

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Ervin Smith at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 15, 2012.*

# **“The Oneness of the Human Family”**

## **John 17:20-26**

### **Jesus Prays for All Believers**

<sup>20</sup> “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, <sup>21</sup> that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

<sup>24</sup> “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

<sup>25</sup> “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup> I have made you [known](#) to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. increasingly dedicated his thought and work to the idea that we are one, we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. We find this statement continually repeated from

1964 when he won the Nobel Peace Prize until his death in 1968. The children of the ghettos of America were one with the children of Vietnam. The bombs that were exploding there were exploding here. He increasingly turned his attention to the possibilities of nonviolence in international affairs. This was the source of his judgment against his own government with respect to the war. Nothing so energized Dr. King as the specter of all persons embracing the idea of our common humanity, our oneness as children of a loving and just God. A brightness would come to his face as he recalled our interdependence as people of the world.

Tragically, bullets like the one that killed him are still carrying out their demonic destruction of innocent life today in all too many places. Martin's concerns had moved out like a centrifugal force to embrace the people the world over because he had come to see the people of the world as interconnected, as one. He concluded that we could no longer live as if we were not fundamentally one, a global village, a world house.

Surveying the moral landscape today in so many part of our one world, many are living as if they have never heard the fact that we are fundamentally one. The Middle East, Sudan, the Congo, Korea, Somali and other places in our contemporary world keep this idea alive. We find ourselves still in a world running wild with the notion that there is somehow a fundamental difference in people, whether by geography, race, religion, ethnicity or class.

Often before you have finished breakfast, you have depended on more than half of the world. This is the interrelated quality of our universe. He said, and I quote, "We aren't going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality."

Jesus prays that the disciples be one, even as he and the father are one. The tragedy is that the oneness of the human family is either denied or ignored in all too many places in our world today. The slave master knew that he was one with the

slave. Yet it became expedient and self-serving for him to act otherwise.

My testament to the revelation of God reveals a God who declares us one, all made in his image, all called to a life of loving each other as he has loved us through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness of prejudice and separatism. Many churches would put that light out if they could. You never hear sermons in many of them that we are one, really one, fundamentally one. Even well-meaning church-going Christians operate day after day as if somehow those other people are not kin to me. I thought the other day that the men who set off the bomb that killed those little girls in Sunday school during the civil rights movement were probably sitting in a church in Birmingham when the bombs exploded.

In this text, Jesus points the disciples to their oneness. I believe it is faithful to the biblical witness to see an increasing belief in the oneness of all humanity. Paul says to the Athenians that God has made from one blood all the people of the earth.

If we really taught all our young from day one that we are of the same blood, I mean literally, the darkness of prejudice and hate could be put at an end. Each of us are called to claim and to promote our oneness with God and our oneness with the whole creation. This is Jesus most earnest prayer. This is our hope for a just and peaceful world.

In one of his last sermons, Dr. King declared anew that he still had a dream that men will rise up and come to see that they are made to live together in common humanity, that one day war would come to an end, that nations would no longer rise up against nations, neither will they study war any more. With this faith we will be able to speed up the day when there will be peace on earth and goodwill between all persons. He said that will be a glorious day, the morning stars will sing together, and the children of God will shout for joy.

During and following the Montgomery Bus Movement, Dr. King came to see the connection between the American South, the nation and the world from another angle. He believed that the successes achieved by southern blacks during and after the Montgomery protest, through the employment of nonviolent direct action, resulted substantially from national censure and world pressure. He said, "The nation and the world were sickened by the South's brutal treatment of its black citizens, and that partly because of this view from the outside, national legislation had been enacted to wipe out a thousand Southern laws, ripping gaping holes in the whole edifice of segregation." This significant interplay between the South, the nation and the world remained deeply etched in Dr. King's consciousness, shaping his understanding of the human struggle and reinforcing his sense of purpose and mission.

Dr. King's trips to Africa in 1957 and to India and the Middle East in 1959 contributed significantly to his international perspective. In Africa, his perspective on world problems was heightened through conversations with the leaders of Ghana and Nigeria.

After completing trips to India, Israel and Cairo, Egypt, he wrote: "The strongest bond of fraternity was the common cause of minority and colonial peoples in America, Africa and Asia struggling to throw off racialism and imperialism." By 1963, after more trips abroad, he was advocating bonds and obligations between the oppressed everywhere in even stronger terms, asserting that "I must be concerned about Africa, Asia, South America and Europe because we are all tied together." This world perspective was deepened in King's 1963 "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail."

King's view of his own role in the search for world community was enhanced when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1964. He undoubtedly took this award as a beckon to turn his efforts for peace and justice toward the whole world. He said in 1965: "Though I will continue to give

primary attention to the problems of the South, I realize that I must more and more extend my work beyond the boundaries of the South.”

Subsequently, he increasingly advocated extending the movement beyond a quest for basic constitutional rights for southern blacks to embrace the ideal of a truly democratic nation for all Americans, and the ideal of a world devoid of racism economic exploitation and wars of aggression. In March, 1965, Dr. King expressed satisfaction with the fact that:

“All over the world, like a fever, the freedom movement is spreading in the widest liberation struggle in history. The great masses of people everywhere are determined to end the exploitation of their races and lands. And consciously or unconsciously, the Negro of America has been caught up in the Zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Arica and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, he, too, is on the move.”

King’s internationalism, especially his sense of global responsibility, was reinforced as he continued to travel to various parts of the world in the later 1960’s. King used the metaphor of the “great world house” to explain his world perspective in intellectual and theoretical terms. This metaphor captured for him the ideal of a totally integrated world based on love, justice and equality of opportunity, a world in which loyalties to race, class, sex, tribe, religion, philosophical orientations, political differences, ethnicity and nationality would be transcended in the interest of total human community. In 1967, he wrote:

“We have inherited a large house, a great “world house” in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who because we

can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.”

He went on to declare that a truly democratic America for blacks and whites would be possible only within the confines of a truly democratic and peaceful world, a view that further substantiated the significant interplay between the South, Nation, and World in his thinking.

“However deeply American Negroes are caught in the struggle to be at last at home in our homeland of the United States, we cannot ignore the larger world house in which we are also dwellers. Equality with whites will not solve the problems of either whites or Negroes if it means equality in a world society stricken by poverty and in a universe doomed to extinction by war.”

This and other statements concerning the “world house” corroborates Benjamin E. Mays’ assertion that King “was supraracem, supranation, supradenomination, supraclass and supraculture.”

This sense of a “world house” or “world-wide neighborhood” – a situation in which “all inhabitants of the globe are now neighbors” – was rooted in a communitarian or solidaristic conception of society and the world, which holds that each person is a distinct ontological entity that finds growth, fulfillment, and purpose through personal and social relationships based on the agape love ethic. Humans are not individuals who are completely self-sufficient but social beings who find authentic existence through social contact and social relations under the guidance of a personal God who works for universal wholeness.

King also believed that “this world-wide neighborhood has been brought into being largely as a result of modern scientific and technological revolutions.” The radio, television, motion pictures, telephone, airplanes and other amazing developments have all converged to make our world much smaller in terms of communications and interpenetrations.

This view of the world led King to insist that “the first thing that parents should instill within their children is the world perspective.” He was convinced that many parents were giving their children an isolated perspective that rendered them incapable of relating properly and effectively with persons unlike themselves.

King’s world perspective increasingly embraced his universal egalitarianism. With civil egalitarianism, King insisted that the civil rights movement in America could not be separated from the call and quest for human rights on a global scale. In economic egalitarianism, King increasingly struggled for economic improvement for the poor, a struggle that led him to accept democratic socialism. This undergirded his efforts on behalf of the Memphis sanitation workers, the poor people’s campaign and the world war against poverty. With his international egalitarianism he became an advocate for world peace and inspired the peace movements of the late 1960s. His spiritual egalitarianism affirmed all humans as creatures made in the divine image (*Imago Dei*), and also Christ’s love for all

In the final analysis, King’s ideal of world community was essentially Christian in that it upheld (1) the impartiality of God in creating and dealing with human beings; (2) a sacramentalistic conception of the cosmos as echoed by the Psalmist, “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein”; (3) a belief in the dignity and worth of all human personality; and (4) the idea of the social nature of human life and existence.

In more specific terms, King’s goal of community was Christocentric but not Christomonistic, because the “world house” metaphor embraced Jews, Buddhists and other non-Christian groups as well.

King was concerned essentially about the universal importance and implications of Christ’s person and message

for the liberation of the whole human community. He reached for a wholeness in which neither the oppressor nor the oppressed could be redeemed without each other. All thought of liberation and activism are irrelevant and futile if they fail to go beyond a narrow, sectarian model of the oppressor and the oppressed.

Although King found the language and concept to articulate his vision of world community in Western philosophical sources, personalism and the Social Gospel, his actual search for world community was inspired and influenced mostly by his contact with black life and culture. He lived and struggled among people who had long expressed the realization, especially in their religion, that their being, welfare and value as individual were linked to that of all humans. "The Negro's religion revealed to him," said Dr. King, "that God loves all of his children, and every one, from a bass black to a treble white, is significant on God's keyboard." Within this principle alone,, King discovered sensibilities and values that could significantly enlarge humanity's capacity for creative, universal human fellowship grounded in love and justice.

Displeased with the chasm that existed between that ideal and the reality of human community, King wanted to unify and meld those realms. His vision of world community and his willingness to pursue that vision with every fiber of his being made conflict between him and the oppressor of the world inevitable.

To this day, Martin Luther King, remains a tremendous challenge for the pharaohs of the world, not only because he articulated the beloved community ideal and the social solidarity of the human family with disturbing clarity, but also because of his passionate commitment to translating that ideal into practical reality.

In 1967, in his book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, King referred to racism, poverty and war as the greatest impediments to the actualization of world community

and the social solidarity of the whole human family. He variously described these fundamental problems as “the three major evils.” He refused to view racism, poverty and war as three different problems. Instead, they were for him manifestations of the same evil system that fomented the poor and oppressed worldwide – that system that had to be dismantled before world peace and community could be realized.

Dr. King’s ideal of world community and one human family remains a viable concept for the world over today. Ethical dialogue with him concerning the meaning, character, and actualization of human community can be fruitful for humans everywhere as they seek to overcome the many barriers that prevent them from realizing their essential oneness as children of God. His identification of racism, poverty, and war as major obstacles to peace and the unity of the human family is still accurate. These are the major problems blocking the social solidarity of the human family.

His mature concept of a world house, global village, world community awaits the efforts of persons of good will everywhere to bring closer to existence a world experiencing and celebrating the oneness of the human family. King’s indomitable faith in God, his incurable optimism, his unwavering devotion to the democratic ideal, his skillful wedding of secular and sacred dimensions of life, his strong belief in the essential worth, dignity and oneness of all humanity, and his willingness to suffer and die for a more just and moral social order - virtues and values that reflect both his cultural roots and his cultural legacy – contain invaluable lessons for humans struggling to overcome their alienation from themselves, other humans and God. Ethical and theological dialogue with Martin Luther King, Jr., around the beloved community and the oneness of the whole human family must continue on the deepest possible level throughout the world.

King's legacy can be aptly described as one of hope and struggle. Hope in the redemption and transformation of individuals and of human society, despite all of the ambiguities and vicissitudes of life. Struggle that compels one to suffer and even die nonviolently if need be for that which is just and noble. What can be more just and noble in our time than to hope for and struggle for the social solidarity of the whole human family. I believe as firmly as Dr. King, that in God we are one human family, and oneness supercedes all of our claims to nationality, race and religion.

Let us go forth today, as fully committed as Martin Luther King, Jr., to the reality of one humanity. The DNA geneticists tell us today that we are all related and can all be traced back to common ancestors. There is no race but the human race, no glass ceiling for woman, but opportunity without respect to gender, no sexual abuse, but every woman as my mother, my sister, my friend, no religious imperialism, but everyone as a child of the one God. No ethnicity more fundamental than respect for all of God's people whatever their region, language and culture.

Whatever our differences in appearance, we are one really. We really are one. That's the real light shining into our darkness.

In Christ there is no East or West  
In Him no South or North  
But one great fellowship of Love  
Throughout the whole wide earth

In Christ is neither Jew nor Greek  
And neither slave nor free  
Both male and female heir are made  
And all are kin to me.

In the name of the one God who has made us one humanity.  
Amen.

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