

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

Sermon for Martin Luther King Jr. Day Choral Evensong

1.18.26

The Measure of Man is a publication of two of ML King Jr's lectures from 1958. In the book Dr King talks about the three dimensions of a complete life, length, breadth and height, referencing the dimensions of heaven as described in the Book of Revelation.

King says that the length of life is pursuing one's personal goals and ambitions. He writes, "every individual has a responsibility to be concerned about himself enough to discover what he is made for. After he discovers his calling he should set out to do it with all of the strength and power in his being. He should do it as if God Almighty called him at this particular moment in history to do it." King says that we should consider whatever work we do to have cosmic significance, and we should act accordingly. "If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets as Raphael painted pictures, sweep streets as Michaelangelo carved marble, sweep streets as Beethoven composed music and Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, 'Here lived a great street-sweeper who swept his job well.'"

But we can't stop there, says King. We need to live into the second dimension of life, the breadth, the dimension where we feel for and care for others. And here Dr. King tells about the parable of the Good Samaritan. He talks about how the priest and Levite likely did not help the beaten man out of fear. The road was dangerous, clearly, and they asked themselves, If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?

The Samaritan stopped, because he asked a very different question. If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him? This, to Dr. King, is the essence of the breadth of life. And here, early in his public life, he brings out a theme he will return to again and again, our interdependence. "We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality," King writes. "Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." Later, in his Letter from Birmingham Jail he will put it like this: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

This deep sense is what made MLK answer the call to respond to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It is what helped him endure his time in Birmingham Jail. Later, it helped him respond to calls that angered his previous allies, speaking against the Vietnam War, and to his final ministry of standing with striking sanitation workers in Memphis. Each time, King asked himself, If I do not respond to

these my neighbors, what will happen to them? Coretta and others in Dr. King's inner circle worried about his safety and also his exhaustion, because of this strong sense of needing to go wherever he was called, because just like Jesus in this evening's Gospel reading, the crowds were always pressing upon King.

So the dimension of breadth is a challenging one, but Dr King argues that once we understand how connected we are to each other, we live a richer and more complete life. We move beyond being afraid of acting to help others, to the understanding that we must respond, for our own survival and flourishing.

Then there is the third dimension of life, the dimension of height. This is the dimension where we reach for God, where we come to know that God will strengthen us to do things that without God would be impossible.

MLK argued that a person needs all three dimensions to live a complete life. To do our best at what we are called to do, but to do it for others. To call on God always, to help us in the work. MLK wrote this, understood this, lived it out.

We hear in this evening's Gospel that Jesus called to him those that he wanted, and that they came to him. We hear that he appointed twelve, to be with him, to preach, and to have authority to cast out demons. Jesus called the twelve to be with him, to preach, to have authority to cast out demons. And this is what Jesus calls us to, today. To preach, to proclaim a message of hope, to be the hope in our words and actions. To cast out demons wherever we go, to do what we can in the way we are called to repair the brokenness around us. Whether that is making the street cleaner, healing the sick, creating beautiful art and music, working to make our government better. To preach, to cast out demons. And to be with him.

We are called to be with Jesus. That is what MLK calls the third dimension of life. To live into the length and breadth dimensions, especially in those days we think we cannot do them, when we are falling into exhaustion and hopelessness and just plain inertia, to do those other things we are called to be with Jesus. To get closer to Jesus, to build a relationship with God, to feel God's presence strengthening us for those exhausted days, helping us to do what we think we cannot do.

St Martin's, we are those that Jesus wanted, the ones Jesus wants today. We are all called to live into the length, breadth, and height of our lives. We are all called to bring a message of hope where there is violence and hurt, where ICE is shooting and beating and killing our neighbors. We are all called to

care that a child in Gaza is starving and a child in Venezuela is living in the midst of uncertainty and fear.

St Martin's, Dr King has given us a framework for our life as the children of God. His life has been a testament to it. Now we must carry on the mission. We do not do it alone. We have each other, our fellow apostles, the ones who Jesus wants and calls. And we have God, always with us. Amen.