

What Happens to a Dream Deferred?

Good morning, fellow congregants. I am Michael Martin. Those of you that have read the bulletin know my story. Isn't that a nice write-up Merrie gave me. She made me sound kind of human, and almost well-adjusted. It is wonderful to be here in the pulpit. I am flattered and honored to be asked. The last time I spoke from here was a little more than three years ago, on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, when it fell on a Sunday.

I was just six weeks out of the hospital after multiple surgeries, and I was hoping to be able to remain standing throughout. But I remember, so clearly, starting off, after the anthem, with "how' ya like that choir?" I looked over and saw all of their loving, smiling faces, and knew why I was there.

Apparently I did okay. They asked me back. Well...it's been three years. Well...

Today, I want to talk about a dream, the dream of a truly equal America. I fear I have some bad news. I hope I have some good news. Let's look at it together.

Let me start with some quotations from The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I love quoting Dr. King, not just because of his elegant truth-telling, but because I can imitate him and pretend that I'm really preaching. What he said, back in August, 1963 during the famous March on Washington that I fear is losing its historical significance, is this:

I say to you today, my friends, though, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream today...

And now this, from Langston Hughes, the poet, author, columnist who lived from 1902 to 1967 and is widely regarded as one of the architects and the poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance movement of the 1920s.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore —
And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over —
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

I juxtapose this passage and this poem because, together, they pose an important question. What, in God's name, happened to Martin Luther King's 1963 reverie? One of his four little children is a grandparent. Another is dead. And where have we, as a nation, come in the 57 years since?

Well...we had the disco era; we had the me decade; we had the crack cocaine crisis, which gave us increases in prison sentencing; we had the opioid crisis; which gave us decreased prison sentencing; Enron; red-lining; the tech boom; the tech bust... we had Rodney King, who, since his famous public beating, and his more famous quote "can't we all just get along," has died.

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Eric Garner, 350 lb., asthmatic, big fat Eric Eric Garner, died in July of 2014. He died at the hands of New York City Police Officer Daniel Pantaleo, who used an illegal restraining technique. The choke hold was illegal because, too often, it could cause death. Officer Pantaleo used it on Eric Garner, and, according to the medical examiner, caused his death. He used the illegal hold, and it killed the guy he used it on.

A grand jury was convened and it declined to indict him on any charges. Five years later, last year, he was fired, prompting such protest from the police officer's union that one would have thought he was a hero.

Officer Pantaleo killed a black man with his bare hands in an attempt to run him in for selling loose cigarettes. The police officers' union said that firing him, after five years, sent a message that would inhibit officers from properly performing their duties. He killed a black man using a dangerous, improper restraint with his bare hands, faced no criminal charges and continued to draw a police officer's salary for five more years. Then he, and his buddies, beefed when he got fired.

Congressman Peter King (D-NY), for whom both men were constituents, stated that Garner's obesity and poor health were the true cause of his death. Certainly race could not have had anything to do with it. If Mr. Garner had been "a 350-pound white guy," the Congressman, Mr. Garner's national representative, said, "he would have been treated just the same."

Our President, at the time, a black man named Obama, called Garner's death and its lack of legal consequences "an American problem."

I bring this case up because it illustrates best, perhaps, the deep, deep institutionalization of racism in our American society. It also illustrates the most essential, insidious feature of the practice of racism: the denial that it even occurred. This gaslighting has been a feature of the oppression of the African since the beginning of the European imperial colonization of the rest of the world. Either it's not even happening, or, if that cannot be credibly denied, it wasn't a matter of race.

Each of these conceptual vessels of racism are dependent on one another. With their assistance, the killing of an unarmed black man

by a white police officer, the sort of killing that seems to have become epidemic in recent years, could take place with impunity. In this case, the late Mr. Garner's congressman said it would have happened to a similarly situated white guy – as if one would ever find a similarly situated white guy. His president, a black man, said it was a problem with the country. The country of which he was president. Apparently, no one was responsible for this clear case of racial injustice except, maybe, the criminal justice system, an institution.

Let's talk about the first institution of institutionalized racism, the institution of slavery. Slavery, the sinful system that is at the base of all this, was not, as many of my public-school history books implied, some unfortunate social occurrence brought about by uncontrollable conditions. It did not just happen. It happened on purpose. It was a tightly operated statutorily and regulatorily mandated institution. It is responsible for the building of our nation and its wealth. The White House and the Capitol were built by slaves. Slavery was firmly supported by the British crown, until the American Revolution. Then, it was firmly supported by all three branches of the new nation's constitutional government. At the time

of its abolishment, the slave trade was the biggest business in the United States. Few would reasonably disagree, now, that everything about the horrid institution was in clear violation of the constitutional rights the new nation proudly espoused.

It would seem that, based on what we all learned in elementary school about the great principals of our relatively young nation, something like slavery simply could not exist. There would have to be some sort of explanation for something as evil as slavery, and its progeny — “Jim Crow” laws and various other covenants and customs specifically designed to oppress black people and exclude us from the best America has to offer — to exist in a great nation like this.

In fact, that explanation is what I have been reading in books, articles, and legal opinions throughout my life. It is a tortured explanation because there is no real explanation except racism — raw, naked racism. Racism is a word so strong, so charged, that many white people are loathe to even use it. Many are more comfortable talking about “bigotry” and “prejudice.” Others are more comfortable referring to “racial relations” or “racial problems.”

The real word and issue, however, is racism: “a doctrine...that asserts the superiority of one race over another or others, and that seeks to maintain the supposed purity of a race.” New World Dictionary of the American Language, Second College Edition, William Collins & Co. (1972). Without racism, something like slavery could not exist. Unless the humans subjected to this organized, official cruelty were deemed less than human, our enlightened, free, new nation could not do — legally, morally, spiritually — what it was doing. For America to believe in itself, it had to believe in black people’s lack of humanity and the God-given rights that the Declaration of Independence stated came with it. It had to be a fervent belief for our nation, as we are encouraged to envision it, to survive.

The racism has been woven into the very fabric of the society, just to make it make sense. It is in the ether, learned practically by osmosis. It only makes perverse sense that our society, to justify the horrors of something so horrible as — the institution — of slavery, would not only adopt the hideous, un-American doctrine of racism but, indeed, promote it.

Black people have been, from the very start, denied the rights of citizenship, indeed of personhood, in America. The revered Founding Fathers, then Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Executive Branch all cooperated in this conspiracy. Individual states, with the blessing of the larger nation and the law of the land, set up legal structures and societal mores designed to perpetuate the exclusion and subjugation of black people permanently from all parts of the elusive American Dream. Even black men who joined branches of the U.S. military joined a segregated black military where the officer's corps was almost all-white, and the duties were either highly hazardous or humiliatingly menial.

By necessity, the black American has had to create a parallel society. America has a vast network of historically black colleges and universities. There are black fraternities, black sororities, black Masons. There was the Negro Leagues. There is the black press – my first job out of college was as a writer and editor of the California Voice, a black weekly in Oakland. There are, of particular note to we United Methodists, the AME and CME Churches. Many of our existing institutions are reflective of the sadness of our history.

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How is it that America fights so hard to maintain the barriers it has erected to limit its boundless opportunities to white people, then celebrates the bravery and heroism of the black people who breach those carefully-maintained barriers? Oddly, the larger society acknowledges that racism and the resulting racial restrictions and discrimination are inbred in America. It observes the barriers, and, sort of, condemns their existence. Then, oddly, perversely, when the racial barrier is broken, breached by someone brave, persistent, or lucky enough to do it, that someone is congratulated, celebrated, honored as “the first one.”

Is it, perhaps, a way to assuage, or even deny collective guilt. If racism is built into virtually every element of everyday life in America – institutionalized, we have called it – it is, simply, a part of that everyday life. It is the system. That way, individuals have no responsibility for it. That way individuals don’t have to explain it or apologize for it. If I describe to a white colleague my history of being pulled over and harassed by police officers in the myriad jurisdictions through which I’ve driven, he can sympathize and join me in

condemning its wrongness. Certainly he, as an individual white person, could not be held responsible for such behavior, or for a system that allows or even encourages it.

This individual denial of collective guilt, is the hypocritical grease with which our racist societal machines are lubricated. Blatant, horrible instances of racism that took place in the past are excused with the observation that they were in keeping with whatever times in which they occurred. Those that occurred as recently as yesterday are excused as someone else's racism. We can all agree that the cops, the law firms, and the President are racist, but no one can explain why this racism persists. No one will take responsibility for it.

So, the barriers remain and persist. When one who insists on living his or her life to the fullest manages to, in so doing, breach one of these carefully erected and maintained barriers, it becomes heroism. America salutes the talent, bravery, and persistence of that person for going where others who looked like him were previously kept away. He, or she, becomes The First One.

The institutions into which our American society's racism is baked are largely old and staid, like my alma mater. As such, it seems that their old, racist ways must be fought against, like the wider racism in our country at large, often to no avail. These things were baked in long ago, and old ways are difficult to change. But consider this:

I just completed my second season of boycotting the NFL. Not that the league has noticed. I was in my thirties before I even went to an NFL game, and I've only been to four, maybe five total. And for those I didn't even buy the tickets. They were given to me every time. So, my "boycott" has consisted only of not watching NFL football on the tube, and refusing to follow it in the newspapers and other media...although that last part is close to impossible.

I boycott to protest the NFL's treatment former 49ers quarterback Colin Kapernick. As many of you probably know, Mr. Kapernick, during the 2017 season, chose not to stand in response to the playing of the national anthem before football games. He made this choice, he said, to protest the persistent racial injustice in our nation, particularly the police's brutal treatment of black people.

Another player advised him to take a knee, rather than merely remain seated on the cooler, to show more respect. So, he did that.

And it became a “thing.”

Mr. Kapernick’s protest was perverted into a display of unpatriotic behavior. Kneeling became a controversy in which there were sides to take. But what side? Is there, or is there not racial injustice in America? Any player who took a knee, thus implying that there is, was, according to none other than our President, unpatriotic, and his team’s owner should “fire the son-of-a-bitch.”

For his part in all this, Mr. Kapernick was effectively drummed out of the league. Of course it wasn’t racial. It never is. In fact, according to the NFL, it never happened. There was no collusion among owners no not hire Mr. Kapernick. The league made that determination after a thorough investigation of itself.

The NFL arbitrarily took away what would have been the best years of Mr. Kapernick’s athletic career because he had the temerity to stage a racial protest on its hallowed turf. This was the same way boxing and the U.S. Government took away the best years of

Muhammed Ali's career some 50 years before. So I boycott. I don't think the league has noticed yet.

But think about this. What if it had been "the Gronk?" I'm talking about Rob Gronkowski, the big, white, hugely popular tight end for the New England Patriots, now retired and a commentator. His popularity extends beyond the league.

What if it had been the Gronk who refused to stand, instead of Mr. Kapernick. Not because he grew up with black people. Not saying "I've played along black teammates all my life." Just what if the Gronk — based on what he is seeing every day; based on what Mr. Kapernick was seeing every day, what we are all seeing every day — what if the big, affable, hugely popular Mr. Gronkowski decided to remain seated, or take a knee in protest of the treatment of his people: black people.

Would we have believed him? Would we think him crazy? Would we think he was up to something? Probably so. I would have.

Or, how about this?

You may have heard of Rachel Dolezal. She's the white woman from Spokane who served as president of their branch of the NAACP. She is famous because she has chosen to self-identify as African-American. The comedian Dave Chappelle has a bit he does about her. "We'll take you, Rachel," he says, "but you can't be black and just keep on being Rachel Dolezal. You gotta get you a black name. A name like...well like Draymond Green. A name that the Air BnB computers will kick out right away."

Now Chappelle's routine, and the audience, black and white, who found it hilarious, tell an interesting tale about our America. First, that we readily accept the concept of black or white names. As an aside, I should point out that Ms. Dolezal has since taken on the name Nkechi Amare Diallo. I guess that's black enough. The Air BnB computers will kick that out.

What's more compellingly disturbing is how we all, black and white, in order to get the joke, had to accept the premise. We all have readily accepted — some cynically, some naïvely — that even an institution as relatively new — practically brand new — as Air BnB has incorporated racism into the very basis of its structure. This is

brand, new institutional racism. But who's behind it? Who can change it?

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The Apostle Luke comes in here. I love the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's been interpreted on many levels, like Jesus being the Samaritan, and mankind being the injured man. What I find in it is the insistent lesson that we must become one, truly one, in order to ever, ever reach our goal of racial justice. Becoming truly one with one's fellow black person almost surely requires dedication and sacrifice, emotionally, spiritually, and financially.

It's significant that Jesus is relating the parable to his fellow Jews. The Samaritans were, I understand, not mere outsiders, but considered by Jews to be a despised enemy. And here, Jesus is telling a story where a Samaritan is the hero.

What I really like, though, is the degree to which the Samaritan goes to help the injured man. I mean, he really puts himself out there: he uses his own oil and wine to dress the man's wounds. He puts the man on his own ass, takes him to an inn, where he pays for his

lodging and leaves him with an open tab. It is clear that truly loving one's neighbor involves significant cost and risk.

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It's been 57 years since Dr. King expressed his dream for his children. Since I started my first legal job, back in 1983, I have given addresses on Dr. King's birthday, or in observance of Black History Month at least 30 times. I was always the go-to guy in whatever federal agency I was working. Each ceremony seemed more and more nostalgic for the bygone days of the Civil Rights Movement. Looking at the timeline, it is clear to me that the society of which Dr. King so fervently dreamt will not exist in my lifetime. Progress has occurred, but black men are still being shot to death in the streets with impunity. Mike Bloomberg not long ago presided over a NYC wherein he supported the "stop and frisk" ordinances that were virtual martial law in certain black communities. Now he wants to be President. The current President is, well, you know. This mess won't be cleaned up by the time I die.

But, I must remember that steady progress has been has always been made against a very formidable foe. Frederick Douglass was

born a slave, escaped to freedom, and spent his life fighting racism's evils. When he died, in 1891, slavery had been abolished, but America was still a racial mess – the continued slave-like conditions of sharecropping still existed. There was disenfranchisement of black people, public lynchings of black people. He had fought his entire, long life to correct a horrible condition and died with it woefully uncorrected. He had made it his life's work even if it was left undone in his time. I must do the same. We must do the same.

I have hope. I hope, long, indeed pray for another movement, a movement akin to the now revered, increasingly ancient civil rights movement. The urgency of now is what that movement embodied, with white people participating as avidly as their black siblings. We, you and me, could be part of such a movement. We, you and me, must be part of such a movement.

The quest for equality must be energized. Martin Luther King characterized this sort of urgency in a less popular message than his "I Have a Dream Speech," where he said:

There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of

revolt will continue to shake our nation until the bright days of justice emerge.

No, no we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

So let us strive that ever we will make the cry of freedom our watchcry. As Emma Lazarus, the poet who wrote the New Colossus, the poem on the Statue of Liberty said, “until we are all free, we are none of us free.” Let us go forward with a prayer for a new movement wherein we, as true siblings fight for equality and freedom. Let freedom ring.

When we allow freedom to ring – when we let it ring from every city and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the word of the old Negro spiritual “Free at last, Free at last, Great God a-mighty, We are free at last.”

Amen, and I thank you.