

Reflections for Martin Luther King Day

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First, I want to say what an honor it is to address our church family on the weekend of Martin Luther King Jr's birthday. As some of you may know, we are an interracial family raising my wife's Caribbean son as an African American. Today, we wish to share some of our experiences that have come from us choosing to be a family. No matter how painful, I know we must wait and be patient in our pain. I believe in the promise that God will lift us out of the pit of our despair that is sometimes the consequence of my choice, which is the love I have for my family. As David wrote in the fortieth Psalm, God will set our feet on solid ground, and He will steady us on our journey.

Our journey to becoming a family was very eye-opening for me. Originally, I am from Preble County, which is predominantly white, with very little diversity. In fact, growing up, the first place I had ever heard of the "N" word, was in my own home. Early on in our relationship, we went back home for a popular Festival. When we were walking through the fairgrounds the tension was palpable and the looks from others were quite obvious. When we sat down to eat, there was a woman who made her repulsion towards us quite known and physically turned her back on us. It was at this point, I knew this journey would be unlike any other. Even when seeking a church family, we have struggled to feel welcome in the parish where we live. Instead, we drive 25 minutes and past three Catholic churches to our beloved parish here at Bellarmine Chapel where we feel greeted and warmly welcomed.

I thought I had a good perspective on what it would take to be a father to my new son. On a trip to the vet, we were listening to the Jesuitical podcast. They end each podcast with "consolations and desolations" for the past week. For me, it's my favorite part of the podcast as they reveal when they either have felt closer to or more distant from Christ. One young lady on the show, who is from the Dominican Republic and the product of an interracial relationship, candidly shared that her desolation was for her father and brother (both black). She feared that they would never make it home safely, after stories of several unarmed black men losing their lives for the crime of being black made national headlines. My heart broke and I wept. As tears were streaming down my face, I began to realize the harsh reality of raising a young black man in America. Through my sobs, I told my wife that I was genuinely scared. Then, from the backseat, our son says, "Daddy, don't worry, at least you're not black." I could not hide my anguish as I realized that neither my love, nor my whiteness could protect him.

Raising a 9-year-old son in 21st century Cincinnati has its challenges. At age 2, an older child made him aware that he is black and something to be disdained. We struggled with his desperation to become a white boy for a couple of years. He has been treated differently by caretakers with more severe consequences than his peers and frequent isolation from groups that are clearly all white children. In these United States, I have to teach him that he cannot play and speak as the other children in his predominantly Caucasian school, in fear that he will be perceived as aggressive, a criminal in the making. There is no room for toy water guns, expressing anger and frustration like other kids, or running around the neighborhood without an adult. It's clear that we are unknown and unwelcome in many situations. Watching him grow up

is rife with agony that accompanies every joyful milestone. I'm not looking forward to having to teach him to "Drive While Black". But I must, to ensure that he comes home after any traffic stops since many black men have not.

As a white, middle-class man, my perception of safety and identity are forever shaken. I am more aware of race and privilege, than I ever have been. Now the question is: Where do I go from here?

I have found comfort in today's responsorial Psalm (Psalm 40:1-4). As you may recall, it begins with the words, "I waited patiently for the Lord to help me, and He turned to me and heard my cry". Patience is definitely not one of my top virtues, but it is necessary in this current climate of racial tension. All we have to do is wait . . . And, we will have a new song to sing.

We feel that Dr. King lived out the sentiments of this Psalm: He waited patiently for the Lord and cried out to Him for his people; His faith was a firm foundation to all he did; He sang a new song, a song of love and equality and brotherhood and sisterhood; and, through his ministry many saw and put their trust in the Lord. In one of Dr. King's sermons, he so eloquently stated, "Faith in the dawn arises from the faith that God is good and just. When one believes this, he knows that the contradictions of life are neither final nor ultimate. He can walk through the dark night with the radiant conviction that all things work together for good for those that love God. Even the most starless midnight may herald the dawn of some great fulfillment."

God has given us a solution in the coming of Jesus Christ. He IS a wonderful counselor who knows your greatest joys, pains, fears AND He knows mine. So, I ask you; do we as a church allow for safe spaces to be other and learn about otherness? Is this a place where our faith identity and mission is alive within us the other 6 days a week? You are not required to know it all, nor carry the torch, for things you do not understand; but for us to be co-creatives in God's promise, we must extend ourselves beyond ourselves. It is critical for each of us to hear the voices of those unknown to us and for us to create spaces of empathy, love, and grace for those who fear judgement because they don't know where to start. This could help our community in our first steps towards the dawn of some great fulfillment the Dr. King referred to. The tension this challenge creates requires gentleness and compassion for those of us who don't know where to begin regardless of color, heritage, or background. But it is clear, Jesus came and gave us the model as a Jewish teacher to walk among the Gentiles, healing them, converting their hearts and reuniting them wholly with the Father; no exceptions. So, I ask, are we willing to walk with Him, as children, and let Him do his good works IN you and THROUGH you to reconcile US to each other and to the Father?