

## A KNOCK AT MIDNIGHT

A sermon preached by Dr. John H. Nichols to Channing Memorial Church of Newport on  
January 16, 2011

Peter Gomes, who is preacher to Harvard University once said that although he had never met Martin Luther King, he suspected that if they had met, King would have made him profoundly uncomfortable. Gomes said, "Moral power, spiritual rigor, intellectual acuteness and physical courage are all qualities we admire in the abstract, but when we confront them face to face – especially if we doubt our own supply of them – well it is difficult to be anything but awkward."

This is precisely why I do encounter Martin Luther King periodically. Hearing what he stood for and why inspires a discomfort that is probably good for many of us. His courage and faith came from deeply held beliefs. They aren't everyone's beliefs, nor need they be, but they inspired one of the most courageous witnesses for freedom and dignity in our nation's history.

This morning we will look at how King came to believe what he did. That's a critical question for all of us: how we have come to believe what believe. The quotations you will hear are taken from his sermons to his congregation..

King frequently told this Gospel story. Jesus once said, "Suppose you have a friend who comes to you in the middle of the night and says to you, 'Lend me three loaves (of bread) for a friend of mine has shown up, and I have nothing to offer him.'" If the caller were merely a friend who hadn't planned his day properly, most people would suggest that he should go back to bed.

But in this instance, an unexpected visitor had arrived and the host was being confronted with his deficiency as a host. Being unprepared for guests was almost a moral failing in Judea at that time, and the host was now desperate and ashamed. Jesus makes it clear that under these circumstances, anyone with a heart would provide him with the bread he needed to redeem his failure despite the trouble and inconvenience.

King made this story a paradigm for the situation of religion in America. He said, this time is midnight in America, a time of desperation similar to the midnight in Jesus' story. Two world wars had been fought, and the threat of atomic annihilation was still very real. It was midnight, as well, in the soul of America. People had turned to science for salvation but found cold comfort for their yearnings for love and spiritual support. Psychology and social psychology, the darling sciences of that day, had only offered ways to numb the psychic pain and without answering the questions, which caused the pain.

King commented,

“Some have been tempted to revise Jesus’ commandment to read, “Go ye into the world, keep your blood pressure down, and lo, I will make you a well adjusted personality. All of this is indicative that it is midnight within the inner lives of men and women.”

He said it was midnight in America. There is a knock on the door of the church or of the synagogue, and thousands of people are looking for bread. King believes it is the bread of love they want. He believes they are looking for some connection between their lives and something greater than their individual lives. He said,

“Everybody wishes to love and be loved. He who feels he is not loved feels he does not count. Much has happened in the world and (people) feel they do not belong. Living in a world, which has become oppressively impersonal, many of us have begun to feel we are little more than numbers... A modern mother is often Maternity case 8434, and her child after being finger printed and foot printed becomes 8003. A funeral in a large city is an event in Parlor B with Class B flowers and decorations at which Preacher 14 officiates, Musician 84 sings selection 174. Bewildered by this tendency to reduce (us) to a card in a vast index, (we) desperately search for the bread of love. ”

Amidst all of the ambiguities and uncertainties of life; amidst disappointments and disillusionment and despite our wanderings in a moral desert there must be some word, some thought, something to sustain people until the morning. It is at this point that the preacher, King, articulates the faith he shares with his congregation. It is not everyone’s faith. It is not the faith of many here, but King’s religious faith that God is a real force for justice in our lives is inextricable from his legacy as a powerful religious and political leader. You can’t really understand him without it. He finished the sermon in this way.

“Midnight is a confusing hour when it is difficult to be faithful. The most inspiring word that the church must speak is that no midnight long remains. The weary traveler who asks for bread is really seeking the dawn. Our eternal message of hope is that the dawn will come. Our slave foreparents realized this. They were never unmindful of the fact of midnight, for there was always the rawhide whip of the overseer and the auction block where families were torn asunder to remind them of this reality.

“Their positive belief in the dawn was the growing edge of hope that kept the slaves faithful amidst the most barren and tragic circumstances. Faith in the dawn arises from the faith that God is good and just. When one believes this, he knows that the contradictions in life are neither final nor ultimate. He can walk through the dark night with the radiant conviction that all things work together for the good for those that love God. Even the most starless midnight may herald the dawn of some great fulfillment.”

## PART II

The community in which Martin Luther King Jr. grew was deeply rooted in the themes of the Biblical story. They did not take these stories literally. They did not love these stories blindly. They were not naïve or foolish nor did they worry over much about whether the Bible was literally true. Instead they knew that images from the Biblical stories most closely reflected the realities of their own lives. For King's people the truth of the Bible was very visceral

All too often, they had been to the valley of the shadow of death. They had wandered in the wilderness of an unpromising land. They had traveled the highway from Jerusalem to Jericho, been beaten and victimized by robbers and experienced the kindness of a Good Samaritan – or hoped for it. They had seen more than their share of people suffering on the cross.

When King left these people to go to seminary near Philadelphia and then later at Boston University he came into contact with liberal Christianity and with Unitarianism. He and his wife attended Unitarian churches in the Boston area and were courted by some of our denominational leaders. Initially it was a very exciting and disturbing time in his life. He worried that he might never be able to return home religiously.

At Boston University, he studied with leading religious liberals. His dissertation compared the thought of Paul Tillich (whom many considered an atheist) with Henry Nelson Wieman (who was a Unitarian minister.) Some of the core ideas of his writings at this time remind me of the early stages of our movement.

He was influenced by the Transcendentalist philosophers who believed there was an inherent moral law in the universe. King later preached these words to a Detroit congregation in 1954.

“This universe hinges on moral foundations. There is something in this universe that justifies Carlisle in saying, ‘No lie can live forever.’ There is something in this universe that justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying, ‘Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again.’ There is something in this universe that justifies James Russell Lowell in saying, ‘Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne. Yet the scaffold sways the future. Behind the dim unknown stands God, within the shadow keeping watch upon his own.’

“There is something in the universe that justifies the Biblical writer in saying, ‘You shall reap what you sow.’ This is a law-abiding universe. This is a moral universe. It hinges on moral foundations. If we are to make of this a better world, we've got to go back and rediscover (those foundations.)”

When he received his doctorate, Martin Luther King was offered the prestige and the security of becoming one of the nation's few black academicians at a major Northeastern liberal university. He turned it down. There are two reasons why he turned that offer down and left that comfortable life in order to accept a call to the ministry of a black Baptist church in Alabama? The first reason is that although he believed – with the early Unitarians -- in a universal moral force for justice, he also recognized that some actions have to be called “evil” and opposed as “evil.”

The Unitarians and most academics of his day didn't believe in evil, but King and his people had lived with it all their lives. They did not believe evil was a person or a Devil, but they certainly knew it was a reality that had to be named in order to be defeated. They also knew that there were both personal evils and social evils. King did not see that he could do his part against the structures of evil from within the comfort of the university or from within the framework of religious liberalism.

The second reason King did not become a religious liberal or remain in academia is that the scholars and the Unitarians King met during his stay in Boston had no real affection for the Bible. They had read their anthropology and their mythology and they had decided that the Bible was just the cultural icon of a departed time. God, for this crowd, was an abstract principle rather than a pressing reality. For King's peers in scholarship, Jesus was a historically disputed figure.

Now, as I said earlier, neither Martin Luther King Jr. nor the members of his congregation were fundamentalists. But their life experience told them that the Biblical story was not the relic of another era but a reflection of their lives today. For these people, God was not just a cosmic principle – not an old man in the sky either – but an unseen and mysterious source of courage, arming a few people to do difficult things in order to sustain the presence of love in a hard world.

King went back to the South, because this was his emotional world as well. He could not leave it for all of the blandishments of income and prestige and safety that the academic world could offer. But he did bring back the fire of Unitarian Transcendentalism – its passion for justice – to preach along side of his belief in the love, the justice and the abiding presence of God.

Had his people not readily understood and shared his deep inner conviction that God was an intimate force in their lives – that God strengthened the power of love in combating the presence of evil – King would not have had a following.

It took courage, after all, to talk about love in the atmosphere to which he spoke. Imagine trying to convince the black people of Montgomery Alabama they

ought to be more loving to the white folks who had ground them under the heel for two centuries. In time the Montgomery Bus Boycott took place. White citizens of Montgomery then felt besieged by something they had never dreamed would happen – black assertiveness.

Threats had been made. Crosses were burned. The black community itself awakened to a new dawn of possibilities, but ancient and deep resentments also surfaced. How could this Boston trained African American minister preach love as a law of the universe to a people who had largely received so much hatred from the white world? He knew it was not an easy sell. He acknowledged this in more than one sermon. In speaking of the moral law of the universe, he said,

“I’m not so sure we all believe that. We never doubt that there are physical laws of the universe that we must obey. We never doubt that. And so we just don’t jump out of airplanes or jump off high buildings for the fun of it – we just don’t do that. Because we unconsciously know there is a final law of gravitation, and if you disobey it you will suffer the consequences – we know that ..... But I’m not so sure that we really believe there is a law of love in the universe, and that if you disobey it you will suffer the consequences. I’m not sure we really believe that.”

In another passage King unpacks what philosophers have taken volumes to say,

“.. Somehow the ‘isness’ of our present nature is out of harmony with the eternal ‘oughtness’ that forever confronts us. And that means simply this: that within the best of us there is some evil, and within the worst of us there is some good. When we come to see this we take a different attitude toward individuals. The individual who hates you has some good in him; even the nation that hates you has some good in it; even the race that hates you has some good in it.

“And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every man and see deep down within him what religion calls, ‘The image of God you begin to love him in spite of – no matter what he does you see God’s image there. There is an element of goodness that he can never slough off. Discover the element of good in your enemy. And as you seek to hate him find the center of goodness and place your attention there and you take a new attitude.

“Love is creative, understanding good will for all men (and women.) It is the refusal to defeat any individual. When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals, who ought not to be caught up in that system, you love, but you seek to defeat the system.”

And if, sometimes, his confidence in the power of love began to wane a little, King knew that he had learned enough of hate. Better than most people we know he understood and expressed what hatred does to a community.

“I’ve seen too much hate to want to hate myself; hate is too great a burden to bear. I’ve seen it in the faces of too many sheriffs of the South – I’ve seen hate. In the faces and even in the walk of too many Klansman of the South, I’ve seen hate. Hate distorts the personality. Hate does something to the soul that causes one to lose his objectivity. The man who hates can’t think straight; the man who hates can’t walk right. And (because of these experiences) I know now that Jesus is right, that love is the way.”

He preached to people who led unrelentingly tough lives. They may well have been torn between bitterness and apathy, either of which could easily accompany the systematic oppression they endured. To these congregations he offered a conviction that the universe is on the side of justice and that love, at least, keeps us all alive so that something good will prevail over hate.

There is one more passage, which, I think, says it all in a very plainspoken way. In a sermon titled, “Guidelines for a Constructive Church” which he delivered in 1966, he speaks as a pastor about having a broken heart.

“Now there is probably no human condition more tantalizing than a broken heart. You see, broken heartedness is not a physical condition; it’s a condition of spiritual exhaustion. And who here this morning has not experienced a broken heart? I would say broken-heartedness comes basically from the trying experience of disappointment. And I don’t believe there are many people here this morning under the sound of my voice who have not been disappointed about something ...

“Sunday after Sunday, week after week people come to (the) church with broken hearts. They need a word of hope. And the church has an answer – if it doesn’t, it isn’t a church. The church must say in substance that broken-heartedness is a fact of life. Don’t try to escape it when you come to that experience. Don’t try to repress it. Don’t end up in cynicism. Don’t get mean when you come to that experience.

“The church must say to men and women that Good Friday is a fact of life. The church must say to people that failure is a fact of life. Some people are only conditioned to success. They are only conditioned to fulfillment. Then when the trials and burdens of life unfold, they can’t stand up with it. But the church must tell (people) that Good Friday is as much a fact of life as Easter; failure is as much a fact of life as success; Disappointment is as much a fact of life as fulfillment. And the church must tell (us) to take up your burden, take up your grief and look at it, don’t run

from it. Say that this is my grief and I must bear it. Look at it hard enough and say, "How can I transform this grief into strength"

This is Dr Martin Luther King's legacy: not a gospel of blue skies and warm summer days, not a gospel that has never been tested in the winter, but a commitment to the power of love and justice, a faith that has survived the harshest winters.

(All quotations are taken from a collection of Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermons, which is titled, A Knock At Midnight. It is still in print.)