

Already Fully Equipped for the Job
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Martin Luther King Jr. Day / Human Relations Sunday
Woodbury UMC
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Today we remember the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We teach that he had a dream, and children know that. When we are older, we learn more, thinking of things like the *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. That is where we get lines like “justice delayed is justice denied.” We focus on these because they are words of power, words that stir the heart. King was assassinated at age 39, and I want us to remember that he accomplished much more than two good sound bites during that time.

In late 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. brought his crusade for civil rights to Chicago. He came at the invitation of the Chicago Freedom Movement, a coalition of 44 civil rights organizations working to end slums and improve living conditions for blacks in the city — addressing entrenched racial discrimination in urban cities which kept blacks locked in ghettos, overcrowded schools, and low-paying jobs. Things that today we would call systemic racism.

King pushed for fair and open housing and used the non-violent strategies of the civil rights movement to try and bring about change:

rallies, boycotts, and grassroots lobbying. It was the marches in hostile white territory that forced the city to respond.

News cameras captured the depths of racial tension during an open housing march into the all-white neighborhood of Marquette Park. Mobs of angry whites screamed obscenities and hurled rocks, bricks, and bottles toward the protesters. As the marchers walked peacefully, King was struck in the back of the head with a rock, which knocked him to the ground. After recovering, King commented, "I have seen many demonstrations in the South, but I have never seen anything so hostile and so hateful as I've seen here today."

King's words from an essay in *The Nation* magazine from March 1966 talking about his work in the northern US are well worth sharing with you:

Negroes have benefited from a limited change that was emotionally satisfying but materially deficient. As they move forward for fundamental alteration of their lives, a more bitter opposition grows even within groups that were hospitable to earlier superficial amelioration. Conflicts are unavoidable because a stage has been reached in which the reality of equality will require extensive adjustments in the way of life of some of the white majority. There is no discernible will on the part of white leadership to prepare the people for changes on the new level.

That's a whole lot more than what I typically hear at this time of year! I thought it important to share this with you because certainly the best-known things about him do matter — but if that's all we ever talk

about, then we rob his witness of its full power. You play the greatest hits, and think you know the whole catalog.

This is also a present danger when preaching and studying the Bible. When we do this with the Bible, it is called proof texting—taking a little bit of scripture, and considering what it offers, without regard to what is around it. People trying to make points do this all the time: God said it, I believe it, that settles it. This is so bad! Everything we do and experience and our very being are all contextual.

You cannot give too much context in understanding something, especially something difficult or contentious. Yet often times it is something almost intentional, taking the bit that makes the point, maybe the bit that looks good on a t-shirt or bumper sticker or refrigerator magnet. To be fair, sometimes it is fine.

Ephesians 2:8-9

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Romans 3:23

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

I believe those. If you know those, that's something worth knowing. But sometimes, it is not fine.

1 Corinthians 14: 34

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.

1 Timothy 2:11-12

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.

I work with quite a lot of women clergy, and I assure you, these lines have done terrible damage and continue to do terrible damage, right into the present day.

Like the Bible. It says to be nice to each other, that Jesus loves you. You know that, but don't think that means you know the rest, let alone that you *understand* the rest!

There is a lot about treatment of immigrants and foreigners.

There is a lot about income inequality. About someone having more than they will ever use while others have nothing. About the early church, holding everything in common, using what was needed out of a common pot.

Today's scripture on its face isn't one that stirs the heart. It makes the point that this is someone's correspondence, the greetings and pleasantries at the beginning. It makes a good point — and the rest of the

letter then goes into greater detail. What stirs me the most about this brief text is making the point that what you already have, is all you need.

What I read in this letter is that God has already provided all we will need to do what God asks of us. More provision means we can do more, or reach more, or raise up more in leadership. But to begin to do work that matters? We already have all we need.

Is there more to it? Absolutely, there is an entire letter, and there were subsequent letters. In fact, one could argue that to understand scripture, you must begin by reading the *entire* Bible, leaving nothing out. I don't see things as quite so black and white, but I am a lot closer to that camp than I am that you can just lift verses and leave it at that. You already have all that you need to do whatever work God has for you to do.

Maybe you don't buy that. Maybe God has given **some people** what we need, but I'm not sure **I'm** ready. OK: are you ready? You don't have to be completely ready in order to do Gods will. We can't afford to take a public stand right now, we have few people and can't afford to lose anyone. Well, that's true even if we have a thousand people. So that means the time is never right to take a stand, or we may upset people.

Human Relations Sunday has been around for half a century, originally established in 1972 to fund Self-Determination Projects, The Black Community Developers and the Police-Community Relations Program. In 1988, the offering was designated to support ministries of social justice and outreach to at-risk youth. Specific ministries include the Community Developers Program, United Methodist Voluntary Services Program and the Youth Offender Rehabilitation Program. (You probably think that some or all of these efforts are a good idea, even without knowing much about them. Check the link in this week's email, check around the internet to learn more.) That's not what I want to point out — The point is to **put money into it**, bringing it from an idea, to something that will make a difference in the actual lives of actual people. What is it that we can do to make a difference in the lives of real people?

Well, that is baked into our DNA as Methodists, right? Our very name comes from the idea that if you wanted to be more holy and get closer to God, you could cultivate holy habits and ways of living that would make a concrete, measurable difference in your life.

Our spiritual forebears worked on practical spirituality — what will give you a better life? We seek to spread the Gospel to other people because we believe it will give them a better, more meaningful life. We

do this the same way we serve God through the church — with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.

Too often, we spend time wishing. Wishing we had more people or more resources or more volunteers or more activity. But what if, instead, we were simply thankful? Let's be thankful for the gifts we have, for the people we have, for how they give of themselves and their resources and give thanks for the mission and witness that we are able to do week by week.

Of course, we want to encourage more. But why? Because we are lacking? **No!** We encourage more because we don't want anyone to miss out on the joy of being the body of Christ, the joy of serving, the joy of worship. We come from **an attitude of abundance and not scarcity.**

We also remember the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on this weekend. His witness reminds us that the work of antiracism and civil rights is not yet done, and we need to be engaged in the transforming work of the gospel, even in our neighborhoods. Even here, we come not from fear or from lack, but from an abundance of grace that calls us into action to be a part of the creation of beloved community in which everyone is welcome, and everyone is honored. Let us celebrate the church we are and we are becoming. **Amen.**