

Reflection for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Ecumenical Service
January 21, 2008
Oconee St. United Methodist Church

I am a child of the '50's, raised in Atlanta, during the period immediately after the Second world war, as our country rebuilt, prospered, and settled down to some well-deserved tranquility, at least on the surface. In my world, it was a time of "Ozzie and Harriet," "Leave it to Beaver", and "Father Knows Best." Religious beliefs were kept to Sundays and practiced in private; one's faith was a personal issue, not to be imposed on the secular world. I remember tranquil Sundays, going to Sunday School and church, and then coming home to a special dinner, either fried chicken or pot roast, topped off by two kinds of ice cream, one was always chocolate, my favorite. Maybe afterwards a Sunday drive out into the country – out to Stone Mountain, or to the observation deck of the Atlanta Airport to watch planes take off and land on property where my father had gone hunting as a boy.

For me as a white, middle class child growing up in the south, the '50's were a great, peaceful, satisfying time. Not so for another little girl – because of the color of her skin, she lived in a deprived and run down neighborhood not far from my home called Buttermilk Bottoms, attended an inferior school, and couldn't use the restroom at the gas station, or buy a coke from the Woolworth soda fountain. Not so for her parents, who if they traveled, spent the night in their car when they were too weary to drive further because there was no motel that would sell them a room; not so for her older brother or sister who had to buy tickets from a separate window and go up back stairs to the uppermost balcony to watch a movie at the Fox theater on a Friday night. Not so for her cousin who, if thirsty, had to drink from a separate water fountain marked "Colored Only" at the Sears-Roebuck on Ponce de Leon Avenue. But all was right in my world. I didn't know; I didn't understand.

I was eleven years old when Martin Luther King, Jr. accepted the pastorate of the Dexter Ave. Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama and within one year he was recognized the leader of the civil rights movement in Alabama and within another year he was an international celebrity and the subject of a cover story in Time Magazine. What has only recently occurred to me is how young he was – only 26 years old when he accepted the call to Dexter Ave. He always seemed so old to me – maybe because of the wisdom of his words, the elegance of his language, the dignity of his demeanor. He was so young, but God spoke to him as to the prophets of old.

I'm sure you are familiar with the story of Dr. King sitting at his kitchen table, after having received death threats against him and his family. He prayed, and he heard the voice of God saying, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for Justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world."

And so he took his God given message to the world, a message of equality, of opportunity for all. A message that said poverty and economic deprivation are at the root of the violence and evil in this world, a message that contained a vision of a community of peace and harmony, where he said, "little black boys and little black girls join hands with little white boys and girls as sisters and brothers . . . of a nation where our children will not be judged by the color of their skin but the content of their character." His was a non-violent message, but it was greeted with violence and bloodshed, ultimately his own.

More than anyone else, Martin Luther King, Jr., with his courage and his eloquence, opened my eyes and changed my world view. I am a different person today because of him. But not just me; he changed what it meant to be a Christian for my generation. He brought the teachings of Jesus to bear on public issues; he spoke as a prophet, one who could see God's hand at work in human history and who gave voice to God's demands upon human life, both individual and corporate.

Today is a special day, but if we only celebrate Dr. King's life as an historical event, simply praising a great man, then we do him and ourselves a great disservice. One of his classmates from Morehouse College has written, "By exalting the accomplishments of Martin Luther King, Jr. into a legendary tale that is annually told, we fail to recognize his humanity, his personal and public struggles that are similar to yours and mine. By idolizing those whom we honor, we fail to realize that we could go and do likewise."

The best tribute we can pay Dr. King is to follow in his footsteps, to stand up for righteousness; to stand up for truth; to stand up for justice; to live out God's call on our lives in service to others. His life teaches us that God has a mission for each of us; it will often be a mission that is difficult to bear, but God will give us strength.

In this morning's paper Raven Howard, a 4th grader, who could be the grandchild of my contemporary back in the '50's wrote this in the "I Have a Dream" essay contest:

On my bus I can sit anywhere I say.

The only railroad underground I know is the subway.

"Colored" and "Black Panthers" mean Crayons and animals to me.

How can I be so removed from my history?

Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King need more than footnotes in my books.

Harriet Tubman and "The Little Rock Nine" deserve a second look.

My past does not define my future,

But I still need to know,

Just in case we slip a little

Backwards is not the way to go.

No First Black "This," No First Latin "That,"

Everyone together in unity;

A world without color can still have a rainbow. This is my dream.

My friends, for Raven, for Dr. King, to keep the dream alive -- it's up to us; it's our turn now.