

# **“What Would Mike Do?”**

**Isaiah 49:1-7; I Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, The Second Sunday of Epiphany, January 15, 2023, dedicated to the memory and legacy of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (January 15, 1929 - April 4, 1968) on his 94th birthday and always to the glory of God!

## **“What Would Mike Do?”**

Isaiah 49:1-7; I Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

In 1934, Pastor Michael King went to the Holy Lands and then on to Germany on a pilgrimage with other Baptist pastors. He was powerfully affected by his pilgrimage. When he returned to Atlanta, he announced to his family and his congregation that he was changing his name to Martin Luther. His first born, Michael, Jr. was five years old. Because his father changed his name, Mike knew that his name would change too. Mike wasn't crazy about changing his name and would resist legally changing it which he finally did in 1957 at the age of 28. Today, all the world knows him as Martin Luther King, Jr. His closest friends and family always called him “Mike” until his death at 39.

Today, on his actual 94th Birthday, I would like to honor Mike King, Jr. as we consider what he would do in the times like the ones we are living.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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My friend and mentor, the Rev. Dr. Fred Shuttlesworth told me over dinner in Birmingham, Alabama in 2004 when he first heard that fellow Baptist preacher had come from Boston University to Alabama and his name – The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – had arrived at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, in Montgomery replete with a PhD, Fred knew he had to go to Montgomery and meet Dr. King. He got in his car and drove the 90 miles from Birmingham to Montgomery, because in Fred’s words, “I just had to meet a real Black doctor of theology.” It was 1954. Fred was 32 and Martin was 25. That handshake turned into a friendship that would change America.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the right man in the right place at the right time to rise to leadership of Montgomery’s Bus Boycott following the arrest of Ms. Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955. In the words of Esther, he was called for “such a time as this!”

For 12½ years, Dr. King led our nation’s most powerful nonviolent army and movement of men, women, teens, and children, the largest movement ever gathered – to confront racial and economic injustice and inequality – all issues that had plagued our nation since the first African slaves were purchased in Virginia in August 1619.

Until his dying breath on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel where he was assassinated on April 4, 1968, Mike was the key leader of

the Civil Rights Movement in America. He was a magnificent man. For me, as a ten-year boy growing up near Philadelphia, PA, he was my hero. He was inspiration in life and he was the reason I sought ordained ministry. I wanted to be like Mike (although I didn't know his name was Mike back then).

In December, all the contributing editors for the Columbus, Dayton African American New Journal were asked by our editor/publisher, Senator Ray Miller to write for January's 2023 issue on the theme, "what would Martin Luther King, Jr. say today about politics, economics, faith, and more?" I submitted my piece entitled "What Dr. King Would Say about America's 'low-road capitalism'?"

In the time remaining this morning, I would like to reflect on What Mike would have done about low-road capitalism, children and education, and inclusion and diversity.

Let me say first how I would love to hear his aging, resonate voice in our pulpit on this day honoring his birth. As I think about Dr. King, circa 2023, my mind goes many directions because of the vastness of his mind and spirit. America's greatest preacher was also one of our nation's greatest philosophers, social analysts, liberation organizers, economic truth-tellers in the military industrial system, and Democracy freedom fighters in this land we call home. We were blessed to have him walk the earth with us for 39 years. But, we have experienced a deficit as well as we have missed him these past 55 years.

What would he have to say about America's capitalist economic system in 2023? I believe he would analyze our economic system built on the backs of slaves. He would ask, as we should ask, why is it that the United States when compared to many other developed nations,

has much greater inequality, no universal health care, low wages, high job insecurity, and a rotten social safety net?

I believe Dr. King would come alongside the brilliant visionaries and authors of the 1619 Project and carry their writings forward into policy reconstruction. In his major article for the 1619 Project (pp. 30-40) Matthew Desmond delivered a good label for the inequalities we have in the US. He called it “low road capitalism.” Desmond explored the massive impact slavery has had on United States history. He said many of the current ills in the US can be traced straight back to the way that slaves were exploited. Slavery enabled employers to impose harsh working conditions on slaves but even after slaves were freed, there was a determined effort to not give them anything but the barest minimum. That impacted the entire society since the floor for treatment of workers was set so low.

Dr. King would offer a clarion call to justice as he evaluated a capitalist society that goes low and wages are depressed as businesses compete over the price, not the quality of goods. In addition, so-called unskilled workers are typically incentivized through punishments, not promotions. In low road capitalism, inequality reigns and poverty spreads.

He would gather research and statistics to present his case. He always did. In the United States, the richest 1 percent of Americans own 40 percent of the nation’s wealth. That is an amazing and disturbing statistic. A larger share of working-age people (18- 65) in our nation live in poverty – more than in any other nation belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (O.E.C.D.). Consider worker rights in different capitalist nations. In Iceland, 90 percent of wage and salaried workers belong to

trade unions authorized to fight for living wages and fair working conditions. Thirty-four percent of Italian workers are unionized, as are 26 percent of Canadian workers. Only 10% of American wage and salaried workers carry union cards.

The O.E.C.D. scores nations along several indicators, such as how countries regulate temporary work arrangements. Scores run from 5 (“very strict”) to 1 (“very loose”). Brazil scores 4.1 and Thailand, 3.7, signaling toothy regulations on temp work. Further down the list are Norway (3.4), India (2.5) and Japan (1.3). The United States scored 0.3, tied for last place with Malaysia.

How easy is it to fire workers? Countries like Indonesia (4.1) and Portugal (3) have strong rules about severance pay and reasons for dismissal. Those rules relax in places like Denmark (2.1) and Mexico (1.9). They virtually disappear in the United States, ranked dead last among 71 nations with a score of 0.5.

Dr. King would take it one step further. He would agree that those searching for reasons the American economy is uniquely severe and unbridled have found answers in many places (religion, politics, culture). But recently, historians have pointed persuasively to the cotton fields of Georgia and Alabama, to the cotton houses and slave auction blocks, as the birthplace of America’s low-road approach to capitalism (Desmond and Mano Singham, [Freethought.com](http://Freethought.com)).

If today America promotes a particular kind of low-road capitalism – a union-busting capitalism of poverty wages, gig jobs and normalized insecurity; a winner-take-all capitalism of stunning disparities not only permitting but awarding financial rule-bending; a racist capitalism that ignores the fact that slavery didn’t just deny black freedom but built white fortunes, originating the black-white wealth

gap that annually grows wider. At some point we all going to have to own that. But one reason is that American capitalism was founded on the lowest road there is.

Dr. King would have taken the brilliant analytical work of Desmond and others and present it in a way all Americans could understand. He would talk about mothers who are forced to drive around all night delivering food on winter nights with twin babies in the back seat – because we have a slave-originated system of inequality that forces them to make ends meet under such injustice alright. He would call us to accountability.

It is time to end our low-road capitalism and level the economic playing field giving everyone a chance to succeed and not barely survive. Dr. King would call us all, in the name of God, to the high road of capitalism where the poor get richer, and the rich are required to return the vast capital they have taken away from hard working people who are crushed in a slave-like system. We would elect new leaders who would make laws happen to change this. Economic structures of justice would replace centuries of wrong slave-driven structures. From the low roads of Georgia and Alabama's cotton-kingdom, Dr. King would say, "Give us the Kingdom of God!" Take us to the high road of economic equality and justice for all.

But he would not stop there. Dr. King would be deeply concerned about children and education. During the conversations and research I did on my newly released book, *The Genius of Justice*, I spoke with several of the people who knew Dr. King closely – including Dr. Marion Wright Edelman, The Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr., and Susannah Heschel, the only child of Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel, all spoke to Dr. King's genuine interest in and presence with children and teens.



Jackie Dean, you said this so well today. There was a light in him and it shined when he spoke with children and teens.

While some people say, “the children are our future” you don’t find them relating to children and listening to children. Dr. King did just that. Susannah Heschel recalled times when Mike was with her family in New York City. He would stay with the Heschels at their apartment and was always interested in what Susannah was reading or studying. If able, he would help her with her homework or read with her. His kindness was not lost on her.

Marion Wright Edelman recalls the same. His focus on children and families was an inspiration for her as she founded the Children’s Defense Fund in 1973 in his memory. Dr. Moss who worked tirelessly beside Dr. King was always amazed by how Dr. King would stop in his tracks when children were around and sit down or kneel down to be with them.

He loved and cared about children – his children, America’s children and the world’s children. So, what would he have done for children?

I believe he would target pregnant mothers who have poor prenatal care and post-delivery follow-up and support. He would make sure all children born in America make it through the first year of life thriving not barely surviving. He would reinvest in Head Start and other programs which give preschoolers the chance to socialize, learn and grow healthfully and well. He would target schools and make sure we guarantee a fair and equitable redistribution of resources for schools in urban and rural areas which are left behind and seemingly forgotten because they are in the wrong zip codes. He would make sure that the zip code you are in doesn’t eliminate you from reaching your highest potential and fully prepare you for life in this world.

I believe he would have helped raise and train this generation of children with tools and weapons of nonviolence. We would learn from him that our greatest weapons in counteracting what is evil and wrong are our words and our actions of peace. The only thing pointed at another human being would have been a hand of love reaching out to manifest what it looks like in a beloved community to love and hold on to one another.

And, yes, I believe he would teach our children and all of us about racial justice and bring people together around the often-uncomfortable truths concerning racism and caste in America – which includes thoughtful, analytical, and serious translations of critical race theory and not simply turning CRT and any conversations about race into a bashing point for those who seek to talk honestly and openly about race and caste in America. 1619 should never be mocked and denigrated over and against 1776. Both have places to play in our nation's history and our deep and growing sense of who we all are as inheritors of freedom's cry and freedom ringing.

He would entertain and answer children's questions about differences and similarities in Dr. Suess' Sneetches, and all of us. After all, isn't that what reading children's books (and the Bible for that matter) is all about – connecting between colorful, metaphorical, miraculous, and often fantastic stories and each of our stories? That is what is happening there.

Finally, I believe Dr. King would have helped us with Diversity and Inclusion. This is based on one thing. I believe he would have listened to his wife, Coretta Scott King and learned from her and followed her example.

Coretta Scott King was a champion for human rights. Mrs. King was – and remains – a hero in the LGBT community. And with good reason. For more than 25 years before her death in 2006, she fought tirelessly for gay rights and linked the civil rights movement with the LGBT rights movement, believing all the while that her work was a faithful expression of the inclusive dream shared by her husband.

Mrs. King's first public foray into the gay rights movement occurred during her steady leadership of the 20th anniversary of the 1963 march. During the run-up to the anniversary, Mrs. King withstood the tide of social conservatism and pledged her support for the Gay and Civil Rights Act then before Congress in 1983. It was a groundbreaking bill that would have prohibited discrimination against gays and lesbians in housing, employment, and public accommodations.

Encouraged by gay and lesbian leaders, Mrs. King also made space for the black poet and openly lesbian Audre Lorde in the anniversary rally's line-up of speakers. Given the homophobia of some civil rights leaders taking part in the rally, King's decision to make room for a lesbian speaker was nothing short of prophetic. So was Lorde's brief speech:

*I am Audre Lorde, speaking for the National Coalition of Black Gays. Today's march openly joins the Black civil rights movement and the gay civil rights movement in the struggles we have always shared, the struggle for jobs, for health, for peace and for freedom. We marched in 1963 with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and dared to dream that freedom would include us, because not one of us is free to choose the terms of our living until all of us are free to choose the terms of our living.*

In 2003, down the street at Congregation Tifereth Israel, Coretta Scott King spoke to our Jewish sisters and brothers east on Broad Street. She said, “If we can build bridges of knowledge and understanding between peoples of all races and cultural groups, we will sow the seeds of greater unity and prosperity in America. The promotion of diversity opens the doors of opportunity for all groups. When this vision of unity is fulfilled throughout the nation, then the America of our noblest ideals will become a reality.”

A wise man like Dr. King would have listened to his wife. I believe that with my whole heart. He knew and expressed that Civil Rights is never about one race, one community and one nation – and any number of subsets in our country. It is always about all of us on this planet. The protection of rights for those who are unseen, unheard, forgotten, left behind, ignored and mistreated will mean the protection for everyone – in time.

I believe Mike would have done all this and more – if he were still with us, but he is gone. He has been gone for 55 years. So, it is up to us. It is up to us to be the justice we want to see in this world. It’s up to us to take the dream and carry it forward. It is on us. It is on you and me to do this work – to bring about a just economic system, a just educational system, and an inclusive and diverse beloved community here – and everywhere.

If you don’t believe, take some time today on his 94th birthday to read the writings of and listen to the sermons of Mike King, Jr. He will tell you in his own words. And if you really listen – you will be changed. And when you are changed you will change the world. Amen.

