

Martin Luther King Day Talk

January 21, 2019

Good Morning, Everyone! Congratulations on completing the walk, and congratulations on coming together today to celebrate together who we are! Look around to see who-all is here today. Isn't it wonderful that we are a community, with such valuable diversity, and that we care about each other! Today is a day to dream about who we can become, together!

We might think that the main reason Martin Luther King gets honored with this special holiday is mostly because he was assassinated while he was exercising leadership in the Civil Rights movement. But when I review his speeches and his writings, I am amazed and profoundly moved by the thoughtful insights he had – not just energy for leading marches.

His insights are insights into the big question facing every community made up of people from different backgrounds, different heritages, and different personal realities. It's the same big question facing our whole world today: How do we become a FAMILY. How do we build a community where all members know that they are truly valued, and that we will genuinely care for each other?

I recently re-read the long Letter from the Birmingham Jail that Dr. King wrote in 1963. He had received a letter from six clergy who were questioning whether or not he, as an ordained minister, should be participating in protests that broke the law (they didn't have a parade permit from the city of Birmingham) and resulted in his arrest and imprisonment. As I read his letter again, I was so impressed with the way he addressed the issues in the letter from the clergymen.

He put their concerns in a much broader context. He talked about everyone's responsibilities to help create a truly just society.

As we look at our community sitting around us today, we can ask ourselves the same question. What are our challenges today to help create a truly just society? What are we already doing in our community toward a more just society and how can we help those efforts?

This brings three considerations to mind for me, when I think of helping to build community and a more just society in Toppenish. The first issue is homelessness. We all have seen some of our fellow-citizens who are probably homeless as they walk around in our town. I hope that when we see someone we believe is homeless, that we immediately turn in our hearts to say a very heartfelt prayer for that person. If we all did this every time we see a homeless person, I believe that change will gradually happen for those persons.

One solution already underway, that I am especially grateful for, is the Village of Hope, established by the Yakama Nation in the former RV Park. It is an impressive effort in our community to build a more just society, taking concrete steps to address the needs of homeless persons in our community. Last month when my housemates -- the Sisters I live with -- and I visited the Village of Hope, we saw some of the resources being provided and met some of the wonderful staff (including Heritage graduates!), and we brought some bath towels and other supplies that we didn't need. Today as we celebrate the legacy of Martin Luther King, I celebrate Toppenish's Village of Hope! It is a shining example of a proactive effort to create a more just society by addressing homelessness. Congratulations to all those who are making the Village of Hope possible!

The second topic I would like to mention is our Toppenish Foodbank. I am so proud that our community supports a great foodbank. It does a terrific job of building a more just society by providing healthy food resources to those who would otherwise not be eating properly. And it provides other needed resources, like clothing. It is heartening to realize that the Toppenish Foodbank serves 450 families each month and 5,691 unduplicated individuals last year - a remarkably large portion of our community. I'm guessing many of us in this room have made contributions to keep the Foodbank well-supplied and solvent – we've contributed food items, clothes in good condition, or money. We must continue our support as often as we can. We honor the legacy of Martin Luther King when we support a Toppenish project like the Village of Hope or the Foodbank – and we're building a more just society, while bringing us all closer together as a community.

The third area in our community that speaks to me of Martin Luther King's call to build a just society is the issue of our neighbors and friends who are immigrants and have been members of our community for a long time, but who are still without adequate legal status. Regardless of how they got here, these are people who are making contributions to our community and would like to become properly documented residents or citizens, but have no reasonable way to do so. Until our government passes comprehensive immigration reform, they have to live in these unjust circumstances, yet they continue to contribute to the success of our local farms and businesses, and the life of our churches and community organizations. And many have had children, who have graduated from our schools and become the new generation of workers, professionals and entrepreneurs in our community. Yet these undocumented community members are naturally

fearful, living as it were, in the shadows. This is an injustice in our society that Martin Luther King would call us to correct.

We can use the example of some of the students at Heritage University and at Yakima Valley College who were brought into the country illegally as young children, too young to be held responsible for that decision. They hold DACA status which is not a permanent solution to this injustice. The vast majority of DACA individuals are strong and dedicated students, involved in many important activities in our communities, showing the kind of leadership we need for the future of our society. But their immigration status must be remedied so their considerable talents can be used to benefit our communities. We can honor the legacy of Martin Luther King by each of us who have citizenship status contacting our federal legislators through phone calls, emails, or letters to plead for comprehensive immigration reform soon and to say that this justice issue is very high on our priorities.

As we conclude our celebration of Martin Luther King Day, and his legacy of embracing whatever we need to do to assure a just society for all, I want to share a quote from Dr. King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail": "Human progress . . . comes through the tireless and persistent work of [those] willing to be co-workers with God . . . we must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right." (pg. 12) Today we congratulate our Village of Hope, our Toppenish Foodbank, and all those striving to fix our broken immigration system. Thank you to each of you – you are demonstrating that "the time is always ripe to do right." I am honored and proud to be your neighbor working with you for justice in our great Toppenish community! Congratulations to all of you!!