

# **GIFTS FROM THE PROPHET**

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## **OPENING WORDS**

Dear Lord

Give us faith to believe that redemption of people, relationships, communities, and whole nations is possible.

Help us in the moment of difficult decision. Help us to work with renewed vigor for a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood/sisterhood that transcends race and color.

Remove all bitterness from my heart and give me the strength and courage to face any disaster that comes my way.

May all who suffer oppression in this world reject the self-defeating method of retaliatory violence and choose the method that seeks to redeem.

When our days become dreary with low hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in the Universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral Universe is long but it bends towards justice. Amen.

## **WORDS FOR REFLECTION**

The paradox is that the man who fears death is already dead,  
whereas the man who has ceased to fear death has at that  
moment begun to live.                      Albert Nolan

## **SERMON**

### **GIFTS FROM THE PROPHET**

You can kill the prophet. You can cancel the day of remembrance. But you cannot kill the words, nor can you erase our memories. You cannot erase the ideas the prophet brings. The ideas of justice and nonviolence live on. As for our memories, like many of you, I carry unforgotten images etched in the emulsion of my mind – peaceful marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge attacked by dogs, batons, and firehoses; the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church and the killing of 4 African-American girls; the bus boycotts and lunch counter sit-ins; and the deaths including that of the Episcopal Seminarian Jonathan Daniels from Keene, New Hampshire. Who can forget these images from the 1960's? And these images have been recorded for all who come after us. These images remind us of our colonialism, our racism and our fears. For all who look, they record our history of keeping non-whites enslaved, pushed down, and classified as “other.”

This morning in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I invite us to consider our colonialism, the idea of nonviolence, and the making of a prophet. Though this is occasioned by a day to honor Dr. King, these are foundational topics which raise important questions about our humanity and where we find ourselves today as a nation.

This is about our history, the present day, and our future as a country. Will we be a country of justice and equality or not?

I would like to begin with colonialism. It may be disarming to think of us as a colonial power like England, Spain, France and other countries in the days of old; but colonialism exists today. It just has a different face, and we are part of that face. Consider Venezuela, Iran, and Iraq. It continues to be the subjugation of third world countries by the world powers. Colonialism reflects a basic belief in a duality that labels people as being superior or inferior. It is grounded in the belief that whiteness is more evolved and responsible for the progress of civilization. It reflects a paternalism that white people alone are responsible for mankind's advancement. Of course, there is no admission that we have advanced on the backs of those we consider less than ourselves. And that advancement has come via racism, patriarchy, capitalism, exploitation of resources, and enslavement. In other words, "power over" not "power with."

Though these are actions that support the superior-inferior dichotomy, at a deeper level, colonialism is driven by deep insecurities – our fear of the other, our fear of losing power, and our fear of sharing power. Instead, we look to duality – us vs them, superior vs inferior, white vs black/brown – to defend our exploitation of the "other" racially, educationally, economically, sexually. Reading James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and others educates us in the ways the "other" in our society has been exploited including being blamed when our country is not going as desired by those in power. It seems we always need to blame someone else rather than take responsibility for the choices we

make as a nation. We do not have to look far to see the forms of violence visited upon those we consider “other” – land occupation, violent policing, human trafficking, racialized incarceration, interference in elections, poor education, preventable famine and malnutrition.

This is what it means to be a colonial power. This is who we have been. This is who we are today. Will this be our future? Open questions for all of us to consider as well as to reflect on our own participation in our nation’s colonialism.

Nonviolence is an answer to colonialism. It arises within the oppressed people together with others who identify with the oppressed. It is born out of the shared experience of the pain of violence, and it requires something bigger than victim-perpetrator thinking – something bigger than duality. It requires one to go deeper by asking one to join with the pain of the Universe – cosmic pain. All creatures of the Universe suffer pain and in joining with that pain, we can join in bearing one another’s pain. When we can put aside the fear of our own pain, we are free to join with others to share the journey together. This is a kind of thinking foreign to most of us in the dominant, white culture.

Think of the marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge. This was a sincere and powerful sacrifice – each marcher, arm in arm with others, was willing to empty his or herself of one’s own pain so to share the burden. They did it together. I continue to be in awe of this kind of strength and courage. To quote Gandhi, “True individuality consists in reducing oneself to zero. The secret of life is selfless service. The highest ideal for us is to become free from

attachment.” Clearly, this implies attachment to one’s life in service to humanity. This was what Jonathan Daniels did when he shielded seventeen-year-old Ruby Sales from a racist attack by a part-time police officer. He sacrificed his life for another human and for a humane idea.

Nonviolence stresses love, peaceful disruption, and civil disobedience to challenge oppressive systems without resorting to violence. It is the courageous confrontation of evil through the power of love. It seeks to separate the acts of evil from the people enforcing evil. It requires deep courage to suffer without retaliation. That courage is buttressed with the belief that suffering itself can be redemptive. This kind of commitment asks for a kind of love, agape, that cannot be attained alone, only in community. This is why it is so difficult for us, trained in independence and individuality, to understand. The very idea of shared community and shared experience is essential. What can we do to get ourselves there?

Nonviolence also asks for deep faith in the future stemming from the conviction that the Universe is on the side of justice and not on the side of evil. In holding this belief, one holds at one and the same time, the importance of one’s life in the commitment to justice while understanding one’s time here is short. It is what one does with that time that is important in the belief that justice will win out. Dr. King’s words remind us, “This approach certainly does not make white man feel comfortable. It disturbs his conscience.” Well, it should. When nonviolence disturbs the conscience, the door to one’s humanity is left ajar. It invites one to consider that each of us is simply on this planet having a spiritual experience which includes learning how to live in peace and tranquility with all that is here and

a willingness to sacrifice one's life for something much bigger than the self.

Now to speak of the prophet. The prophet takes the anger of oppressed people and, rather than continuing to live in oppression and passivity, moves them into transformation, self-expression, and new freedom. Christ was a prophet. Gandhi was a prophet. Through their teaching and their own actions, each prophet moved the people into nonviolent action by harnessing their fear of the fearful.

Dr. King looked to both Christ and Gandhi. Christ offered spirit and motivation for change through love while Gandhi provided the method – nonviolent civil disobedience. Dr. King's words remind us that, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. The beauty of non-violence is that in 'its own way' and in 'its own time,' it seeks to break the chain reaction of evil."

Gandhi believed that the "prime cause of modern wars" was "the inhuman race for exploitation of the so-called weaker peoples of the earth." The hallmarks of violence and dualism have endangered the planet and all that lives here. Look around. Look at these last years! Look at last week! Look ahead to what is coming!

To their credit, prophets like Christ, Gandhi, and King believed we are here to transform the social order and not merely to endure it, either passively or cynically. Salvation through pain has been with us for a long time. It belongs to no single religion. In fact, nonviolent social change comes out of the feminine as a counter to the very worst effects of the masculine reflected in dualistic thinking and

resort to violence. Again, look at our history and the ways in which we have responded to ideas and actions that threaten our power. It is rather like the 10-year-old who supplies the bat for the neighborhood ball game. If he does not like the rules or does not get chosen on the right team, he either uses his bat as a weapon, or he takes his bat home and refuses to play the game. This is where we are as a nation. Our leaders only want to play the game with their rules. It reflects latency age development, that is being stuck at an 8-12 year-old way of being male and not emotionally growing through adolescence into adulthood. There has been and continues to be ample evidence of that in our “leaders.”

Before ending, I wish to speak to another dimension of Dr. King. His theology provided the foundation for leading the dispossessed and downtrodden in an important way. Dr. King was not a proponent of St. Augustine’s teaching about fall and redemption. He believed the teachings about fall and redemption were a theology that kept poor people ever poor because it is a theology of the oppressor. He did not believe we were born in sin but that we were born in goodness and love. His theology is grounded in the writings of de Chardin, Chenu, and Fox. It is a Creation Spirituality of the oppressed and those who identify with the oppressed. It is committed to the oppressed liberating themselves. In the process, perhaps even the oppressors may be liberated.

In the 1960’s black men and women led the way with their nonviolence. Their courage, their willingness to be beaten and jailed, to die so to liberate themselves and their people, ultimately liberated us. Progress was evident – compassion and judgment made their way into our schools, our towns and cities, our state and

federal governments, our businesses, and our communities. Their sacrifice and leadership gave voice to many groups of oppressed people in our society. We have lost a good deal of ground. Is it time again for a prophet to follow in the footsteps of Dr. King? Who could come forward? From which oppressed group? Would it be a man or a woman?

However, I do not believe we can just wait for the next prophet. Prophets like Dr. King hold a mirror up to the oppressors. What is necessary is for us to look at ourselves in the mirror. We need to see what we must change about ourselves. Some thoughts.

First, we must divorce ourselves from the belief in radical individualism. It is a false belief that has kept us alone and isolated with a sense of superiority. It supports colonialism and has given us permission to treat others very badly. The path ahead is grounded in community – reaching out to others, learning about others, risking revealing ourselves to others, and finding love in community. I ask, “What are the ways each of us can do that here and now?”

Second, we must look at our fear. Our fear keeps us alone and pointing fingers to defend our culpability. Ask, for example, “What am I afraid of if I risk community?” We all have parts of us that are not as adult as we would like, parts of us that are childish or adolescent. This is where our fear lives. Have a conversation with that young part and explore how your adult self can protect the young part while you risk meeting a fear. For a long time, I believed trust was about learning to trust other people; but, at the core, trust is about learning to trust oneself regardless of others’ beliefs or opinions. Fear can then fall away.

Lastly, we must surrender our arrogance, our attitude of superiority everywhere – what part of town we live in, what church I join, what music I listen to, which children our children can play with, etc. Often, we are not aware of how our insecurity causes arrogance to arise in many aspects of our lives. Start with your daily life and look for the ways your arrogance leads to judgments about others. Ask yourself whether that serves you in the quest for common ground?

In closing, prophets seek to free the oppressed through the actions of the oppressed. But the prophet also holds a mirror to the oppressors in the hope of freeing the oppressors as well. Dr. King showed us our colonialism, our reliance on power, our deep fears of others and of change, and our arrogance. We can celebrate his life and his work, but such a celebration is empty if we do not commit ourselves to our work – continuing to grow ourselves as responsible adults in the world and working with others to undo the oppression which exists in our society. He left us a dream about learning how to live with love and justice. We can do nothing less than commit ourselves to that dream.

## **CLOSING THOUGHTS**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed of a loving and just society for all. Honor him today by taking a moment to pause and reflect on his legacy. Even more important, honor him by putting your hands and feet to his dream of racial equality and justice here and around the world. Discover within where those goals are stopped by your fear and your arrogance and grow yourself and then help to grow the

world. That is how legacies live on and change the world. Go in  
Peace.