

January 16, 2011

Good Morning:

During this morning's service, you will be invited to read portions of this work of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, as we commemorate him during this time of remembrance.

Please feel free to join in the reading when the time comes. I especially invite you to take this home and reread it from time to time. It is a piece that deserves study and meditation.

Peace,  
Ray

---

The Strength to Love by The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963)

*From Chapter IV:*

...fear is mastered through faith. A common source of fear is an awareness of deficient resources and of a consequent inadequacy for life. All too many people attempt to face the tensions of life with inadequate spiritual resources. When vacationing in Mexico, Mrs. King and I wished to go deep-sea fishing. For reasons of economy, we rented an old and poorly equipped boat. We gave this little thought until ten miles from shore, the clouds lowered and howling winds blew. Then we became paralyzed with fear, for we knew our boat was deficient. Multitudes of people are in a similar situation. Heavy winds and weak boats explain their fear.

***[Pause]***

Many of our abnormal fears can be dealt with by the skills of psychiatry, a relatively new discipline pioneered by Sigmund Freud, which investigates the subconscious drives of men and women and seeks to discover how and why fundamental energies are diverted into neurotic channels.

Psychiatry helps us to look candidly at our inner selves and to search out the causes of our failures and fears. But much of our fearful living encompasses a realm where the service of psychiatry is ineffectual unless the psychiatrist is a person of religious faith. For our trouble is simply that we attempt to confront fear without faith: we sail through the stormy seas of life without adequate spiritual boats. One of the leading physicians and psychiatrists in America has said, "The only known cure for fear is faith."

***[Pause]***

Abnormal fears and phobias that are expressed in neurotic anxiety may be cured by psychiatry; but the fear of death, nonbeing, and nothingness, expressed in existential anxiety, may be cured only by a positive religious faith. A positive religious faith does not offer an illusion that we shall be exempt from pain and suffering, nor does it imbue us with the idea that life is a drama of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease. Rather, it instills us with the inner equilibrium needed to face strains, burdens, and fears that inevitably come, and assures us that the universe is trustworthy and that God is concerned.

**[Pause]**

Irreligion, on the other hand, would have us believe that we are orphans cast unto the terrifying immensities of space in a universe that is without purpose or intelligence. Such a view drains courage and exhausts the energies of men and women. In his *Confession* Tolstoi wrote concerning the aloneness and emptiness he felt before his conversion:

There was a period in my life when everything seemed to be crumbling, the very foundations of my convictions were beginning to give way, and I felt myself going to pieces. There was no sustaining influence in my life and there was no God there, and so every night before I went to sleep, I made sure that there was no rope in my room lest I be tempted during the night to hang myself from the rafters of my room; and I stopped from going out shooting lest I be tempted to put a quick end to my life and to my misery.

Like so many people, Tolstoi at that stage of his life lacked the sustaining influence which comes from the conviction that this universe is guided by a benign Intelligence whose infinite love embraces all humankind.

***[Pause]***

Religion endows us with the conviction that we are not alone in this vast uncertain universe. Beneath and above the shifting sands of time, the uncertainties that darken our days and the vicissitudes (hardships and events beyond our control) that cloud our nights is a wise and loving God.

This universe is not a tragic expression of meaningless chaos but a marvelous display of orderly cosmos – “God by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath God established the heavens.” We are not a wisp of smoke from limitless smoldering, but a child of God created “a little lower than the angels.” Above the manyness of time stands the one eternal God, with wisdom to guide us, strength to protect us, and love to keep us. God’s boundless love supports and contains us as a mighty ocean contains and supports the drops of every wave. With a surging fullness God is forever moving toward us, seeking to fill the little creeks and bays of our lives with unlimited resources.

This is religion’s everlasting diapason (a full and rich outpouring of harmonious sound), its eternal answer to the enigma of existence. Any person who finds this cosmic sustenance can walk the highways of life without the fatigue of pessimism and the weight of morbid fears.

***[Pause]***

Herein lies the answer to the neurotic fear of death that plagues many of our lives. Let us face the fear that the atomic bomb has aroused / with the faith that we can never travel beyond the arms of the Divine. Death is inevitable. It is a democracy for all of the people, not an aristocracy for some of the people – monarchs die and beggars die; young people die and older people die; learned people and ignorant people die. We need not fear it. The God who brought our whirling planet from primal vapor and has led the human pilgrimage for lo these many centuries can most assuredly lead us through death's dark night into the bright daybreak of eternal life. God's will is too perfect and God's purposes are too extensive to be contained in the limited receptacle of time and the narrow walls of earth. Death is not the ultimate evil; the ultimate evil is to be outside God's love. We need not join the mad rush to purchase an earthly fallout shelter. God is our eternal fallout shelter.

***[Pause]***

Jesus knew that nothing could separate us from the love of God. Listen to his majestic words:

Fear them not therefore; for there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed; and hid that shall not be known...And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather, fear them which is able to destroy both body and soul. Are not two sparrows sold for pennies? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without God. But the very hairs on your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.

..., for Jesus, we are not mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life, but children of God. Is it not unreasonable to assume that God, whose creative activity is expressed in an awareness of a sparrow's fall and the number of hairs on a person's head, excludes from God's encompassing love the life of humans, themselves? The confidence that God is mindful of the individual is of tremendous value in dealing with the disease of fear, for it gives us a sense of worth, of belonging, and of at-homeness in the universe.

***[Pause]***

One of the most dedicated participants in the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, was an elderly woman whom we affectionately called Mother Pollard. Although poverty-stricken and uneducated, she was amazingly intelligent and possessed a deep understanding of the meaning of the movement. After having walked for several weeks, she was asked if she were tired. With ungrammatical profundity, she answered, "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested."

***[Pause]***

On a particular Monday evening, following a tension-packed week which included being arrested and receiving numerous threatening telephone calls, I spoke at a mass meeting. I attempted to convey an overt impression of strength and courage, although I was inwardly depressed and fear-stricken. At the end of the meeting, Mother Pollard came to the front of the church and said, "Come here, son." I immediately went to her and hugged her affectionately. "Something is wrong with you," she said. "You didn't talk strong tonight." Seeking further to disguise my fears, I retorted, "On, no, Mother Pollard, nothing is wrong. I am feeling fine as ever." But her insight was discerning. "Now you can't fool me," she said. "I knows something is wrong. Is it that we ain't doing things to please you? Or is it that the white folks is bothering you?" Before I could respond, she looked directly into my eyes and said, "I don told you we is with you all the way." Then her face became radiant and she said in words of quiet certainty, "But even if we ain't with you, God's gonna take care of you." As she spoke these consoling words, everything in me quivered and quickened with the pulsing tremor of raw energy.

***[Pause]***

Since that dreary night in 1956, Mother Pollard has passed on to glory and I have known very few quiet days. I have been tortured without and tormented within by the raging fires of tribulation. I have been forced to muster what strength and courage I have to withstand howling winds of pain and jostling storms of adversity. But as the years have unfolded the eloquently simple words of Mother Pollard have come back again and again to give light and peace and guidance to my troubled soul. "God's gonna take care of you."

This faith transforms the whirlwind of despair into a warm and reviving breeze of hope. The words of a motto which a generation ago were commonly found on the wall in the homes of devout persons need to be etched on our hearts:

Fear knocked at the door.

Faith answered.

There was no one there.