

January 17, 2021

Dear Friends,

Today is the National holiday in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I remember being drawn to him and to his non-violent protests against racial discrimination back in the mid-1960's. I remember when he was felled by an assassin's bullet. He was in his late thirties. I was in my early twenties but inside my feeling tone was that we were both men living in the ever-more-turbulent 1960's. One black; one white. There had already been one incredible assassination of a white man in 1963 when President John Kennedy was struck down in a Dallas motorcade. I will never forget that moment nor the moment when I learned that Dr. King had been shot and killed that day in 1968. Later that same year it would happen yet again when Robert F. Kennedy would be shot and killed during the primary campaign for the presidency. It was during those years that I learned that violence was a very real thing in American life. It was during those years when I realized how bankrupt and destructive violence is in solving problems.

The non-violent way of Jesus Christ, espoused by Rev. King, was something that I was drawn too as well. Later Pope John Paul II would be shot but not killed. And then President Reagan shot but not killed. Too many shootings. Too much killing. It just does not work as a reliable way to resolve the truly thorny issues of life or convince those with whom we disagree. Not then. Not now. And those who turn to violence must be opposed. And those who encourage violence must be challenged.

But there is a danger I sense slowly seeping into our lives. We get so convinced that the persons on the opposite side of the political world from us are so vile and hateful that we are justified in hating them and in doing anything and everything we can to stop them, to silence them, to remove them. No. Because all of that is also rooted in violence and we just cannot allow ourselves to go down that path. It does not work. It is not good. And it is not of the Lord Jesus no matter how convinced we are, no matter how filled with righteous indignation we are feeling. Hatred of enemies is not something Jesus countenanced. Actually he bid us to love our enemies and to do good to those who hurt us. I see clearly how far we are from that world. It surely has not happened yet.

As a country we have not yet resolved the racial discrimination that exists and has existed for a long time. But we have made amazing progress from the days when I chopped wood as a seminarian to make chords of firewood to sell to make money to support seminarians living in the inner city of Philadelphia during the summers in order to learn what was real and how to bring the gospel message to those most in need. And to live that message.

Be willing to endure, to suffer for, to suffer with and in the process allow God's grace to penetrate the situation and complete the process of transformation begun in Jesus Christ. It is still his message that this world needs more than anything. Let us remember to honor Dr. King this day and renew our own efforts to live the non-violence of Jesus Christ—in our actions, of course, but in our minds and hearts most especially.

Peace,
Msgr. McHenry