No Never Alone: ML King, Myths and Justice Christians

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Good morning. It's good to be here again at Hyattsville. The last time, I think, Elysia and I saw most of you, it was the summer of 1990, and I had just finished writing a dissertation on Mennonite pacifism. Elysia and I had packed up all of our stuff in a U-Haul truck and were about to take off for Oklahoma, where I had somewhat miraculously found a job teaching history. I remember it was hard to say goodbye. We had had a wonderful experience worshipping with you here at Hyattsville for a couple of years. I still wear with pride the T-shirt from our softball team, the Hyattsville Menno Knights, with its big drawing of a knight (and always point out, of course, that the knight does not carry a lance, because it is a nonresistant knight).

At that time, when we left, Elysia would have been heavily pregnant. Now, 18 years later, we are accompanied by a larger family, including our eldest daughter, who is 18 and on the verge of starting college. So it's been awhile, but it's good to with you again at Hyattsville.

My task this morning is to say something, in about 10 minutes, about Martin Luther King and the relevance of his message for today. I have two basic points. The first is rather generic, I expect, and has to do with how we need to recover King's radical message for today. The second point is more fitting for a service of Christian worship, and has to do with how we can best do that.

There will be a lot of great and stirring words said today, in this particular historical context, about Barack Obama and the events of this week and King's unfinished work. The election of Barack Obama to the White House is a marvelous, unimaginable development and many of us are thrilled to see it. But a great many people will also point out, and rightly, that if we think that this election somehow dissolves the cancer of American racism,

of course we are fooling ourselves. For the past three decades, both jobs and the black middle class have been vanishing from our inner cities, leaving behind an urban underclass trapped in a world of poverty. By nearly every significant statistical measurement of progress and quality of life — infant mortality rates, wages, quality of housing, life expectancy, mortality rates — African Americans still lag substantially behind whites, and the gap is growing, rather than narrowing. There are more black men in prison than there are in college; African Americans are four times more likely than whites to be arrested on drug charges, even though groups both use drugs at about the same rate. An African American man is seven times more likely to go to prison than a white man, and blacks make up a disproportionate number of the inhabitants of death row.

Dr. King would have had some harsh words about these kinds of statistics, and it would be a good thing to refashion something of his critique. There have been a lot of efforts made by the high priests of American civil religion to de-fang King, to tame him, to diminish his anger. It's understandable, of course, why they would do this. Taking a radical figure like King and smoothly cementing him into the pantheon of deities in American civil religion is quite functional to people primarily interested in social stability and public conformity, especially so in a nation like America of the 1960s that had been traumatized by a mass movement of racial protest. One of the reasons that the 60s were such a difficult time for us as a nation was because they unmasked our greatest single hypocrisy. For 200 years, we had celebrated ourselves as the world's leading light of freedom and democracy where all people, we assured ourselves, have been created equal and are possessed with inalienable legal, civil and human rights — all the while, of course, confining people of color to slavery and Jim Crow and depriving of basic civil, legal and human rights. It took a great sweeping movement of social protest to unmask expose this hypocrisy. It was led by Dr. King, but the foot soldiers in it, I like to remind my own students, were young people, college students, and some of them gave their lives for that

movement.

In response, the national mythmakers constructed a new set of myths, sort of the "myth of Progressive Race Relations."

"OK," says this myth, "mistakes were made in race relations. People of color have been wronged, mostly by a few bad people, most of them in the south. But we've recognized these wrongs, and as the truly great society we are, we've moved to address them. Now the problem has been fixed," says the myth of progressive race relations. "The great blemish on American civil religion has been erased."

We should briefly note how functional this myth is for the powerful. If they can reinforce a massive consensus that racial problems have by and large been "solved," except for a few minor adjustments, then this consensus renders the need for additional major societal changes certainly unnecessary, perhaps inappropriate, and maybe even unimaginable in the minds of most people.

And as a symbol that this blemish as been erased and the "problem" of American race relations has been "solved," American civil religion has admitted one symbol of the racial struggle into its pantheon of national deities. That one symbol, that one figure, of course, has been Martin Luther King.

So one thing that needs to happen in a service such as this one is to simply dismantle this myth, particularly we might focus on the King after 1963, when he brought the civil rights movement north and thundered to the nation that racism wasn't just a southern problem, that it was a national problem, and that we needed to deal with it. He alienated himself from the liberal political establishment by refusing to silence his conscience and say nothing about the war in Vietnam. Calling our government "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today," instead he denounced the war and uncovered the links between racism and militarism. By doing so he brought down on his head the wrath and scorn of many of his former political allies, who told him to stick to

racial matters, and leave foreign policy to the experts. He worked hard to form a common coalition of interests between the civil rights and the labor movements. Right before he died he was actively engaged in planning such a nonviolent confrontation with those people in power who had lots of money for a war in Vietnam but little for a war on poverty here at home. Instead, by the spring of 1968, he was set to bring an army of poor people to the nation's capital, who would throw their bodies into the streets and block the nation's business until it addressed the injustices of American society. He would offer this witness, he said, in the name of the risen Lord, who hated injustice and loved mercy. "Our only hope today," he thundered, "lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world, declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism and militarism."

You can understand that when the high priests of American civil religion call us to honor King, it's not THIS King they want us to remember. No — *this* King is too dangerous, too radical; *this* King we need to leave safely buried in the history books...! We need to remember that King and deconstruct the myths that have tried to render him harmless. That's a major task of any set of people committed to peace and justice who want to harness the legacy of Martin Luther King. If he was here, I don't doubt that's what he'd say. Take me off of Mt. Rushmore. Don't give me a national holiday! *Give me a national referendum for justice*.

But there's one more part of King's story that I think we Christians especially need to think about. There was a moment of dark despair that confronted him during the Montgomery bus boycott when the threats and the dangers and the fear got to him. Once again the phone rang late at night, and when he picked it up, he heard another racist voice on the receiver, spewing racial hatred and threatening to blow up his house and family. He later told friends that he couldn't put the threats out of his head, and couldn't sleep, so he got up, made a cup of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. He was afraid for his wife

and his daughter and began to lose hope. He thought about getting out, maybe taking up a safer pastorate somewhere. But he couldn't leave the movement. He didn't know what to do.

It was at that moment, he later told friend, that this Christian preacher did the only thing he could do. He bent his face down, there at the kitchen table in the middle of the night, and turned to God in prayer.

It's interesting what King's secular biographers do with this moment. They have to address it because he told friends it was one of the great moments in his life. So King heard an inner voice, they say. He found the inner resources to go on. But that's not what King himself thought had happened. This is what he told his friends happened on that night.

He said:

> "It seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, '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. … I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No Never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone."

King's secular biographers don't know what to do with that kind of testimony. But we do. Like King, we know whose voice that was. King heard the voice of God. King was visited by the Holy Spirit. And so, in conclusion now, as we remember him and his life and the unfinished work of justice that we are called to engage in, it would be good to remember that the same Sprit visits us as well. The same God empowers us, too. The same spirit sends us forth into this needy world to do the works of mercy and justice and peace, and promises us that it will never leave us alone. No never alone. God calls us to

do the work of God’s reign and says that he will never leave us alone. Alleluia. Amen.