



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday Virtual Worship Service for January 17 2021

Sermon: Rev. Paul Slack

I am Reverend Paul Slack, the Social Justice Advocate for Lutheran Social Service, and a member of the Community Leadership and Neighborhood Engagement Board. I'm here today to talk to you about the importance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and what it means for us as a part of the community of faith, and indeed, of the human race.

As we remember Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the movement for racial and economic justice, which he and others embodied, and prayerfully do more than remember in 2021. I want to reflect on a text of scripture and two texts from the civil rights movement.

*“With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow down before the exalted God?
He has shown you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.*

Micah 6:6,8

Micah asked the most profound question for every person who believes in God. I am a Christian, but this question transcends the particularity of my Christian faith, and indeed is a question for all who believe in God.

What kind of worship, the text asks, does God want from you? What kind of service? Do we owe the sovereign of the universe? God requires something from everybody who believes in and serves the divine.

Micah gave a three-fold answer: 1. to act justly, 2. to love mercy, and 3. and to walk humbly with your God. Micah's answer to what does God want from those who believe, I believe is the answer that we all need to reflect on and live out.

The two texts from the movement are: 1. the Letter from a Birmingham Jail from which you've already heard excerpts, and 2. the letter that preceded that, "A Call for Unity."

I mention these three texts, because though all of these texts seem to have been written a long time ago, in a different time, indeed, their content still frames our contemporary conversation when it comes to racial justice, and indeed, God's justice.

"A Call for Unity" is a letter composed by eight clergymen, (yes, men), writing this call to unity, who could only see in their response, their correspondence, unrest when the oppressed marched for rights that had been denied them. They were blind to unrest when black houses were being bombed, black bodies were being hung, and black people had no rights to which white people were obliged to respect. They couldn't see unrest there. Then we have King's response in the Letter from the Birmingham Jail, where he told moderate whites that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, but indeed, must be demanded by the oppressed.

And then we have Micah posing this question in that context, what indeed does God want from those who serve the divine? What is our role in this human existence where systemic racism runs rampant and wreaks havoc? Act justly -- not just when it's convenient. Love mercy -- not just for you, but also for neighbor. And walk humbly with your God. Our daily beliefs and practices and investments should be God-guided.

Now that George Floyd's murder has awakened us, what are we going to do?

I need everyone listening to understand that before George Floyd, we had 14-year-old Emmett Till, and countless others killed, countless others wrongfully convicted, countless others robbed, countless others underpaid. businesses destroyed by law enforcement, openly cheated people who were in black bodies, openly cheated, their families destroyed, their wives and children molested, their right to vote undermined, property stolen. equal protection denied. But now in 2020 and 2021 we have seen the murder of George Floyd. Let's act justly.

By some miracle, Derek Chauvin's knee on George Floyd's neck exposed the ugliness and evil of racism. And we must look beyond that one ugly racist action and comprehend the depths of the racist system which took Mr. Floyd's life. That ugly, evil racist system was around at the founding of this nation and continues today. In recent days, we've seen it raise its ugly head again. It was on the steps of the US Capitol. We saw evil raise its ugly head.

That evil destroys some of our best minds, stifles our creativity, and leaves resources untapped. This racist system adopts wrong when it is white, male, and heterosexual. It denounces genius when it is black and is blinded to the brilliance and nuanced found outside of those two extremes. We have seen systemic racism separate families, deny basic needs necessities for life, enforce dehumanizing codes that send black, brown, female, LGBTQIA2S bodies into servitude and chattel slavery. Even now,

the racist system that orders our life is destroying us all and God is calling the faithful to dismantle this evil injustice.

My brothers and sisters, we need to stop calling for Law and Order. Why? Law and Order is code for “keep black and brown people in the place the racist system has determined they belong.” Actually, it isn't just black and brown people, it's anyone who does not fit the ideal that this racist system has erected. White propertied, heterosexual male. This system wants to keep everybody else in their designated place.

That place is outside the halls of decision, outside the protection of the law, out of the reach of opportunities, unworthy of public investments. Laws are not written for the common good. They're written to support this system in which we live. There was a time indeed when I thought differently, when I thought laws truly were written to protect and to provide a path for all to thrive.

I've been enlightened my brothers and sisters; lawmakers don't intend to serve the good of all. Those who govern don't have an agenda that defends the rights of all and afford a path for everyone to live in dignity and possess the means for happiness. The law has never been applied equally for everyone. That's what Dr. King was telling us.

The powerful have been escaping responsibility since laws existed and the marginalized have paid for the sins and success of powerful since there was a law. Some, my brothers and sisters, if we're honest, are above the law. And others are the law's scapegoat. So, let's drop the “Law and Order” code language. We need to recognize “Law and Order” as a tool in this racist system to control Black, Brown, Indigenous and marginalized, and that tool serves the idea of whiteness as the unchallenged ideal.

The church indeed must become a champion for systemic justice. Until now the church has been complicit in this racist system. Not just the Christian church. Synagogues, and mosques, and temples and places of worship have operated inside the ugly, evil, racist system.

God has given us a unique and particular opportunity, in this time, to change our complicity to injustice, to change and become courageous champions for systemic justice. We turned our eyes away in the past from the ugliness in this nation that has murdered, and stolen, and molested, and cheated, and marginalized communities. The churches have seen the evil, and at times, have benefited from the ugly, destructive system.

But now God is saying to us, God has been saying through us, through all of the events that have happened in 2020. And yes, before, but I believe particularly now, God is saying, we have an opportunity to turn and stand for the justice of God rather than the injustices of our nation. Stand for the humanity that God has created, stand for the good stand for fairness that God wants from us all stand with everyone who is in this nation.

God, my brothers and sisters, has captured our attention. People who believe in God, the Lord is giving us an opportunity to embrace all of humanity. It was not human ingenuity that engineered a global rebuke to the actions of Derek Chauvin when he, as a sworn officer showed utter discontent, disregard,

and inhumanity for the life of all black people. Yes, all black people, as he murdered George Floyd. The power of God caused us to see, caused us to grieve the ugliness we've nurtured for centuries. God has indeed come among us. God is indeed calling us to see each other, to see the sacred image of God stamped on every person, and to work for a common destiny, of shared prosperity.

God is requiring us, requiring us, to voice a collective response to the most profound question of all time: What indeed does the LORD require of you? require of me? require of us all?

God requires us to act justice justly.

"Injustice anywhere," King said, "is a threat to justice everywhere." We must act justly when my community is threatened and when everyone else's community, when everyone else's family, when everyone else's rights are threatened. Because injustice weakens and destroys us all.

God also wants us to love mercy. To indeed, love mercy. Not just mercy when I've done wrong. Not just mercy when my family has participated in missteps and misdeeds, but mercy for everyone. God wants us to indeed love mercy. To be a restorative power, restored to spirit in our world today.

A sage once said that if we practiced an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we'd all be blind and toothless. No, that's not what we want. That's not what we need. We need the mercy. The restorative and redemptive power of God, for everyone in our world.

But there's one more thing that God demands, that God asks of us. That is also to walk humbly with our God. To ensure, fellow believers, people who want good for all to ensure that our actions, that our ideas, that our values come from the very presence and power and wisdom of God. To ensure that our love is not just for those that we see every day and on a daily basis, those whose neighborhoods we live in, but that our love reaches beyond our neighborhoods, beyond our communities, and reaches to every person. Every person.

Every person that bears the image of God, and that's everybody. To work so that every person, every community has an opportunity to thrive. That no one is working uphill, because the law is against them, but that we embrace a path to happiness, a path to renew, a path to redemption, a path to unity, for all of us.

Walk humbly with our God. When we walk humbly, with our God, we recognize and indeed work for every person to have a voice in this world, for the decisions that we collectively make, to name and shape, what our future needs to look like. So that we all participate together for the common good.

We must not practice the same old, tired system where we have to wait in some line for our time. But every marginalized person and community must be brought to the center of concern and connected with resources that promote life and agency, now. Waiting has cost us too much, convenience has crippled too many, marginalized have suffered long enough. The church cannot afford to ask any longer for permission, cannot afford to wait any longer for someone to agree with it, cannot afford to operate within the same status quo. We must demand that hatred and racism end now.

God has already told us what to do. God has already given us a recipe for success. To act justly, not our selfish idea of justice, but God's justice, justly, at every moment, around our kitchen tables, at our community events, in our state houses, in our nation, across the world.

Love mercy. Don't demand that everybody pays the full costs of their missteps, but demand that we all practice the forgiveness and love and restoration that God practices and that we hope for in our lives, in our families.

Walk humbly with our God. Every day. We need to ensure that our thoughts, our actions, our community reflects the fact that we are indeed walking with God. And if we are walking with God, we're walking with each other.

The call of us, the call of those who believe, the call of those who from God, for all those who want to do right, who want to focus on the wield and power that God is making available for us today, is to unite as the church for the common good, and to lead a path for peace and a path for shared prosperity.

Let's realize the redemptive reparation of God's love in motion by uniting in the spirit of Micah chapter six, in the spirit of redemption, in the spirit of restoration, and be renewed as we're renewing. Not just our faith, but the lives of all those, everyone, every person, every community who is a part of the human family.

Amen.