

**GREATER METRO MLK JR. INTERFAITH SERVICE
RESTORATION CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
JANUARY 16, 2011
THE BELOVED COMMUNITY
4:00 P.M.**

Rudyard Kipling began one of his best-known poems with these words:

**“Oh, East is East, and West is West,
and never the twain shall meet,
Till earth and sky stand presently by
at God's great judgment seat.”**

Kipling was a gifted poet, but he was also a racist. He coined the term “fuzzy-wuzzy” and applied it to the people of Sudan. He called all colored races “**the white man's burden**”. In his mind, it was the right and responsibility of England to conquer and to civilize the “**heathen**”. But he saw the world as hopelessly and permanently divided between the east and the west. It always had been, and it always would be in his mind. In his view, these two cultures were so different that they would never be able to live together in harmony.

Kipling wrote his “**Ballad of East and West**” more than a hundred years ago. But the idea that it argues is still very much with us today. Multitudes of people agree with Kipling that the world is hopelessly divided. They might focus on other differences - Jew and Arab, Protestant and Catholic, rich and poor, black and white, Christian and Moslem, gay and straight, democrat and republican, right and left, liberal and conservative. But they would all reach the same conclusion – “**Never the twain shall meet.**” In their view of things, the world has always been, and will always be, a divided and hostile place.

It is not difficult to see why people think that way. There is plenty of evidence to support their belief. The pages of history tell a story of constant and seemingly endless conflict. And the current news media tell the same story, over and over again. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a different view. He called it the “**Beloved Community**”. Dr. King offered us a different possibility than living in a world of endless conflict.

Dr. King was one of the greatest religious leaders of our time. He led the civil rights movement across a minefield of hate. He was a man of conscience. The dictionary defines conscience as “**the inner sense of what is right or wrong in one's conduct or motives, impelling one toward right action.**” Conscience is a gift from God and is vital to our full humanity. Conscience is indispensable in producing character.

Having lived a principled life, Dr. King was disturbed to learn that not all people were treated the same. The standards of God remain unchanged. God is pleased with those who work for justice among the nations. God blesses those who heal the blindness of ignorance and prejudice, and break the chains of poverty and hunger. Conscience involves choices. Choices about how we spend our time and our money. Choices about how we vote. Choices about what we think are important.

Most people swear by the old adage: “**Honesty is the best policy.**” But we are usually far more eager to tell the truth than to hear the truth. Hearing the truth means that we must confront our weaknesses as well as strengths. Hearing the truth often calls for changes that we are reluctant to make.

Dr. King lived a world where we could not have a service like we are having today. We could not enter the same doors, drink from the same water fountains, play in the same playgrounds, attend the same schools, lived in the same neighborhoods, use the same restrooms, nor be buried in the same cemeteries.

Dr. King came to believe that poverty caused much of the unrest in America. Not only poverty for African-Americans, but poor whites, Hispanics and Asians. He came to believe that the local problems of human relations could not be addressed without taking on the broader issues of a war that had poisoned the atmosphere of the entire country and siphoned off the necessary resources to effect the change that he had envisioned.

What a dilemma he faced! Even other African-American leaders were disturbed by his shift in priorities. Our focus is civil rights and not the global issues of the war in Vietnam. The truth is often hard to take. But it's far better to be troubled with the painful truth than to be consoled with a pleasant lie.

Most of us would agree with that. But Dr. King found that his truth was the kind that some preferred not to hear. And for obvious reasons some did not even want to discuss it. Their preference was just to leave it alone, let it lie there, pay it no attention. Why not just focus on the dream and forget about all these other problems.

Even the mood in the black community shifted. The high that King enjoyed after the March on Washington and for receiving the Noble Peace Prize did not last long. Very soon, it turned from admiration to open hostility. The change came when he touched on this truth that nobody wanted to hear.

Dr. Vincent Harding addresses this change in his book, **“Martin Luther King, the Inconvenient Hero.”** There are some problems that are larger than we are. They are too complex for our simple minds. They are too big for our limited resources. We can find ourselves working at the very edge of our capacity. That was the atmosphere in which Dr. King found himself.

Nevertheless, he continued his campaign for world peace. He traveled across America to support and speak out for civil rights and the rights of

the underprivileged. He never got a break. He moved from one struggle right into another. In April 1968 Dr. King went to Memphis, Tennessee to help sanitation workers who were on strike. That trip to Memphis was an appointment with destiny.

Listen to this man of conscience as he gave his last speech:

“We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I have been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life.

Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now.

I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land.

I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord”

God's calling is always an invitation to become who we really are, who we were created to be. And God's calling always aims at putting us in touch with our deepest longings and our truest selves. Dr. King did not confront us with a topic for debate, but with a call for change. He went to the mountaintop, but his life was not lived there. His life required descents as well as ascents.

Well I have to admit that Kipling was right about one thing. The east really is the east, and the west really is the west. The differences between people and cultures are real. But for him to say, “**Never the twain shall meet**”, was simply conjecture. He was only guessing. In the many years since his death, the two have already met more than he ever thought they would. And who knows what will happen in the next one hundred years or more?

Who would have thought in the 1950's and 60's that this country would have responded to the ethical and moral cries of a Black Southern preacher to rise and live up to its creed that **“All men are created equal”**?

It wasn't that long ago that many of us shared our doubts that we would live to see a black man elected president of the US in our lifetime. When this nation chose to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with a federal holiday, it was saying that even garbage collectors have a place in our society and a right to be respected. Anyone who knows what Dr. King stood for would not be surprised to learn that he died while trying to help those sanitation workers in the city of Memphis, Tennessee; not doctors, or lawyers or teachers, but sanitation workers. He was a man of conscience. He could not escape the words of Jesus when he said, *“When you do it unto one of the least of these my brothers, you do it unto me.”*

President Obama has another word for people who think like Rudyard Kipling. In his speech at the Tucson memorial service for the victims on last Wednesday, he said, **“At a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarized -- at a time when we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who think differently than we do -- it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not a way that wounds.”**

That means that the hope Dr. King spoke about is an inescapable dimension of all human experience. We cannot live toward the future without hope. Hope keeps the future open to a better life and a better world.

Like Moses, Dr. King led us out of the wilderness of despair. With God's help, Moses defied Pharaoh and led his people out of Egyptian bondage and through the vast wilderness to the Promised Land. Although there were forty years of wilderness wandering, filled with

deprivation, desperation, and danger. Moses finally led them all the way to their long-sought destination.

But there is one thing we should never forget. Moses was not allowed to finish the journey. From the heights of Mt. Pisgah, on the east side of the Jordan River, Moses looked across to the land his people would conquer and call home forever. But Moses died and was buried in the mountains of Moab. He was given a panoramic view of the fulfillment of God's promise, but he never entered the land. After so many years of struggle and wandering, was it enough for Moses to only see the Promised Land? For a weary veteran of a great pilgrimage of faith, perhaps it was enough.

Faith always involves seeing beyond our present place and time. All of the promises of God are not fulfilled in anyone's lifetime. In our limited span of years all our personal aspirations may not be achieved and all of our wishes and dreams may not be realized in our limited span of years. Still, faith has given hints of God's "*not yet*" and glimpses of the Promised Land. For faithful pilgrims, it is enough, and we journey on.

Yes, we spent a long time in the wilderness, but we've gone from the outhouse to the White House. We have gone from the back door to the front door. The journey into the wilderness was forced upon us. But it gave us the courage to face truth without evasion or excuse. In spite of it all, we found ways to serve God's divine purposes.

Sure there are differences in this room that divide us, but they are mostly superficial. Our skins are of different colors. Some of us are white. Some are black. Some are brown. And others, such as Asians or Native American, are not so easily labeled. But the blood that runs in our veins crosses all color barriers.

In the musical **The Wizard of Oz**, Dorothy's house is swept up by a horrible cyclone. When her house finally lands in Munchkin City, it just happens to set down on top of an evil witch who had been tormenting

the Munchkin people. The Munchkins want to throw a huge celebration in Dorothy's honor. But first, the Mayor of Munchkin City has to verify beyond a shadow of a doubt that the witch has been killed. In his song to Dorothy, he says, **“As Mayor of the Munchkin City, in the county of the land of Oz, I welcome you most regally. But we've got to verify it legally, to see if she is morally, ethically, spiritually, physically, absolutely, positively, undeniably, and reliably dead!”**

That is the charge I leave you with today. I want you to leave here determined to make sure that the sin of prejudice and discrimination is dead! Morally, ethically, physically, absolutely, positively, undeniably, and reliably dead!

Amen!