

**Active Discipleship Witness:  
Sunday before Martin Luther King Day, January 17, 2021  
Mickey Townsend**

Good Morning, my name is Mickey Townsend, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share with you today in honor of the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I am a junior here at Xavier from Cincinnati, majoring in Philosophy, Politics, and the Public and Spanish with a minor in Criminal Justice. As Fr. Eric mentioned, I just started my term as the Student Government Association President, a leadership position I pursued when I noticed, students of color voices not being heard. My involvement with Xavier and Bellarmine did not begin when I entered college. In High school I was a member of the parish, participating in BYG (the Bellarmine Youth Group), and even travelling several times with our parish community to Kentucky for our annual mission trip.

It was during these high school years that I first heard the call to be a social justice advocate and to live as an active disciple, combatting racism. I had attended a predominately white Catholic elementary school, where I did not experience any outright racism. Yes, there was the occasional microaggressions, but being one of seven students of color in my grade, I did not know any better. However, when I went on to attend a minority Catholic high school where the majority of students looked like me, I saw how we, as a community, experience much more overt racism. Many of the schools we played in athletics were predominately white Christian and Catholic high schools across greater Cincinnati and Dayton. We heard micro and macro aggressions on numerous occasions. The worse is when we would hear students, parents, coaches, and even referees at these other schools calling us the 'n' word. I quickly realized, after these repeated experiences, that if a group of high school students felt such discrimination from those who were supposed to be living out their faith in these respected school-church communities, then this sin of racism goes much deeper than individual acts. This is a social sin, with systemic issues at play. Here, was my first Samuel moment, as we heard in the first reading, though like Samuel, it took me some time to reply, "Speak, your servant is listening."

In fact, it was not until my junior year of high school when a close friend, former religion teacher, and Bellarmine parishioner Katie Sellers introduced our class to Tyra Patterson. Tyra Patterson had been incarcerated for 23 years for a crime she did not commit. The only thing Tyra was guilty of was picking up a necklace and calling the police because a young girl was being killed. Tyra, wanting to help, went to the police station to tell her story. Although Tyra had nothing to do with the murder, she was charged. During the trial, evidence of her innocence was excluded. While Tyra was incarcerated, the victim's family came out and supported Tyra, stating that she had nothing to do with the young girl's death. Even with the victim's family supporting her, she still was not released from prison.

Ms. Sellers introduced us to a few people from the Ohio Justice and Policy Center who had been working on Tyra's case, specifically David Singleton. While working on her case with them, I had the opportunity to put my faith into action, video chatting with Tyra weekly and coming to understand her story, especially the systemic racism she experienced through the criminal justice system. Fortunately, after a year of work with OJPC, Tyra Patterson was freed on Christmas Day!

It was through this experience, that I heard God's voice even more clearly, this time calling me to serve as a civil rights lawyer. This led me to attend Xavier and has set me on the course I am now on. Like Samuel, I am now doing my best to say, "Speak, your servant is listening."

Over the last year, I have continued to find ways to live out this call to active discipleship. Today, I intern at the Archdiocese of Cincinnati as the Catholic Campaign for Human Development Intern. I have also been able to sit on the Archdiocese' Anti-Racism Taskforce. Picking up on my experiences with Tyra Patterson, I am in the process of helping the Taskforce move from discussion towards action. I recently helped create a subcommittee for parishioners to work on addressing Bail Reform and restructuring charges for lower-level, non-violent drug offenses.

In the Gospel, we see John and his disciples recognize Jesus, then hastily follow. Jesus asks, "what are you looking for?" In other words, what do you seek? Their response was Rabbi, which translates to Teacher. One can speculate they were seeking knowledge or absolute truth in Christ, a truth that necessarily leads to action! We need to be more like John, to recognize the truth, seek it out, and then share it actively as John did with his brother. ?

On my journey, I have had many teachers who have opened my eyes to the true impacts of racism in the world, who have shared the truth with me— people like Katie Sellers and Tyra Patterson, people here in my faith community, and prophets too, like MLK, who believed education would unite us all. He said, "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character- that is the goal of true education."

Unfortunately, in today's media-bubbled world, many of us fail to acquire such an education; we are made to believe that our perspective is the truth, while missing Christ's absolute truth: "We are created in the image of God." No matter our skin color, nationality, creed, sexual orientation, or religious belief, every human being deserves dignity and respect.

And yet, as my story and the stories of countless other people of color reveal, we are living in a society where that truth is denied, where so many refuse to

acknowledge that the sin of racism impacts our lives in systematic ways, dehumanizing all of us. This past summer, we saw this clearly, when people who looked like me pick up the mantle of Martin Luther King, living out their Christian faith by marching for their lives under the banner of Black Lives Matter, praying to God to save us, asking police officers not to shoot. Compare the violence of the response to those protests to what we all witnessed last Wednesday, when white men and women committed an act of domestic terrorism, many in the name of white supremacy.

As people of faith, we all know that white supremacy has no room in the Catholic church, but is it enough to know? If we are not standing up to and speaking out against it, are we following Christ? King famously declared, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." If we are to live as active disciples of Jesus today, we must engage in the work of being actively anti-racist in the world, to reply to God's call and to say, We need to finish Dr. Kings work by recognizing Christ in all by peacefully and aggressively advocating for all.

"Speak, your servant is listening."

I leave you with this, an excerpt from "a prayer to heal a divided nation" by Rev. Elizabeth Kaeton.

"We are your people. You know us by many names. You are our God. We know you by many names. May we find strength in our diversity and seek the courage to live into what is written on every piece of currency in this nation: In God we Trust.... For only in you can we live in safety. Only in you will we find justice. Only in you will we know the peace that passes all human understanding."

Thank you