

This will be necessarily brief, since we are encouraging participation, a dialogical sermon. Here at Belleville, I try to alternate between themes of the Gospel as individual (oft called personal sin and salvation) and the Gospel as societal (systemic sin and salvation). Because of the relentless news about war, and because Jan 15 is Martin Luther King Jr's birthday, it seems appropriate to talk more about the Christian Social Gospel these days.

How do the teachings of Jesus and of MLK overlap... and how are they relevant to our daily lives? Well, first of all, let me remind us all that MLKJr. was a co-pastor, along with his father, starting at age 19, at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta Georgia, and earned a doctorate in theology from Boston University. And in the tradition of many black preachers, he made reference to many "Old Testament" sayings of the prophets, as well as focusing on Jesus as prophet and Savior. Last week I spoke about of the value of following bright lights in 2026, especially "lights" who shine with the light of Jesus!

We know that no human being is perfect and that MLKJr. was certainly not perfect. And we know that Malcom X challenged his insistence on nonviolence. But the letters, sermons and speeches of MLK are filled with so many sayings that ring with the Spirit of Jesus, that I trust MLK as one of the great guiding lights. He quotes the prophets for courage, and Jesus for amazing Love and Grace.

So we have heard many words this morning, and I ask YOU now for your input: what words are most relevant to YOU? .....

I want to underscore the African American hymns: *Precious Lord, Take My Hand* and *I Want Jesus to Go with Me*. Yes, in most of African American church history, the personal gospel is still primary... trust in a God, a Christ, who will give courage to our *individual* hearts, courage to demand justice!

But surely, the slaves and later black churches are thoroughly *community*-minded and community supported! So we'll be ending worship with WE shall overcome!

I ask again (last chance!): What words this morning resonate with YOU and resound, memorably, in your ears?.....

We all know the most famous words of MLK: "I Have a Dream.. that one day, my four children will be judged not by color of their skin, but by the content of their character." Or perhaps "Let Justice roll down like mighty waters" (direct quote from the prophet Amos).... And about Light: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only Light can do that!" How true... retaliation and vengeance, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, only escalates and entrenches violence.

Or the one really meaningful one I'm still trying to memorize: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (We can't just let injustice slide... we need to speak up... or there is threat that the injustice will spread!) (Think of a school classroom... *you let one "bad actor" get away with launching spitballs, before long the whole back row is bringing in straws and making spitballs.* Injustice spreading also resonates with that famous saying by German pastor Martin Niemoller who was imprisoned by the Nazis... *They came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.* Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me. When King was in the Birmingham jail, he wrote: "*In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.*"

I close here, reminding us all to watch for the bright lights speaking up for more justice and peace, like MLK Jr.. Can we learn and remember his challenging words, knowing that they ring true because they echo Jesus' own words. Amen.