

On the mind of the Rev. Dr. Nathaniel Jung-Chul Lee

In a recent *Gallup* poll, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was named among the “Most Admired” people of the 20th century. In fact, he finished second only to Mother Teresa, and there was a substantial gap between the two of them and other contenders—like John F. Kennedy, Albert Einstein, Helen Keller, Pope John Paul II, and our own beloved Roosevelts. The irony of this is that at the time of his death—and most people forget this—Martin King was one of the most unpopular people in the world. His disapproval rating was 75%. To put that in perspective, President Trump’s disapproval rating after the mob violence last year at the U.S. Capitol was only 62%. Worse still, and lest we think this low approval rating was merely a result of racism, Martin King’s disapproval rating among the black community was 54%. Think about that for just a second. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964. Martin King was assassinated in 1968. Yet somehow, in that short time, more than half of Black America had turned against him.

Why do I say all this at outset of “Martin Luther King, Jr. Day” weekend? Well, what happens so often with figures who have come to have the sort of transcendent popularity that Martin King now has—who we lionize on street signs or with national holidays—is that people, who want to capitalize on their popularity, tend to start reinventing them in their own image. People will pick and choose from among the things Martin King said to create a version of him who will serve to subsidize their own agendas. Meanwhile, the real Martin King—the Martin King who was a challenge to *everybody*—the Martin King who remains a challenge *today*—gets left behind.

Martin King had a hard word for everyone. He was perhaps hardest on “**moderates**”—who he said were a greater obstacle to black freedom than the KKK—and was an outspoken opponent of “gradualism.” Make no mistake—Martin King was a staunch advocate for social revolution over social evolution. Though he was a pacifist, he was by no means passive. He also was heavily critical of (in his words) “**the liberal**,” especially liberal Christians. In the political sphere, he echoed Malcolm X’s sentiment that he preferred Goldwater to Johnson (calling the former a “wolf,” and the latter a “fox”), and once said he saw no difference between Nixon and Kennedy. Theologically, he wrote a series of essays denouncing “liberal” theology and theologians—for not taking the Bible seriously enough, for failing to acknowledge the deep sinfulness of the human condition, and for holding to ideas of love that were so “pie in the sky” that they never got to the practical work of creating real change on the ground. King called “white liberals” concern for black people “a sentimental affection, little more than what one would have for a pet,” and accused it of being meaningless unless concretized into action.

King’s conflicts with **conservatives** were perhaps more visible, but they also accelerated toward the end of his life, especially through his opposition to the war in Vietnam. In the last years of his life, King turned much of his attention away from battling racism *per se*, instead placing racism aside two other great concerns—economic exploitation and militarism. For King, these “evils” (as he called them) were equal to and interconnected with the evil of racism, which led many conservatives to believe he was a communist ally of North Vietnam. It was also in shifting his focus toward critiquing economic exploitation and militarism that he lost much of **the black community**, who either felt he had forgotten them, or even more fundamentally, disagreed that economic exploitation and militarism were interconnected with racism.

But in his view, King could not separate racism, economic exploitation, and militarism for one basic reason: *Jesus*. King’s logic here has two parts. First, he saw the interconnection between these “evils” in terms of Genesis 3:5: “Ye shall be like gods.” In other words, he saw the ground floor of human evil as the pursuit of a “god-like” power, exercised through the attempts to control, master or dominate other people—whether the means of control are weapons, markets, or ideology. And so, second, King felt that the only resolution to these evils was the cross of Jesus Christ. Indeed, this was why King’s program was grounded in the path of “nonviolence.” For King, the only weapon that will prevail against the power, domination and control at the heart of human evil is the weakness, fragility, and vulnerability of Christ’s cross.

As he writes: “We must not return violence under any condition...this is the way of Christ; it is the way of the cross. We must somehow believe that unearned suffering is redemptive...The believer in nonviolence...lives by the conviction that through this suffering and cross bearing, the social situation may be redeemed.”

I don't know about you, but that challenges me. And I pray that, as we remember King this weekend, God might give a fresh eyes to consider what this challenge might mean for us.

COMING UP AT INCARNATION

Wednesday, January 19

7:00 to 8:30 p.m. Vestry meets on Zoom.

Thursday, January 20

7:00 p.m. 20s/30s will head out to a local bar after Candlelight Communion, and the Rev. Dr. Nate Lee will lead a discussion on the theology and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. RSVP to Nate at nlee@churchoftheincarnation.org.

Sunday, January 23

6:00 to 7:00 p.m. Annual Meeting of the Parish held on Zoom. The Annual Meeting features brief reports from parish leadership as well as voting for the 2022 Vestry Election. All parishioners are invited and encouraged to attend.

OFFERING ENVELOPES AND ONLINE GIVING

Offering envelopes are available to all parishioners who prefer to make their Sunday offering in the form of cash or check. If you requested offering envelopes when making your financial pledge for 2022, you can pick them up from the ushers at the entrance to the church. If you need to request envelopes, please email office@churchoftheincarnation.org, call the church office at 212-689-6350 ext. 2, or fill out a 2022 Commitment Card found in your pew. For those who prefer to make their offering online, remember to pick up a green "I Give Online" card at the back of the church and place it in the offering plate.

HOW DO I JOIN?

To become a member of the Church of the Incarnation, you may transfer from another Episcopal parish or a Lutheran church. Or you may take our Spring Confirmation and Inquirers' Class, a six-week series that will help you explore the basics of Christian faith as experienced in the Episcopal tradition. The next Confirmation and Inquirers' Class will begin in March 2022. Contact the Rev. Adrian Dannhauser at adannhauser@churchoftheincarnation.org for more information.

EVERY WEEK AT INCARNATION

Sunday Bible Study: Bible Study is held in the Parish House on Sundays from 10:00 to 10:30 a.m. (Masks are required.) We generally follow the Yale Bible Study program, which offers course materials on select books of the Bible, deepened by insights from Yale Divinity School professors.

Sunday School for Children: During the 11:00 a.m. service, children ages 3 to 10 depart the service with their teachers for Sunday School in the Parish House. (Masks are required, and all teachers have been vaccinated.) They return before the end of worship. Please note that there will be no Sunday School on January 2. See our website, churchoftheincarnation.org for more information on Children and Family Ministries.

Wednesday Holy Eucharist: Join us each Wednesday at 12:15 p.m. for this Rite I spoken service of Holy Eucharist, which includes a brief homily and organ music.

Thursday Candlelight Communion: Join us each Thursday at 6:15 p.m. for Candlelight Communion, a service of Holy Eucharist that incorporates chant and silence as well as elements of contemporary worship. This service is informal and contemplative, with music led by a Cantor and a brief reflection by one of the clergy. You can also stream this service on our YouTube channel, youtube.com/churchoftheincarnation.

Daily Office: Services of Morning Prayer, Noonday Prayer and Compline are held via Zoom. Join our email distribution list, by filling out the yellow Connect Card found in your pew, to view the weekly schedule and receive Zoom access information.