

Three weeks before he was assassinated in Memphis, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. visited suburban Detroit at the invitation of the Grosse Pointe Human Relations Council. On March 14, 1968, he addressed a crowd of 2,700—many supporters and a significant number of hecklers and opponents—at the Grosse Point South High School. It is one of Dr. King’s most memorable – and often overlooked – speeches.

I suspect the hostility he encountered there from the predominantly white suburban audience and the later inattention to this specific address stems from his explicit expression of opposition to US involvement in the Vietnam War. But his opposition to the war was not the primary focus of his remarks.

Entitled “The Other America”*, Dr. King urged his supporters to recognize, stand up and oppose the inequality that was evident in America’s urban centers, a reality that is still evident today. In his remarks, Dr. King sought to shine a spot light on three myths that worked against justice in America:

“The first thing I would like to mention is that there must be a recognition on the part of everybody in this nation that America is still a racist country. Now, however unpleasant that sounds, it is the truth. And we will never solve the problem of racism until there is a recognition of the fact that racism still stands at the center of so much of our nation, and [that] we must see racism for what it is. . . . It is the notion that one group has all of the knowledge, all of the insights, all of the purity, all of the work, all of the dignity. And another group is worthless, on a lower level of humanity, inferior. To put it in philosophical language, racism is not based on some empirical generalization which, after some studies, would come to conclusion that these people are behind because of environmental conditions. [No!] Racism is based on an ontological affirmation. It is the notion that the very being of a people is inferior. And the[ir] ultimate logic of racism [Dr. King observed] is genocide. Hitler was a very sick man. . . . He took his racism to its logical conclusion. . . he ended up killing six million Jews. The ultimate logic of racism is genocide, and if one says that one is not good enough to have a job that is a solid quality job, if one is not good enough to have access to public accommodations, if one is not good enough to have the right to vote, if one is not good enough to live next door to him, if one is not good enough to marry his daughter because of his race. Then at that moment, that person is saying that that person who is not good to do all of this is not fit to exist or to live. And that is the ultimate logic of racism. And we've got to see that this still exists in American society.”

The second myth Dr. King identified was the belief that with simple patience, time would be on their side; that Dr. King and the Civil Rights leadership were asking for change to come too quickly:

“It may well be that we may have to repent in this generation . . . for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say ‘wait on time’ . . . [BUT, Dr. King warned that] human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability, it comes through the tireless

efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. And so, we must always help time and realize that the time is always right to do right.”

The third myth, was the argument that legislating civil rights needed to first be preceded by efforts to change people’s hearts and minds. The affirmative myth that

“we will never have a truly integrated society, a truly colorless society until men and women are obedient to the [moral, and therefore] unenforceable.”

Dr. King responded that

“It may be true that morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law can't make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important also. And so while legislation may not change the hearts of men, it does change the habits of men when it's vigorously enforced, and when you change the habits of people, pretty soon attitudes begin to be changed . . .”

Who would have thought that 50 years after Martin’s assassination that our nation would have slid into this retrograde moment of history?! That these myths that Dr. King identified would have crawled out from under their rocks into the bright sunlight. That the President of these United States of America would, without reservation, give voice to “the notion that one group has all of the knowledge, all of the insights, all of the purity, all of the work, all of the dignity. And another group is worthless, on a lower level of humanity, inferior.”

The myth that we are a post-racist country has been laid bare. The idea that time and heart-changing are necessary or sufficient for progress has been met a half-century later by efforts to roll back that progress, even by the claims of a candidate for the US Senate that slaves had better and safer lives than African-Americans today.

Fifty years ago, there were those who wanted Dr. King to limit his moral vision and voice to civil rights for African –Americans and nothing more. He responded,

“I have been working too long and too hard now against segregated public accommodations to end up at this stage of my life segregating my moral concern. I must make it clear. For me justice is indivisible. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

So too, we who gather here this morning professing to religious moral tradition must not limit our vision, voice and action to comfortable posturing on safe topics. Justice demands our own discomfort. To paraphrase Dr. King, *the great stumbling block in our stride toward justice*

is when we are more devoted to maintaining order than to achieving justice; when we give preference to a negative peace which is the merely the absence of visible tension.

And Dr. King saw that when any particular group views justice as a matter only insofar as it applies to its own group, it is not justice, it is privilege. Justice could not be Justice only for white, male landowners. And justice could not be Justice when it denied women the vote. Justice could not be justice when the color of one’s skin determined one’s freedom to safely, securely and successfully live and participate in America.

Today’s myths are as insidious as the myths Dr. King spoke out against a half-century ago. That Justice can exist without expanding legal rights beyond heteronormative men and women. That Justice can exist while seeking to ban immigrants from Muslim countries. That Justice can exist while favoring the rich and powerful and turning a blind eye to the poor and powerless. That Justice can exist when there is one set of rules for winners and another set of rules for losers. That Justice can be constituted from something other than the Truth. That Justice can somehow be divided, and unequally applied and still be Justice.

Scripture itself recognizes that a legal system unequally applied is not Justice: In synagogue this week we come to the conclusion of the Ten Plaques on Egypt – a society that had enslaved another. Exodus 12:49 demands of the Israelites: “There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you.” Justice divided cannot be Justice!

That notion of Justice Indivisible, is also engraved above the entryway to the Supreme Court with the words “Equal Justice under the Law.” That phrase alludes to our American aspiration that our society should be informed and guided by something greater than arbitrary human legalism, but rather by the moral concepts of Justice and Fairness. “Equal Justice!” “Justice for All!”

“Justice Indivisible” that is the meaning of those words. And Dr. King reminded us again and again that Justice cannot exist unless it is applied equally and equitably—indivisibly—each and every time. This was Dr. King’s plea and demand, that America take its own words to heart and live by them. “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

But I say to you, that it will not bend unless we get up, and stand together, and grab, and pull on that arc!