

THE MESSAGE MAKES THE MAN

January 15, 2012

Nathanael said to Philip: *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”*

Folks, we know Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as the great Moses of the movement for civil rights and racial equality. But, first and foremost, Dr. King was a pastor. In that work, he followed in his daddy’s footsteps. And, from 1960 until he was martyred on April 4th, 1968, he served beside his daddy as the co-pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. On Sunday, February 4th, 1968, two months before he was martyred, Dr. King preached a sermon from Ebenezer’s pulpit, a sermon titled *The Drum Major Instinct*. Here’s an excerpt:

“If you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice, say that I was a drum major for peace. Say that I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter.”

Now, skip ahead to the dedication of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial in Washington D.C. just this past October 16th. The centerpiece of that memorial is a 30-foot tall block of granite with Dr. King emerging from the stone. The inscription on it reads:

“Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.”

So finally, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is memorialized alongside of George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt in our nation’s capital.

But, like his life, this memorial to Dr. King is controversial. The sculptor is Chinese, and some thought the sculptor should be born in the USA. The image of Dr. King is stern, defiant, his arms are crossed; and many say that was not who he was at all. And then there’s another inscription, an inscription that’s a paraphrase of the Drum Major sermon, an inscription that says:

“I was a drum major for justice, peace, and righteousness.”

Did you hear the difference? The sermon says: *IF I was a drum major...* but the inscription says *I WAS a drum major...*

About that inscription, Maya Angelou has this to say:

“By omitting the ‘if,’ the quote makes Dr. Martin Luther King look like an arrogant twit. He was anything but that. He was far too profound a man for that four-letter word to apply.”

And the news just last Friday is that the inscription is going to be corrected.

Friends, this monument with its revisionist quote isn’t the only memorial to Martin Luther King that collapses his profound humility into petty arrogance. This holiday that we have made of his birthday can also do that very same thing. On this holiday we make a monument out of the man, and we are prone to carve a civic hero with the chisel of nostalgia out of the stone of our corporate guilt.

I wonder – maybe you do, too – I wonder what Dr. King would have to say about all of this...about how we have made him a god in the pantheon of American civil religion? Would he smile? Would he laugh? Would he shake his head? Or would he just cry?

Yet, you know, what we have done to Dr. King is not unique. We magnify our public figures because we need heroes and we need villains...because we need people to lionize *and* to demonize...and, of course, we have done both to Dr. King.

Villains and heroes: we make villains, you know, because we need to externalize our own responsibility and blame for our failure and our pain, and our shame. And we make heroes because we secretly or not so secretly, want to be heroes ourselves. We want prestige, and honor, and status.

But, you know, status is a seductive thing. Sometimes we build status on family...or on heritage...or on the neighborhood where we live...or the house that we live in...or the educational achievements that we've made...or the career that we occupy...or the wealth that we command...or our fame...or even the church. Can you imagine status built on a church?

Eighty years ago or so, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a book titled *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. (H. Richard Niebuhr is Reinhold Niebuhr's lesser-known brother.) In that book, H. Richard Niebuhr says that churches provide status, and that, in American culture – at least eighty years ago from his observation – the greatest status was to be gained if you belonged to an Episcopal church. And if you didn't belong to the Episcopalians, then you should try belonging to the Presbyterians. And if you didn't manage to get into either of those two congregations, the Congregationalists would do.

Now, in Green Bay, the Episcopal Church had a big fight a hundred years ago and many of them came to this church, and this church was the Presbyterian Church until it decided to be the Congregational church, so there wasn't a status Presbyterian Church in this town. That means that in Green Bay, folks, you're in it. This is it! This is the status place when it comes to churches!

Status matters to us...and yet it can be seductive. And even H. Richard Niebuhr was seduced by status. You see that **H** at the beginning of his name stands for his first name, which was Helmut. It's German, just like he was. And he used that first name until he was appointed to the faculty at Yale University and the divinity school there...when he decided that, for the sake of status, and recognizability, and acceptability, he'd just let Helmut become an **H**, and he'd be Richard so as not to appear too German.

Status is seductive, and status gets to be destructive when it's built on the foundation of oppressive discrimination: that means race...or gender...or ethnicity...or age...or ability...or sexual orientation. Status is seductive and status can be destructive.

In the words of Nathanael:

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Long ago, Egypt was the place of discrimination. In Egypt, Israel was enslaved by Pharaoh for Egypt's status. And for the Israelites, that was misery. But for the Egyptians, that was pretty

good news because, you see, we like living in Egypt when we benefit from the favor of Pharaoh. It's not a bad thing to live in a place of discrimination when we're the ones doing the discriminating and not the ones who are discriminated against.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Dr. King was a modern-day Moses...a Moses for our nation's exodus from the Egypt of racist sin. Dr. King didn't just lead his people; he led all of us from slavery to freedom. He led us from Egypt to the Promised Land.

But, you know, even that first Moses – the one who challenged Pharaoh – had his own struggles with status. In the wilderness after Israel had left the confines of Egypt but before they'd entered the Promised Land, the Israelites were thirsty and they complained to Moses at Meribah-Kadesh. And God told Moses to give them something to drink; to take his rod and strike the rock and water would come forth. So Moses did it. Moses struck the rock with his rod and water gushed forth, but Moses gave himself credit for that fountainhead, and he gave God nothing. And because of that, because Moses claimed his status and excluded God from the credit, God did not allow Moses to enter the Promised Land.

You see, it's dangerous for us to get too full of ourselves...it's dangerous for us to solidify our status by forgetting as Moses did, and by suspecting, and slandering others.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Some of you have been paying attention to the news and, if you have, you know that there's been a controversy at St. Norbert College. Cardinal Francis George, the Archbishop of Chicago, has been invited to be the commencement speaker for this coming May's commencement exercises. But there's a problem because, before Christmas in a TV interview, Cardinal George compared the Gay Rights Movement to the Ku Klux Klan. It is, I think, absolutely astonishing that a prince of the Roman Catholic Church would compare a civil rights movement for the LGBT community to the most vicious hate group in this nation's history...absolutely astonishing! And I want to say to you today, folks, that that kind of a statement in no way expresses the diversity of intellectual opinion. That kind of a statement only fuels the violence of ignorant prejudice.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

We still have a long way to go!

Friends, we love to focus on personalities...to elevate and to denigrate...to make heroes and villains...to name the Nazareths in our world...to name those places and the pedigrees that we despise as well as the places and the pedigrees that we prize. So today I must tell you that the celebration of this birthday cannot be as much about a man named Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as it must be about a message for which Dr. King was a drum major. Today is not about the man. It's about his message! And his message is this: ***Good things do come out of Nazareth!***

So, for all those who think that homosexuality and Christianity are mutually exclusive, what is the message?

Good things come out of Nazareth!

Say it with me!

Good things come out of Nazareth!

For those who think that the color of our skin counts for far more than the content of our character; what is the message?

Good things come out of Nazareth!

For those who think that status is about possessions, and profession, and gender, and ethnicity and exclusivity; what is the message?

Good things come out of Nazareth!

And, you know, that message is not a ***weapon*** that beats prejudice into submission. No, that message is an ***invitation***; an invitation to experience what the power of God's love and mercy are doing in this world...an invitation to give up on the selfishness of status for the selflessness of our Savior...an invitation with three simple words...an invitation that Phillip issued a long time ago...an invitation that simply says: ***Come and see! Come and see!*** Come and see what's coming out of Nazareth! Come and see the son of Joseph. Come and see the Son of God. Come and see Jesus. Come and see what Jesus can make of you!

At our 12th Night Party a week ago Friday, one of you commented to me about the wonderful diversity of that gathering and what this congregation has become. Well, you know, that's what happens when we really do believe that good things come out of Nazareth! That's what happens when we ***come and see***...when we put Jesus smack dab in the center of our lives!

The truth about Martin Luther King, Jr. is that the message made the man. And it's no different today, because the message is what makes us. Because of his arrogance, Moses did not get to enter the Promised Land. But he saw it...oh, yes, he saw it from his lofty perch on Mount Nebo. And because of an assassin, Dr. King did not get to enter the Promised Land, either. But he saw it...he saw it from his lofty perch at the Lincoln Memorial.

Dr. King had a vision of the Promised Land...a vision that God set in his heart. Remember: ***I have a dream!*** And, yes, Dr. King saw that vision and he knew where he was going...because he was following Jesus.

So, brothers and sisters, we, too, have a message to share, and the message is this: ***Good things come out of Nazareth!*** And we have an invitation to give, and that invitation is this simple: ***Come and see!***

That message is the only thing...the only thing that will ever make us...and this church...holy and whole. In the words of Dr. King: ***None of the other shallow things matter.***

Yes, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a drum major. But, you know, the drum major only makes a difference if we join the parade. So fall in! Let us march for justice. Let us labor for peace. And let us witness to righteousness.

Yes, let us join the parade...the parade for which Dr. King was a drum major...the parade for Jesus and His love! Friends, if Jesus ever taught us anything, it's this: ***Good things come out of Nazareth!***

So, say it with me! ***Good things come out of Nazareth!***

That's the message. And this is the invitation: ***Come and see! Come and see! Come and see!***
Amen.

Charles E. Mize
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday
January 15, 2012