This was a very controversial move, and it cost King much support, especially from President Johnson. Nevertheless, King felt that it was a logical move, for the "triplets of evil" were all interrelated: racism, materialism, and militarism.²

"The Other America" was more traditionally a civil rights speech. King gave it several times, first at Stanford University, in a high school gymnasium in metropolitan Detroit, then at a union meeting in New York City less than a month before he died.

King's thesis was that there were two Americas: "one beautiful for situation," in King's words. Let me read the relevant paragraph in the speech. "[T]his America is overflowing with the

¹ "American Missionary Association," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Missionary_Association

² Martin Luther King, Jr. "Beyond Vietnam,"

<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>

miracle of prosperity and the honey of opportunity. This America is the habitat of millions of people who have food and material necessities for their bodies and culture and education for their minds, and freedom and human dignity for their spirit. In this America, millions of people experience every day the opportunity of having life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in all of their dimensions. And in this America, millions of young people grow up in the sunlight of opportunity.”³

But, King said, there is another America, “This other America has a daily ugliness about it that constantly transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair.” King continued, “In this America, millions of work-starved men walk the streets daily in search for jobs that do not exist. In this America, millions of people find themselves living in rat-infested, vermin-filled slums. In this America, people are poor by the millions. And they find themselves perishing on a lonely island of poverty, in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.”

I would like to now read some more of the “quotable quotes” in this speech. I ask that you meditate upon them with me:

“In a real sense, we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” King goes on to say, “John Donne placed it years ago in graphic terms, ‘*No man is an island entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.*’ And he [that is, Donne] goes on toward the end to say, ‘*Any man’s death diminishes me because I’m involved in mankind. Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.*’ [Emphasis King’s.] And so we are all in the same situation: the salvation of the Negro will mean the salvation of the white man. And the destruction of life and of the ongoing progress of the Negro will be the destruction of the ongoing progress of the nation.”

King was delivering his address in the larger context of urban riots, such as in Chicago and Cleveland in 1966 prior to the first delivery of the speech. The summer of 1967 has been dubbed “The Long Hot Summer” because 159 race riots occurred across the country. Thus, King says, “a riot is the language of the unheard.”

Again, I will read from the speech: “And in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity. So in a real sense, our nation’s summer’s riots are caused by our nation’s winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention.”

In response to his critics that said that the time was not right for civil rights, that civil rights leaders should wait, King said, “[W]e must come to see that social progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals,” King continued, “and without this hard work, time itself becomes an

³ King, “The Other America,” <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/the-other-america-speech-transcript-martin-luther-king-jr>

ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. And so we must have time, and we must realize that the time is always right to do right.”

Near the end of his speech, King said, “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward Justice.” In this paragraph, King alludes to the song, “We Shall Overcome.” He said, “We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward Justice. We shall overcome because Carlyle is right, “No lie can live forever.” We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right, “Truth crushed to earth will rise again.” We shall overcome because James Russell Lowell is right, “Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne — Yet that scaffold sways the future. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”

This last line appears on the King memorial in Washington, DC.: “Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.” At the King memorial in DC, the viewer passes through the stone and sees King rising out of another stone. Perhaps many of you have visited this memorial and passed through the mountain of despair to the stone of hope.

What is the relevance of King’s message in 2022? The struggle continues as we have witnessed several killings of African Americans in the last few years, such as George Floyd in Minneapolis, Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Sandra Bland in TX. Back in 2020, Connecticut residents rallied at the state Capitol against police brutality and against racism. Perhaps some of you participated in that rally.⁴

But the struggle also takes place within each of us. Since we are living in Spirit, we allow Spirit to convict us of prejudice and affirm our dignity and the dignity of all persons. We allow King’s words to touch us deeply, showing us our sin and convincing us of the worth of all humanity.

I would like to conclude this sermon with King’s conclusion. (Trigger warning: King used gender-exclusive language, and I am going to leave it that way to preserve his voice.) King ended the speech in this way:

“With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discourse of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to speed up the day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and live together as brothers and sisters, all over this great nation. That will be a great day, that will be a great tomorrow. In the words of the Scripture, to speak symbolically, that will be the day when the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy. ”

We might say “sons and daughters of God,” but nevertheless we will shout for joy.

And all God’s people said, “Amen.”

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⁴ “Connecticut Residents Rally Against Racism and Police Brutality.”
https://ctnewsjunkie.com/2020/05/29/20200529_connecticut_residents_rally_against_racism_and_police_brutality/