



## **DIVERSITY SUNDAY**

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

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**Ben Sanders III, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator**

PhD Student in Religious and Theological Studies, University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology, Denver, CO

#### **I. Introduction**

Diversity in the church represents the promise that the good news of Jesus Christ applies to all human beings, regardless of ethnicity. The issue of diversity in the context of the United States must engage the history of African Americans. Furthermore, the Civil Rights Movement, which would have never occurred without the presence and participation of prophetic black churches, represents the most outstanding social movement in the history of the United States which attempted to deal with the issue of diversity head-on. The leading figure of the Civil Rights Movement was undoubtedly the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The centrality of Dr. King's legacy constitutes a major portion of the framework used to remember the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the legacy of Dr. King has often been so watered down by the status-quo that the prophetic nature of his challenge as it pertains to diversity has been lost. One of the primary lessons lost in the process of draining King of his

prophetic nature is the insight that to deal properly with diversity is to be in a constant state of learning.

With this threat to Dr. King's legacy in mind, this resource unit seeks to provide a recalibration of *how* we remember Dr. King's life-work with respect to the issue of diversity. My main hope is to call forth a memory of Dr. King that challenges us to constantly **learn** about diversity. This cultural resource unit does not seek to simply remember Dr. King's life (for this see the excellent entry from Lewis Baldwin for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day 2010 on The African American Lectionary), but also directs us to look at the ways that Dr. King is remembered in popular culture with the hope of sustaining King's vision that the church fulfill its calling to be, not just colorblind, but truly diverse. After examining how King's legacy challenges us to celebrate diversity as learners, I provide three quotations from addresses in which Dr. King pushes us to rethink our interdependence and our need to be students as well as teachers.

## **II. Re-remembering Dr. King's Challenge of Learning in Diversity**

In my research on the social and ethical importance of Martin Luther King, Jr., I am often struck by the major differences between the modalities of memory that are espoused by our popular social memory and the historical records that show Dr. King in a more prophetic light. From kindergarten until eighth grade, my school remembered the life of Dr. King by watching clips of his classic "I Have a Dream" speech, and singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (we were never taught to refer to this song as the African American National Anthem). The sanguine image of a loving and prophetic preacher with a booming voice and masterful cadence courageously challenging us to judge others not by skin color but by character content was ultimately disturbed by the equally famous images of King laying fatally wounded on the balcony of Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Of course, our annual educational reflection on the life of Dr. King was not completely without value; it was, however, extremely inadequate.

As important as it is for us to remember that Dr. King was a powerful preacher, courageous leader, and articulate public theologian, it is equally important for us to remember Dr. King's relationship with the nation during his lifetime. It is known that Dr. King's national popularity had decreased greatly in the nearly five years between speaking his dream on the steps of the Washington Memorial and being gunned down in Memphis.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, during the latter years of his life, Dr. King was far from a beloved son of the United States. Dr. King was encouraged by the nation's top authority figures as long as he remained within his socially designated position as "Civil Rights leader." However, as soon as he began to speak his mind on the economics of militarism and its negative effect on the possibility of truly ushering in a political order that cared for all people, he became the subject of much antipathy, across racial lines.<sup>3</sup> He was labeled a communist and traitor to his country owing to his prophetic warnings that war in Vietnam acted as a major hurdle to constructing a social and political culture that truly valued the diversity of all human life. How could America claim to stand as a nation welcoming to all when the Vietnam War had deadly social and economic ramifications for its most vulnerable citizens?

It is at this point that the "how" of our remembering Dr. King is important. Too often, Dr. King is remembered simply as a black leader who lived during a less developed time in our nation.

However, this underdeveloped notion does not capture the full brilliance of Martin Luther King, Jr. King's challenge that people be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. He was certainly concerned with justice for African Americans and this concern never faltered or decreased; however, King's concern for African Americans was always also a concern for all of humanity (lest we forget that blacks are a part of the human family). It was Dr. King's belief that one can be concerned for those closest to you *and* simultaneously be concerned for all of humanity that made his challenge for diversity prophetic. King, however, was no romanticist; he understood the very real danger in challenging the U.S. to reconsider how much it knew by asking what the country still needed to learn. Yet, he also knew that to remain silent about the United States' ideological hypocrisy on the issue of diversity was to cheapen the value of life itself. As King classically challenged, if a person has not discovered something worth dying for, that person isn't fit to live. Thus, the process of life was about *learning* what made life worth living.

The best of the prophetic tradition, which Dr. King so outstandingly represented, seeks to overcome socially constructed divisions by giving priority to the God-given right of every human being to live a life poised for individual happiness via communal participation. Yet, it is the nature of this community that continues to beguile us. The community that Dr. King envisioned so radically prioritized the right of *every* individual human being that the diversity and connectedness of all communities in one worldwide community took center stage. Thus, no one, no matter what race, religion, gender or sexual orientation they are born into, should suffer because they are not born another way. Read in its best light, this means that there is no one superior group of people, no matter what race, class, or gender they represent. The great challenge that King's legacy lays before us with respect to diversity is to constantly be in the process of learning more about those around us. To truly value diversity is to constantly *learn* about those around you. It is to *learn* that diversity means co-dependency, not by choice but by God-ordained requirement. To recapture this lesson about learning diversity as we move through life is to recapture the best of the African American struggle for freedom. Not to learn this lesson is to resign ourselves to cheapened lives.

### **III. Learning to Live with Diversity: Excerpts from the Head and Heart of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

- We must all *learn* to live together as brothers [and sisters]. Or we will all perish together as fools.<sup>4</sup>
- We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is structured.<sup>5</sup>
- There is little hope for us until we become tough-minded enough to break loose from the shackles of prejudice, half-truths, and downright ignorance. The shape of the world today does not permit us the luxury of soft mindedness. A nation or a civilization that continues

to produce soft minded men [and women] purchases its own spiritual death on an installment plan.<sup>6</sup>

#### **IV. Songs for this Lectionary Moment**

Hezekiah Walker's "I Need You to Survive" is a classic worship song that speaks directly to today's scripture and the best of Dr. King's legacy. This song celebrates God in a very horizontal fashion. Here, God is worshipped through celebrating our mutual dependency for each other.

##### **I Need You to Survive**

I need you, you need me.  
We're all a part of God's body.  
Stand with me, agree with me.  
We're all a part of God's body.  
It is his will that every need be supplied.  
You are important to me, I need you to survive.  
You are important to me, I need you to survive.

I need you, you need me.  
We're all a part of God's body.  
Stand with me, agree with me.  
We're all a part of God's body.  
It is his will that every need be supplied.  
You are important to me, I need you to survive.  
You are important to me, I need you to survive.

I pray for you, you pray for me.  
I love you, I need you to survive.  
I won't harm you with words from my mouth.  
I love you, I need you to survive.  
(Repeat 6x)

It is his will, that every need be supplied.  
You are important to me, I need you to survive.<sup>7</sup>

India Arie's "Better People" captures the essence of Dr. King's challenge to learn from those that are different from us. The ability to learn from others not only improves our knowledge of ourselves and our neighbors but opens us up to creating traditions that make us better people "all around."

##### **Better People**

Yeah Yeah!  
Yeah Yeah!

[Verse 1:]

I wish there was a video game  
to teach you your ancestor's name  
I wish there was a phone number

Like 1-800-Save-Your-Brother  
I'm thankful for the radio station  
Not afraid to put the truth in rotation  
there are skirts of information  
That you can only get in conversation with...

[Chorus:]  
Young People, who talk to  
Old People, it would make us  
Better People, all around...  
(Yes it would)

And if Old People would talk to  
Young People, it would make us  
Better People, all around....  
(Yes it would)

[Verse 2:]  
We went from radio to TV  
Now we're going from LP to CD  
Don't be afraid

To try something new  
I can help you with the brand new technology  
Help me with the age old philosophy  
Together there's so much we can do with:

[Chorus:]

And if Old People would talk to  
Young People, it would make us  
Better People, all around....

They say that every  
Generation gets worse  
Whether you're generous or have no purse

These problems tend to strive off the sky (yeah)  
Listen to Mahatma Ghandi's words  
Be the change you want to see in the world  
Start with yourself and healing will multiply

AAAAAAH, that's what happens When..

[Chorus:]

If Old People would talk to  
Young People, it would.....  
Better People, all around....

If black people  
Would talk to white people  
It would make us  
Better People  
All Around....

If Republican people would  
Talk to Democratic people  
It would make us diplomatic people  
[laugh] All Around....<sup>8</sup>

John Legend's "If You're Out There" begins with a call to all humanity to become the leaders we have been waiting for by responding to the world's pains in unconventional ways. Legend challenges our conventional modes of believing what is possible by calling people together not along lines of social difference but in the spirit of a mutual desire for a better society.

### **If You're Out There**

If you hear this message, wherever you stand  
I'm calling every woman, calling every man  
We're the generation  
We can't afford to wait  
The future started yesterday and we're already late

We've been looking for a song to sing  
Searched for a melody  
Searched for someone to lead  
We've been looking for the world to change  
If you feel the same  
Then go on and say

If you're out there  
Sing along with me  
If you're out there  
I'm dying to believe that you're out there  
Stand up and say it loud  
If you're out there  
Tomorrow's starting now

Now, now

No more broken promises  
No more call to war  
Unless it's love and peace that we're really fighting for  
We can destroy hunger  
We can conquer hate  
Put down the arms and raise your voice  
We're joining hands today

Oh I was looking for a song to sing  
I searched for a leader  
But the leader was me  
We were looking for the world to change  
We can be heroes  
Just go on and say

If you're out there  
Sing along with me  
If you're out there  
I'm dying to believe that you're out there  
Stand up and say it loud  
If you're out there  
Tomorrow's starting now  
Now, now

Oh now, now

If you're ready we can shake the world  
Believe again  
It starts within  
We don't have to wait for destiny  
We should be the change that we want to see

If you're out there  
Ooooh  
If you're out there  
And you're ready now  
Say it loud  
Scream it out

If you're out there  
Sing along with me  
If you're out there  
I'm dying to believe that you're out there

Stand up and say it loud  
If you're out there  
Tomorrow's starting now

If you're out there  
If you're out there  
If you're out there

If you hear this message, wherever you stand  
I'm calling every woman, calling every man  
We're the generation  
We can't afford to wait  
The future started yesterday and we're already late.<sup>9</sup>

### **V. Learning about Diversity: Jesus as Exemplary Learner (Mark 7:24-30)**

In today's text, we find Jesus faced with the issue of crossing boundaries. How might Dr. King's challenge to learn about diversity be applied to a reading of today's text from the Gospel of Mark?

The woman in this passage is of Syrophenecian decent (v. 26); she is a Gentile, and it is, therefore, scandalous for Jesus to have any type of social contact with her. The woman has heard of the miracles that Jesus has been performing and comes to him begging that he might cast a demon out of her daughter (v. 25). What happens next has confounded various scholars attempting to make theological or exegetical sense of this encounter. Jesus says to the woman, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (v. 27). It seems that Jesus is refusing to respond to this woman's anguish! I have no interest in explaining away Jesus' response to this heartbroken woman. In fact, it seems powerful to me that even Jesus, in all his wisdom, finds it difficult to cope with how to cross social boundaries. In the same way that we have struggled as a society to make sense of Dr. King's prophetic challenge, we find Jesus struggling with how to respond to this woman from the other side of the religious and ethnic tracks.

The hesitancy of Christians to read this passage this way is rooted in our belief that Jesus represents the best of who we are and the best of what we might be. Yet, how does Jesus of Nazareth lose his exemplary status by learning a lesson or making a mistake? On the contrary, our ability to see the best of ourselves in Jesus as learner is extremely powerful and goes a mighty long way in teaching us about how to cross social boundaries. When Jesus is our example as a learner as opposed to a dominating know-it-all, the divine example that Jesus sets becomes one of learning from others as life goes on.

The woman's response is packed full of humility. She knows that Jesus has the power to heal her daughter, yet she also knows that Jesus is a product of the thinking of his time. She says to Jesus, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (v. 28). She is not here referring to herself as a dog, but is instead reminding Jesus that everyone and everything, *including animals*,



require nourishment to survive. Furthermore, in order for everything and everyone to survive, we must remember the connectedness of the substances on which we all depend for life. The food that the children eat for sustenance has the same source as the food that dogs depend on for their livelihood. The woman's response to Jesus is so impressive because it shows a profound understanding of the co-dependency within God's creation, that her daughter is healed immediately: "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter" (v. 29). The healing power of Jesus is brought about through what he *learns* from the Syrophenecian woman about crossing social boundaries.

Jesus' educational interaction with the Syrophenecian woman crafts a new space in which the power of God can function. Within this new space, not only is the woman's demon possessed daughter healed, thus ending the torment experienced by the girl and those who love her, this new space also opens up a new social space for God's healing power inhabit. The contemporaries of Jesus were extremely offended by the idea of "unclean" people benefitting from the redemptive power of YHWH. Yet, the lesson that Jesus learns from this woman recasts notions of whom and what is considered unclean. The woman's worthiness to be healed has nothing to do with her religious or ethnic background; instead it has everything to do with her connectedness to Jesus as fellow human.

### Notes

1. One outstanding text dealing with the importance of reexamining the lens through which we see black history is Glaude, Eddie S. In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
2. For a rich interpretation of King's life as a personal and public figure, see Dyson, Michael Eric. I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr. New York, NY: Touchstone, 2000.
3. See Jackson, Thomas F. From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice, Politics and Culture in Modern America. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.
4. King, Martin Luther, Clayborne Carson, and Peter Holloran. Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool. New York, NY: Intellectual Properties Management in association with Warner Books, 1998.
5. King, Martin Luther. "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution." A Testament of Hope. James M. Washington, Ed. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1968.
6. King, Martin Luther. "The Strength to Love." A Testament of Hope. James M. Washington, Ed.
7. Walker, Hezekiah. "I Need You to Survive." The Essential Hezekiah Walker. Verity, 2007.
8. Aire, India. "Better People." Testimony: Vol. 1, Life and Relationship. Motown, 2002.
9. Legend, John. "If You're Out There." Evolver. Sony, 2008.