



**A Sermon preached in Christ Church, Grosse Pointe, Michigan
by The Reverend Andrew Van Culin, *Rector***

**On the Weekend Observing the Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
The 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)
14 January 2024**

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I'm sure Martin Luther King Jr. was nice – one seldom gets very far without being pleasant and polite. But he spoke a hard truth that was uncomfortable for many to hear, so I'm equally sure quite a few people didn't find him all that “nice” at all.

I'm equally confident that Dr. King was a kind person – memoirs of those who worked closely with him are filled with private acts of kindness and compassion that marked King's relations with those closest to him.

But King is not remembered for being nice or being kind.

No, King is remembered because he was profoundly and sacrificially good.

On the one hand, King was profoundly good. Those very qualities of kindness – compassion and generosity, honor and respect, that marked his most personal relationships – were the natural expressions of a goodness that permeated *every* relationship he had. The compassion he showed to grieving mother or a injured marcher, was the same compassion showed to protesters who mocked him and police officers who beat him. The generosity he showed to the local poor was the same generosity that led him to donate the entirety of his Nobel Peace Prize award to the movement of equality and justice. And the honor and respect that he paid to President Johnson was the same respect that he showed to Bull Connor and the countless white officers of justice who mocked and abused him. Even as he vehemently disagreed with their actions and theology (for theology is what upholds our most profound actions!), he refused to dishonor or disrespect them with violence and hatred of his own.



You see, King understood that to be genuinely good, meant extending his kindness, his compassion and generosity, his honor and respect of others, not simply to those dear and close to him, but to everyone – and this is the profound bit: especially, to his enemy. Yes, to be profoundly good as he was demanded that all of the love he felt toward his family and closest friends, and all of the kindness he naturally extended toward fellow marchers and rally audiences, must extend to not only to strangers along the way, but particularly to the very people who barred his way, who mocked his ideas, who spat in his face, or drew his life's blood.

Such goodness is inherently and fundamentally sacrificial. That is to say, the goodness we see and celebrate in Dr. King was revealed in his commitment to the good even in the face of personal suffering. It is the willingness to pursue the good, even when it means loss for oneself. Long before his tragic death, the high cost of such good was on public display – and not just for him personally. Constantly surveilled, targeted at home with his family and personally in the streets, King understood that the goodness he sought for the world – justice and love in theological terms – demanded personal sacrifice from him . . . and from all.

This, of course, is the same profound and sacrificial goodness we see and experience in Christ. The personal kindness he showed to a tender child in his arms was the same profound and sacrificial goodness he showed to a woman caught in adultery, a leper asking to be made clean, and a centurion whose daughter was facing death. And it is the same profound and sacrificial goodness that Jesus showed to Judas as he greeted him with a kiss.

Of course, the opportunities we have today to demonstrate such profound goodness are different than those for Dr. King – as they were even then for the vast majority of men and women of his era. Yes, there was the profound goodness demanded of Rosa Parks and John Lewis and Jonathan Myrick Daniels and the busloads of freedom marchers. But that vast majority of women and men whose profound goodness advanced cause of the civil rights movement demonstrated their goodness in other, yet equally profound, ways.

There were the countless white women and men who cast votes for representatives and senators – state and federal – and governors and presidents and council members, who drafted and enacted policies and laws that dismantled their very privileges white society has long enjoyed in order their black neighbor would experience the privileges previously available only to a few. There were the countless men and women of all faiths and colors, who advocated for higher taxes and the integration of American schools so that all children, rich and poor, black and white, would benefit from improved health care and excellent education. There were, also, the countless families who gave generously to churches and organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student



Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, ensuring that leaders and marchers and pastors and protesters would be well trained, well organized, and well lead.

Such profound goodness as lived and demonstrated by Dr. King, has never been limited to a faithful few; on the contrary, it has been an opportunity for goodness available to all. The willingness to forgo their own advantage and privilege, the willingness to sacrifice the benefits they long had known and enjoyed, is the profound and sacrificial gift that transformed our society in remarkable just and loving ways.

And it is this same profound and sacrificial goodness that is asked of us still today.