

**A speech for the Dublin, Ohio
Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Celebration
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Prelude to preaching: I was 10 years old when The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968, at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. On Easter Sunday, just one week later, a full color picture appeared of the young preacher. I asked my parents for that picture, put it up on the door to my room and have carried it with me ever since. He was the single greatest influence on my becoming a Christian pastor. As a pastor, his models of non-violence and social justice preaching have inspired me throughout my 27 years in the pulpit. Other than my father, there is no man outside of Dr. King who has more deeply influenced my life. It is an honor to speak to you on HIS day.

In February 2004, I was sitting in Columbus International Airport waiting with some friends for a plane to Charlotte, North Carolina, which would then transfer us to Miami, Florida. Across from me sat an old black Baptist preacher from rural North Carolina. He was talking with an old Orthodox rabbi from New York. Neither man was known to me before that very moment. As I sat listening to them talk of their spiritual journeys, their years of preaching and teaching, and their aging generation of Holocaust and civil rights' survivors, I was struck by an epiphany. I had to take a trip through the South! This trip was fashioned with one purpose in mind – to say “thank you” to the men and women who served our nation in the battles of the civil rights struggles of the 1950’s and 1960’s. My words would be simple.

I said, *“Thank you for saving the soul of our nation and my soul by what you did.”*

Fast-forward seven months to September 2004 when I jumped in my 1998 Ford Taurus and set off on a 3,200 mile journey over two weeks through Washington D.C., Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee.

In towns and cities like Courtland and Richmond, Virginia; Walnut Cove and Sedalia, North Carolina; Rock Hill and Fort Hill, South Carolina; Atlanta and Albany Georgia; Tuskegee, Selma, Montgomery and Birmingham, Alabama; Greenwood, Money and Rulesville, Mississippi; Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee, I traveled to speak, to listen, at times to get down in the hot sun and pick cotton, but always to say, *“Thank you.”*

I met the extraordinarily courageous yet often quite common men women and children whose feet, hearts, and souls guided the civil rights movement into the heart of darkness known as segregation and Jim Crow. Their names were names like Fannie Lou Hamer, Samuel “Billy” Kyles, Abraham Lincoln Woods and Odessa Woolfolk. In the end, there were tens of thousands of them who stepped forward out of the shadows of fear and judgment and stood tall. They were farmers, teachers, barbers and hair stylists, garbage collectors, funeral home directors, preachers, and factory workers. They were children wanting an equal education – kept out of schools like this one - because of the color of their skin. They were common men and women who shared one thing in common - in the words of Fannie Lou Hamer - ***“They were sick and tired of being sick and tired.”***

I went to gravesites in small towns to kneel and pray and thank God for those who has already gone before us – some who laid down their lives for us. In Montgomery, at the Southern Poverty Law, as the water flowed down from the fountain over black granite with the names of 40 slain civil

rights workers, and the words of Amos above, *“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an over flowing stream.”* I prayed for those who laid down their lives for our nation.

And there were places, like the bridge crossing the Tallahatchie River outside Money, Mississippi, which have no markers. It was here that Emmett Till, a 14 year old Chicago teen, having been brutally beaten within an inch of death, was chained to a tire iron and thrown 100 feet down into a shallow river to die in late August 1955. With no gravesite for Emmett, I crawled down to the river bank and knelt to pray. This sleepy, mosquito infested river was where Emmett died was juxtaposed to the granite memorial of our slain civil rights hero, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., set in a reflecting pool in Atlanta, Georgia.

Along the way, I met over 90 people, each one a bright shining star in the heavens of God’s own creating, each one with a story to tell. Each one touched my life. But no one touched me more than the Rev. Dr. Fred Shuttlesworth, co-creator with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Shuttlesworth was a civil rights icon and hero of social justice, who I met right in front of the 16th Street Baptist Church where high-powered fire hoses had broken his arms and cracked his head open when they pinned him against the walls outside the church in April 1963. It was here, only five months later in September 1963, on Youth Sunday morning, that Cynthia Wesley Addie Mae Collins and Carole Robertson (both 14) and Denise McNair (11) were blown up in church while fixing their hair in the ladies room before worship. (Remember that the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing happened 21 days after King had delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech to 500,000 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington).

Two things struck me on the journey – First, I was surprised by how many people told me that no white person had ever thanked them before. I was shocked by this news and deeply saddened. Second, I was overwhelmed by people’s generosity and hospitality with a complete stranger showing up at their door. Every one welcomed me into their homes, their churches and their hearts. There was immediate trust and kindness extended to this scraggly white pastor from the north.

Grace, thanksgiving and hospitality. How hard is it for any of us to offer any of these to anyone? If you want a lesson about life on this King holiday, start with grace, thanksgiving and hospitality. But in remembering the legacy of Dr. King, we need to do more than smile, give thanks and open our hearts to those around us. We need to make changes.

Dr. King and so many others laid down their lives for social change and for social justice. From the civil rights movement we learn many lessons on economic injustice and the moral imperative to change things.

One lesson: Let us remember, name and claim this truth - Slavery, the Civil War of the 1860s and the civil rights battles of the 1950s and 1960s were always battles about money and economic injustice and all the inequalities related to this. Millions of men, women and children were shipped to America in chains. The sea itself is the burial ground of at least a million people who died on the way to slavery. The ocean floor is the resting place for their bones.

During the Civil War, the paper money of the Confederacy had detailed sketches of slaves on them. They were slaves in the fields and in slave auctions. All the drawings on the money had black faces looking happy to be picking cotton and toiling for nothing or smiling as they were sold like cattle at auction. It is disgusting. Whenever I see a Confederate flag in the 21st century, I don’t see rebels or proud “states’ rights advocates,” I see the color of money and I see

racism. I see those millions being shipped to America from the continent of Africa over hundreds of years to uphold an economic system of injustice – which every American, north and south, was effected by and benefited from.

A few months ago, I was in Chapel Hill at the University of North Carolina and saw a statue built to the nameless black men and women who as slaves built the buildings of the university, swept the floors, cleaned rooms and waited tables all for no pay. Many still do it for a little bit of pay.

My church helps people in homeless shelters and those who come to our doors on a daily basis. Over a hundred people each week show up at our doors for bus passes, help with utilities, rent and getting a state I.D. so they can cash checks and receive food stamps. Disproportionate to the overall population of Columbus, they are African-American. I would say 90% or more of the men, women and children we serve are black. Economic injustice still carries a race card in its wallet, if it even has a wallet.

Since the first slave ship arrived on our shores, the issues of race and injustice have been bound together. It is about the color of people's skins (and if you will) the color of money. Americans created this injustice. We as Americans must change it.

In our times, the Occupy Wall Street Movement, started in the fall of 2011, has raised the issues of money and economic justice to a high pitch. Protestors, across the globe, were Time magazine's "Person of the Year" in 2011 - just as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was Time's "Man of the Year" in 1956 following the Montgomery Bus Boycott. When the cry goes up from the 99% that they are not included in the power and income streams akin to their 1% brothers and sisters, it is hard not to hear the echoes of garbage workers in Memphis marching, chanting and carrying placards that say "I Am A Man." If we shall overcome, then we have to this

through restructuring economic systems to bring opportunities to all God's children.

The effects of unjust economic structures are not hard to track. They begin with pregnant mothers who cannot pay for prenatal care and delivery (we rank 50th in the world in this area), they move to how our systems of early childhood development and care and our health care systems fail to meet the growing needs of the poor. Then this spills over into unjust education systems in which some people are given the benefits of a fair education while others are not.

We in Ohio suffer from this inequality. Our state's funding structures for education have been declared unconstitutional four times by the Ohio Supreme Court and yet nothing has changed. Then when we fail to train people for jobs, we create the final straw that breaks in the system of injustice. As it is now, there is pipeline to prison which runs from the streets, shelters and marginal housing of our city's core to poor prenatal care, right through poor jobs, to poor family support and to poor schools. The pipeline will only grow or get even more filled with our young brothers and sisters unless we have the moral courage and political and economic will-power to intercede and end this economic injustice.

A second and final lesson. It is the moral courage and the fortitude to step up, step out, speak out and organize to change that we learn from Dr. King and the thousands who fought non-violently for civil and economic rights. We are missing this courage in our times. It is missing in most of our political and economic leadership. It is missing in our schools and it is missing in our pulpits. Fear causes silence - fear and the love of money.

If we are to address the "*fierce urgency of now*," as Dr. King said in his "I Have a Dream" speech, we will need to overcome our fears and trust that our faith in God, in one

another, and in our dream – our American Dream – will move us forward in this journey into the always unknown.

In closing, I buried my friend Fred Shuttlesworth three months ago. He was the bravest and strongest man I ever knew. He had moral courage. I pray, through osmosis and friendship, I have received 1/100th of it.

On that evening in September of 2004 to which I referred earlier, Dr. Shuttlesworth and I took a walk through Kelly-Ingram Park. In this city park, over 4,000 men, women, teens and children as young as 6 years old, faced billyclub-swinging police officers, snarling and snapping police dogs and full-blast fire hoses pointed at them, which tore off skin and broke people in two in April/May of 1963.

As we walked on this peaceful evening, five decades removed from those days, I asked the 82-year-old Fred if his mind ever slipped back to the experiences of abuse and hatred he and so many others had encountered here. He answered, *"I don't look back. It's too painful and I might get stuck there. Truthfully, I could have died 200 different times on at least 100 different days in Birmingham. My blood is in this ground. But my eyes are focused forward. My body will always keep moving forward."*

Then he looked straight in my eyes with his clear and penetrating focus and said, *"Timothy, God created the world and all that is herein. So we don't have to spend a lot of time talking about all the things that God has done. We have to do what he created us to do. And he created us to work for justice and righteousness and to fight for human and civil rights in this world."*

Fred was right! You and I have been created by God for action on God's behalf! God requires us, according to the prophet Micah, *"To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God."* To not step up is a defiance of none other than God Almighty. As a Christian, I have to find the moral courage

and conviction to do justice! It is in my faithful job description. I would add that “doing justice” is in the texts of all religious traditions and written into the Constitution of our nation as well! So, all of us have it in our job description as Americans.

In the spirit and memory of Dr. King, Dr. Shuttlesworth and the tens of thousands of men, women and children who fought non-violently for civil rights, let’s get moving! In memory of the millions who died building this country and defending this country’s freedoms as slaves and laborers across hundreds of years, let’s get moving! In honor and in respect and out of love for the children headed for the pipelines to prison, let’s get moving! Because it is simply the right thing to do, let’s get moving!

Maybe someday, someone will stop by your home and say, *“Thank you for saving the soul of our nation and my soul by what you did for justice in our land.”*

Let’s get moving.